Book Reviews

Davidson, Jamie S. (2008), *From Rebellion to Riots: Collective Violence on Indonesian Borneo*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press

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Among the numerous ethnic and religious conflicts shaking societies around the world, one particular type – collective violence – has gained scholars' special attention in recent decades. The deadly riots that followed the political transition in Indonesia in 1998 made the issue crucial for understanding current events in this multicultural country and pushed academia to face the theoretical and empirical challenge of this complex problem. Jamie S. Davidson took on this incredibly arduous task in the framework of his doctoral dissertation, which is the basis for an outstanding book published by the University of Wisconsin Press.

From Rebellion to Riots presents detailed accounts of a number of ethnic clashes in West Kalimantan dating back to the 1960s and ranging in form from a military-instigated rebellion with an international background (Chapter 2) to minor street fights over personal issues (Chapter 3). In any given event, each of the ethnic groups – Dayak, Madurese, Chinese, and Malay – were either the instigators or the victims, operated in an organized or spontaneous manner, and fought for a politically viable cause or were an objectively insignificant nuisance. By synthesizing the results of his fieldwork, interviews, military and official data, and NGO reports (most notably from Human Rights Watch), the author makes a huge step towards placing the diverse violent outbursts in the proper theoretical context.

Davidson successfully refutes several common explanations of violence as being either oversimplifications or unjustified generalizations. He looks through a powerful magnifying glass at a few cases of violent outbursts, and his detailed, careful study based on a wide range of resources sets a new standard for research on collective violence. On a more general level, the study is an important contribution to the analysis of centre-periphery relations in the vast territory of Indonesia. As Davidson puts it, "this study traces the subsequent ethnic violence through the prism of New Order centralization, state building, and domination of local politics. […] All told, this book attempts to disaggregate the nation-state into its meaningful constituencies accounting for the ways in which regional societal forces impinge upon and constitute the center" (12-13).

The book grasps the changes of the conflict dynamics over time and manages to unveil not only factors that spark collective violence but also

factors that sustain it. Davidson decided to focus on a single peripheral province in the hope that an in-depth study of a few carefully selected cases would answer some relevant questions by "embedding the ethnic clashes in the parameters of grounded historical and political interpretation and by situating them in a larger pattern of riots in Indonesia and beyond" (3-4). The limited scope of his research, as he argues, "allows us to control for many explanatory social, political, cultural and economic variables" (8). The effect of his precisely selected cases is a completely new level of depth in political analysis.

Davidson explores two main themes throughout his research. The first "emphasize[s] the descriptive and explanatory power of the forms of violence". The second, the diachronic analysis, "capture[s] the complexity behind the genesis, protraction, and marked fluctuations that characterize incidents of mass violence in a given locale" (175). He then compares the results of his study on the cases from West Kalimantan with a few other prominent cases of collective violence in Indonesia and elsewhere (the Moluccas, Poso, Calcutta, Kano, Karachi). The comparison proves the methodological presupposition that detailed, rigorous conclusions pertaining to a limited number of cases will shed light on a wide range of similar occurrences if the comparison is made with appropriate discipline.

Most astonishingly, Davidson successfully challenges the common attribution of violence to ethnic heterogeneity (201). The book, clearly distanced from the primordial understanding of ethnicity (A.D. Smith, C. Geertz), provides a whole new set of arguments for the constructivist theory of identity (E. Hobsbawm). Davidson defies the idea that brutality is an intrinsic feature of any ethnic group and the possibility that culture clash is the sole cause of violence (14) and proves that the attribution of violence to certain ethnic groups (in West Kalimantan most notably the Madurese) can't withstand a proper scientific test. Even if the opposing fighting groups happen to be split along ethnic lines, there is little or no evidence that they clash due to their cultural, ancestral or linguistic diversity. On the contrary, his study confirms that the economic and political interests of Dutch colonial rule in the past as well as those of the current government in Jakarta have had an enormous influence on ethnic relations in the Indonesian Outer Islands. His accusations against the Jakartan decision-makers go even further, as he concludes that the deliberate politicization of ethnicity was "followed by horrific violence" (202). Having gathered all the evidence, Davidson concludes that there is no single causal factor that inevitably and invariably triggers inter-ethnic riots. Neither cultural incompatibilities nor competition over resources and political powers as separate factors suffice to set off violence. However, certain exogenous factors prove to be more

prominent in instigating riots than others. Davidson unveils the dramatic consequences of the actions of local leaders, the military and the central government in instigating violence by, for instance, granting logging licenses, arranging refugee camps, and supporting religious groups – to name just a few of a number of possibly risky political decisions.

One of the pre-eminent issues discussed throughout the study is the politicization of ethnicity. Again, the central and local institutions have played an important, yet infamous, role in this process: "By playing the ethnic card, by stigmatizing the rural Chinese as 'Chinese', and by helping to mobilize divergent communities as 'Dayak'-Dayak in stark contrast to Chinese despite the fluidity of ethnic relations among these communities – murderous New Order policies on West Kalimantan facilitated a hardening of ethnic differentiation" (77). The problem, however, stems from a wider and more general idea – one might say an unquestionable one: "All in all, political ethnicity has arisen not in spite of but due to the modernity that is the very idea of 'Indonesia'" (11). The author's reference to modernity as a political ideology is an important voice in the discussion on the future of indigenous peoples in the quickly changing world. Modernity and development, which used to be a source of optimism for leaders of impoverished multi-ethnic nations, are questioned forcefully by Davidson: they might be a solution to the economic hardships of central government, but they are an unbearable yoke on local communities and often lead to violence.

The study also raises an important question regarding the effects of decentralization on inter-ethnic relationships in the region. He points out that the greater independence from Jakarta in decision making, while a desired and positive outcome of decentralization, has made ethnic relations more competitive than ever and has been yet another factor pushing the politicization of ethnicity: "decentralization has precipitated a virulent form of identity politics: the politics of nativism" (135). Davidson has made an interesting observation regarding the changing notion of indigeneity in Indonesia, originally a concept synonymous with backwardness: "'Primitives', foreigners in their own land, they are accused of having contributed little to the nation's glory, particularly to its founding, when daring revolutionary heroes threw off the colonial yoke" (85). Now, as Davidson shows, the idea of indigeneity has evolved gradually to become valued political capital, if not in Jakarta then at least on a regional scale. This process has changed the division of power and political potential, placing the hitherto obscure Dayaks at the top of the ethnic ladder and causing the remaining groups to struggle either to legitimize their indigeneity (Malays, Chinese (sic!)) or to secure their rights as non-indigenous peoples (Madurese) (170-171). According to Davidson's findings, the notion, common among locals,

of Malays as non-indigenous comes from the fact that they are Muslims. "Muslim" in this case becomes an antonym of "indigenous". This implication, well rooted in minds of the denizens of West Borneo, has resulted in a number of acts designed to prove the indigeneity of Malays in West Borneo, with the argument that "ancestral conversion to Islam should not preclude claims to indigeneity".

Given the ongoing process of democratization in Indonesia, the book is an important contribution to our understanding of possible developments regarding civil rights, internal migration, inter-ethnic relations, and decentralization in the country.

Karolina Chmielewska

Ethnic Policies in Southeast Asia, GIGA Institute of Asian Studies, Hamburg, Germany
<chmielewska@giga-hamburg.de>