

# Indonesian Heroes and Villains: National Identity, Politics, Law, and Security

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## Abstract

This thematic issue of *Politics and Governance* offers a collection of unique articles that debate Indonesian “heroes” and “villains,” providing an understanding of the country’s past and present. The importance of Indonesia in the world is ever-increasing geopolitically and economically, offering rich material for academic studies. It is one of the few Muslim-majority democracies, with a long and complex history of people and institutions that have shaped its national identity, politics, government, law, and security, which we examine under the central theme of agents of change and integration. The articles cover local histories prior to independence in 1945 to the present day, the legacy of President Abdurrahman Wahid (1999–2001), a biography of a prominent Muslim *jihad* (holy war) activist, women’s agency in terrorism, as well efforts to reform terrorists. Discussions on the problematic aspects of the Indonesian state ideology Pancasila and the downgrading of Indonesia’s Corruption Eradication Commission are also examined. Realpolitik is covered in the article concerning Indonesia’s maritime security and in the article discussing activists who died fighting for democratic freedoms, such as Indonesian poet-activist Wiji Thukul, as unofficial heroes of the reform movement (*reformasi*), which toppled the Soeharto “New Order” regime (1966–1998), leading to the democracy that Indonesia enjoys today.

## Keywords

agency; heroes; history; Indonesia; law; national identity; politics; security; villains

## 1. Introduction

On 20 October 2024, Indonesia will inaugurate former army general Prabowo Subianto as its eighth president. This is exactly 25 years after Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) became Indonesia’s fourth president. The two

individuals could not be more different in terms of human rights records and attitudes towards progressive and social issues. Gus Dur's eventful and turbulent term as president was not without its detractors, but his personality evoked admiration from wide circles in Indonesian society as a proponent of Muslim humanism and inclusiveness. For many people inside and outside of Indonesia, he stands out as a “hero” who dared to speak out against aggressive populism and intolerance. In this regard, as Franklin (2017, 2024) has argued, no one has replaced Gus Dur since his death in 2009. On the other hand, Prabowo has often been construed as a “villain” in Indonesian politics; there are allegations of atrocities in East Timor and West Papua, and there is evidence of his involvement in actions against protestors demanding freedom in 1998. He has also been linked to the disappearance of the poet Wiji Thukul, a hero discussed by Miller and Sibarani (2024), which would place him in the antagonist category. For the outside world, he was often associated with cronyism, money politics, and murky practices. Nevertheless, this did not prevent his appeal in successive elections, eventually ushering in his victory in 2024. Through a rebranding of Prabowo's image, including a comical dance, cartoon posters, and a powerful alliance with President Joko Widodo's son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka running for vice president, Prabowo morphed into a “hero” for many Indonesians. All this evokes questions about Indonesian political culture and practices, and the agents of change and integration that have shaped the nation's destiny in the postcolonial era. To help understand Indonesia in this regard, the present theme of “heroes and villains” in *Politics and Governance*, deals with historical and contemporary issues of law, security, and political activism; which are the result of papers presented at a conference held on 18 February 2022, at Charles Darwin University in the Northern Territory of Australia.

The construction of heroes and villains forms a foundational part of Indonesian national self-perception. In fact, it has roots far back in time, to the old Javanese epics and the righteous warrior (*satria*) figure with a strong sense of personal duty, service to the “just king” (*ratu adil*), and contempt for death. Other sources of inspiration include the *jago*, the champion of Javanese rural society, and, later, the Muslim resistance against nonbelief and Western imperialism. Since the Nationalist Revolution of 1945–1949, a pantheon of official national heroes has evolved, as explained by Farram (2024). Here, a hero can be considered a projection of a particular society, reflecting its norms and values. When applied and ritualised in official contexts, as in Indonesia, the idolisation of heroes and castigation of villains may serve particular ruling groups and political agendas, and even help keep a multicultural nation together (Schreiner, 1995). Meanwhile, the rise of the internet and social media, concurrently with a (problem-ridden) democratic transition, has rapidly changed the political landscape. The global potential of the hero trope was demonstrated in 2003 when Saddam Hussein was idolised in the streets of Indonesian cities as an underdog fighter against the oppression of Western intervention, being proclaimed as “the hero of the world”—notwithstanding his poor track record with Muslims. With the same logic, George W. Bush was construed as the villain (Shubert, 2003). While this was perceived within a Muslim and non-Muslim spectrum, it also hearkened back to the hero/villain construction of Soekarno (1945–1966) and Soeharto eras (1966–1998); reflected in the nomenclature of Soeharto's “New Order,” which vilified Soekarno's government as the “Old Order.” Further to this, Soekarno is the undisputed founding father of the nation and is remembered for standing up to the colonialists and even the US. Nevertheless, he was deposed by Soeharto because of his association with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), but went down fighting for his principles and would not be a puppet to the in-coming Soeharto regime, stating that the PKI sacrificed more for the Nationalist Revolution than his own nationalist group (Hauswedell, 1973, p. 143).

