Politics and Religion Journal 19, no. 2: 516-518
Book review
https://doi.org/10.54561/prj1902516s
Received: July 13, 2025; Accepted: September 28, 2025

Contesting Indonesia: Islamist, Separatist, and Communal Violence since 1945, by Kirsten E. Schulze. Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2024, 324 pp.; ISBN: 9781501777660

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Kirsten E. Schulze's "Contesting Indonesia: Islamist, Separatist, and Communal Violence since 1945" examines violence in Indonesia since independence, focusing on religious conflict, separatism, and communal violence. The book explains how violence arises from competing notions of the "national imaginary" and a contested sense of belonging. Schulze argues that violence tends to occur in regions that are geographically, ideologically, ethnically, and religiously on the periphery of the state, and where alternative narratives supported by alternative histories exist. To date, studies on violence have been conducted by Freek Colombijn (2002), Collins (2002), and Copppel (2006), but none have been as comprehensive or in-depth as Schulze's. Therefore, Schulze's book complements existing studies on violence in Indonesia in a far more comprehensive manner.

In her book, Chapter 1 examines the Daul Islam Rebellions of 1947–1965. Chapter 2 examines Jemaah Islamiyah's Jihad and Quest for the Islamic State, 1993–2019. Chapter 3 examines the East Timor Conflict, 1975–1999. Chapter 4 examines the Aceh Conflict, 1976–2005. Chapter 5 examines the Poso Conflict, 1998–2007. Chapter 6 examines the Ambon Conflict, 1999–2005.

Based on her research spanning more than two decades, Kirsten E. Schulze found that violence, whether Islamist, separatist, or communal, occurs repeatedly in regions of Indonesia outside the center of power and the center of national imagination. The violence is not evenly distributed across Indonesia. It occurs more frequently in certain areas—areas often referred to as the "periphery" or "fringes" of Indonesia's national construct. She conducts detailed research on the Darul Islam rebellion, the Jemaah Islamiyah jihad, and the conflicts in East Timor, Aceh, Poso, and Ambon.

She contends emphatically that violence is more probable in regions on the geographical, ideological, ethnic, and religious peripheries of the Indonesian state; that violence perpetrated by non-state actors is most enduring in areas where local

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communities formulate alternative national narratives. Drawing on numerous interviews, archives, and published materials, she offers a fresh perspective on Indonesia's violent history.

According to Schulze, the conflicts in these regions were not only fueled by political and economic factors, but also by alternative historical narratives and collective identities that were not fully accommodated within the Indonesian national imagination. Schulze argues that the greatest and longest-lasting non-state violence emerged when an alternative national imagination developed and was supported by a strong counter-historical narrative. When this counter-narrative had a clear territorial dimension, state violence became far more intense and violent. Schulze observed that the state's response to Darul Islam, for example, was far more brutal than that to Jemaah Islamiyah because Darul Islam carried the imagination of an Islamic state with a clear territorial structure.

In addition to ideological and territorial factors, development inequality was also a latent trigger. In the case of East Timor, Schulze continued, the disconnect between the central and regional governments was the primary trigger for the emergence of separatist demands. The number of fatalities was also the highest compared to other cases.

I see this book as a work that examines violence and its relationship to concepts of nationhood, as well as the imagination and contestation of nationhood and statehood in Indonesia. This is because previous research often explored violence in a fragmented manner, analyzing examples of violence through various topics and academic debates that are not always interconnected. Kirsten Schulze's book is not only substantive and well-argued, but it also includes a solid conceptual and theoretical framework, as well as a methodological approach. Schulze draws on fieldwork, oral narratives, and existing secondary literature. numerous printed original materials, and direct interviews with 474 informants over a 20-year span, including academics, peace activists, perpetrators of violence, and others. Imagine how serious this is. Schulze masterfully mixes and repackages various scholarly works on violence in Indonesia after independence in 1945 into one captivating theme: the people's struggle to realize an imagined society and a real sense of nationhood.

In his writing, Schulze draws on concepts and theories from various important scholars, including Benedict Anderson's imagined community, Eric Hobsbawm's tradition of creation, and Ernest Gellner's and other prominent scholars' notions of belonging. Schulze discusses various examples of post-independence violence, such as Islamist violence (Darul Islam and Jemaah Islamiyah), separatist rebellions (East Timor and Aceh), and inter-religious conflict Christian-Muslim communal violence in Poso and Ambon.

In relation to the violence perpetrated by two Islamist groups in Indonesia, namely the Darul Islam (DI) rebellion from 1947 to 1965 and the jihadism or violent terrorism of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) from 1993 to 2009, she notes that the main root of the DI rebellion was the desire to uphold Islamic Sharia which had become an inseparable part of Indonesian nationalism. S.M. Kartosoewirjo and his allies envisioned Indonesia as an Islamic state, and this was contrary to the national philosophy of the proclamation of independence proclaimed by Sukarno-Hatta (pp. 25-26).

Concerning JI jihadism, she investigates membership fluctuations, ideological roots, and the Islamist national narrative and imagination of the JI, as produced by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Abdullah Sungkar , its key founders. However, she also looks at President Suharto's actions to suppress Islamic politics and Islamic revivalism in Indonesia, which had a direct impact on JI members.

Schulze observes that JI and DI share some essential traits, including a rejection of the state, ideology, and national constitution in favour of an Islamic state, governance, and legal system. Unlike DI, which is local, She claims that the JI is more militant, Salafi, and transnational, pushing for local, regional, and global jihad in the cause of Islam.

In the context of Aceh, she discusses the root causes of the long-running conflict between the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) and the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM), the military's combat strategies (including kidnapping, torture, and murder), and the Acehnese people's political and economic concerns. The overthrow of Suharto in May 1998 reignited calls for independence in East Timor and Aceh. The resulting power vacuum, with Indonesian security forces on the defensive in Jakarta or fighting separatist in the countryside, caused Christian-Muslim hostilities in Ambon, Maluku, and Poso, Central Sulawesi, to resurface and fester.

On December 24, 1998, a fight broke out between a young Christian and a young Muslim in the village of Poso. Within hours, the two religious communities were mobilised, and they clashed repeatedly over the next five days, eventually triggering a sectarian and racially charged showdown. From 1998 to 2007, Schulze studied the reasons, stages, and dynamics of the Christian-Muslim sectarian violence in Poso and Ambon, which ranged from small-scale urban riots to widespread communal unrest, and the worsening of Christian-Muslim relations that existed both before and during this time. Schulze explains that the violence in Poso was fueled by "a shift in Indonesia's national imagination toward a more Islamic orientation at the end of the New Order" and the demographic shift caused by the influx of Muslim migrants, whom Poso Christians viewed as an existential threat (pp. 180-188). She asserts that the organised violent conflict from 2000 to 2007 was intensified by "a misalignment of national perceptions between Jakarta's ruling elite and the Poso communities."

Schulze's discussion not only examines the chronology of violence but also touches on the issue of membership within the national community. Schulze introduces two key analytical concepts: the "national imaginary" and "belonging." Both are key to understanding how Indonesian society is stratified into a complex hierarchy regarding who is considered fully "Indonesian" and who is marginalized.

Schulze's findings demonstrate that the state not only plays a role in maintaining stability but also actively shapes and maintains the collective imagination of who is considered part of the Indonesian nation. The conflicts discussed provide important reflections for us to read the relationship between the state, society, and power more critically. In my opinion, Kirsten E. Schulze's book opens up a discussion of how the nation continues to be shaped and questioned through the lens of identity and social justice. She finds that these outbreaks of violence are linked to conflicting local notions of national imagination and controversial belonging.