

BOOK REVIEW: BIOGRAPHY

Soeharto: The Life and Legacy of Indonesia's Second President

Written by: Retnowati Abdulgani-Knapp, *Marshall Cavendish, HK\$192*

Review by: **Yenni Kwok**



Political observers often view the Javanese *wayang*, or puppet play, as the key to understanding Indonesian politics. In *Petruk Dadi Ratu*, a comic *wayang* story, the beloved clownish Petruk – seen as the embodiment of humble common folk – becomes drunk with power as he briefly ascends to the throne.

The story resonates with that of a Javanese village boy who enjoyed only basic schooling and went on to rule the archipelago for 32 years. But in Suharto's Indonesia, where dissent was silenced, human rights were abused and corruption was rampant, it became a tragic tale rather than a farcical comedy.

Nine years after Indonesian president Suharto stepped down on May 21, 1998, the latest sign that the mood of the nation might be softening towards him is this authorised biography of the strongman, *Soeharto: The Life and Legacy of Indonesia's Second President*. Written by Retnowati Abdulgani-Knapp, this uncritical book attempts to show Suharto's controversial rule in a flattering light.

In it, Suharto is portrayed as a man who believed his rise to power was “predestined rather than the result of choice”. Retnowati, whose father maintained amicable relations with Suharto, had access to his inner circle, interviewing the man, his family and his trusted aides. But these 376 pages add little new.

At the core of the book, dealing with Suharto's years in power, is a simple repetition of the official version of events: his heroic deeds in saving Indonesia from the communists and his successful economic

policies. Anything negative is ignored as Retnowati strays into hagiography in her attempt to whitewash Suharto's career. There's little of any literary merit, Retnowati being a former banker whose previous publishing experience amounts to a devoted biography of her father.

A closed and evasive man, Suharto has remained an enigma. But Retnowati believes that the means to understanding him are to be found in his Javanese roots, his farming background and his military career. Suharto ruled in the style of an army general, tolerating no insubordination (he still bears grudges against those who deserted him in 1998). Quintessentially Javanese, he abhorred confrontation and those who spoke out against him became political and social pariahs.

One of the liveliest chapters recounts Suharto's childhood. Despite being shuttled from one relative to another after his parents' divorce when he was a baby, he grew up poor yet happy in a farming village in central Java. Although moving, it offers nothing new, borrowed as it is from his 1988 autobiography.

There's some revealing insight into his current situation: his frail health triggered by corruption investigations and public condemnation, his quiet life sheltered by his children and a small circle of loyal aides. A section dealing with his visit to the ancestral village is touching – the pater familias, who will turn 86 years old in June, coming to life on returning to his farming origins.

A lengthy chapter on Suharto's charitable foundations, which have been at the centre of a corruption probe against him, argues that they are manifestations of his social concerns, funded by "donations". The corruption charges were revoked last year because of his poor health. There's no mention of the fact the donations were administered like private taxes: civil servants having to shave off their meagre salaries while Chinese tycoons dug deep into their fat wallets to ensure good relations with the president. Suharto ruled like a king of feudal Java, his style paternalistic, bestowing with one hand and clawing back with the other.

Critically, there's little mention of bloodshed during Suharto's reign. Between 600,000 and two million Indonesians were killed during the hysterical anti-communist and anti-Chinese massacre of 1965-66, as he launched a communist witch-hunt. Decades of brutal military suppression in Aceh are overlooked and Suharto's military operations in East Timor and West Papua are conveniently ignored.

Retnowati, though, isn't alone. Her view is typical of Indonesia's middle class and intelligentsia, appalled by the corruption of Suharto Inc while ignoring the former dictator's human rights abuses. Indonesians remain reluctant to face their past and so long as they do, there will be no proper assessment of Suharto.

The review was published in the South China Morning Post daily (www.scmp.com), 20 May 2007.