Whether heroes or villains, the actors in modern Indonesian politics and governance have arisen from a political culture that has oscillated between Western and Indigenous influences. Culture can be defined as a

set of behavioral and representational elements which characterise one group as opposed to others, but is ever-shifting rather than static and dependent on power relations. Political culture may be understood as political behavior that is not just derived from institutions, but rather cultural dispositions, such as religious beliefs, ethical values, attitudes, etc. The well-known essay on power in Javanese culture by Anderson (1972) argues that preconceived Western models are insufficient to grasp Indonesian politics, and that “traditional,” especially Javanese, concepts of power must be accorded a great role. In this model, power was something homogenous and divine and not dependent on legitimacy in a Western sense. For some observers, and despite Anderson’s criticism of the New Order, this syndrome seemed to justify the illiberal and authoritarian characteristics of Soeharto’s rule. As Ricklefs (2008, 2012) explained, the sword, state-sponsored violence, and religious dogma were enough to silence the enemy, providing people with only one narrative of history.

In the 1990s, similar ideas propelled the Asian values debate as a way of legitimising authoritarian regimes via the claim that liberal Western democracy and freedom were unsuited to Asian traditions of collectively shaped rights. Such ideas may reflect an insufficient understanding of the cultural concept and were linked to the strong economic development of East and Southeast Asia in the late 20th century (Eklöf, 2003). After the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis in 1997–1998 and the fall of the New Order, Asian values lost attraction as society changed rapidly: Muslim parties and organisations gained a more vocal role in political and intellectual developments, concomitant with proponents of democratic and pluralist agendas. The old idea of New Order political culture, positing that lines of division in Indonesian society could be leveled out through deliberation and consensus (*musyawarah dan mufakat*) has been shattered. In the present, political culture is dependent on a multitude of Indigenous and external factors. Frustration with Western interventions in the Muslim world and China’s threatening posture have made many Indonesians susceptible to Muslim internationalism and Sinophobia. Internet and social media, particularly through access to mobile phones, can incite large numbers of citizens on issues that would have gone unnoticed in the old days, and thereby alter the political landscape literally in an instant. At the same time, the heritage from the Soekarno and Soeharto years lives on in different ways. The national Pancasila ideology, instrumental in the foundation of the nation, was derided by some as “dead” after 1998 but has continued to play a role, although not uncontroversially as shown by Fenton’s (2024) contribution.

## 2. Thematic Issue’s Contributions

The sometimes-volatile Indonesian political scene, and the possibilities and restraints that it offers to its actors, is amply highlighted by the articles that follow in this thematic issue. Conceptionally, as discussed above, defining who or what is a hero and villain can be a matter of perception and timing. Nevertheless, we try to provide robust analysis and balanced discussions in the nine articles of this issue, which revolve around the central theme of agents of change and integration that have shaped Indonesia’s identity, culture, government, law, security, and democracy in terms of geopolitics and internal stability.

The article by Farram (2024) concerns Indonesian heroes, traitors, and villains from different regions and eras, with examples of regional leaders who opposed or fought for the Dutch colonialists, individuals involved in post-1949 activities, as well as celebrities idolised by fans but who are also considered villains by others. The contribution by Franklin (2024) explains the living legacy of Gus Dur and his impact on Indonesia through the analysis of institutions he influenced in personal ways, placing him in the category of hero.

The contributions by Macfarlane (2024), Azca (2024), and Noor (2024) concern radical Islam and individual agency in the form of terrorism and *jihad* (holy war). Macfarlane's analysis, from a feminist perspective, and Azca's biographical article of a reformist Muhammadiyah individual who pursued a literalist interpretation of Islam, reflect how individuals become villains in the context of acceptable behavioral norms. Noor examines the effectiveness of institutions responsible for reforming and rehabilitating former terrorists. Contributions by Fenton (2024) and Price (2024) debate institutional problems that impact the state and society, with Fenton examining the issues of dogmatic attitudes to the state ideology of Pancasila and Price detailing the decline in power and prestige of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK). The contribution by Afriansyah et al. (2024) provides a summary of the problems of maritime security and the creation of an integrated single-agency coast guard. The article by Miller and Sibarani (2024) reminds us of the individuals, or unofficial heroes, who fought for freedom in the reformation movement (*reformasi*), which ended the Soeharto New Order regime, providing a voice to the victims that disappeared (but are not forgotten), such as the Indonesian poet-activist Wiji Thukul and others.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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