



# Indonesian Quarterly

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GDE DWITYA ARIEF METERA

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## Book Review

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# Standing Firm for Indonesia's Democracy: An Oral History of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono

GDE DWITYA ARIEF METERA<sup>1</sup>

Few individuals have had a front-row seat to Indonesian history like Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. With a career spanning crucial periods under both the authoritarian New Order and the democratic Reformasi era, Yudhoyono found himself in strategic positions to lead various military and civilian organizations, as

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<sup>1</sup> *Gde Dwitya Arief Metera, the Reviewer. Institute for Advanced Research (IFAR) at Universitas Islam International, Indonesia*

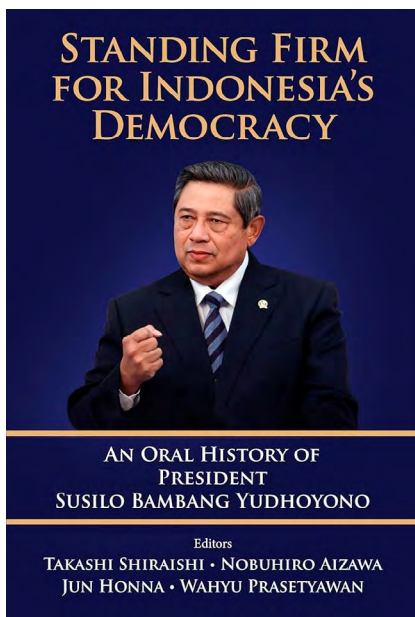
well as the country itself. Notably, he was the first directly elected president of democratic Indonesia, governing from 2004 to 2014.

This book is an oral history project documenting Yudhoyono's career, not only as the president of Indonesia but also as a military officer, general, minister, and party politician before he assumed the presidency. It is the first of its kind in Indonesia, brought to fruition by a dedicated team of Indonesia specialists over seven years, from 2016 to 2023. The result is a remarkably rich and informed manuscript capturing Yudhoyono up close and personal. Chapters are ordered chronologically, following the trajectory of Yudhoyono's career.

Chapters one to three cover Yudhoyono's time as an active military officer prior to Indonesia's democratic transition in 1999. Chapters four and five detail his service as a minister under President Abdurrahman Wahid and President Megawati Sukarnoputri, respectively. Chapter six discusses Yudhoyono's entry into electoral politics, the establishment of Partai Demokrat, and his run for the presidency. Chapters seven and eight provide his views on his first and second presidencies. Finally, chapters nine to eleven explore Yudhoyono's take on several important policy issues, including decentralization, regional geopolitics, and democratic leadership.

For keen observers of Indonesian politics, the book offers important insights into themes such as Yudhoyono's status as the son-in-law of General Sarwo Edhie Wibowo and its impact on his career and relationship with President Soeharto. Another intriguing question is Yudhoyono's position on the alleged factional rift within the Indonesian military between "ABRI Merah Putih" and "ABRI Hijau" during the late New Order. On both counts, Yudhoyono appears judicious in his responses, leaving little room for controversial speculation.

Yudhoyono also addresses his relationships with former superiors—i.e., Presidents Wahid and Megawati—which have seen both high and low points. He was forced to resign from his role as Coordinating Minister of Defense and Security by Wahid for refusing to dissolve the parliament, and fell out



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Jun Honna, Wahyu  
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of favor with Megawati after deciding to run for the presidency in 2004. In both events, Yudhoyono provided contextual explanation leading to the decisions he made.

Yudhoyono's rise to the presidency is a fascinating theme in Indonesia's political history. He founded Partai Demokrat from scratch and quickly led it to political dominance. In the book, Yudhoyono attributes his success to his acute attention to popular surveys, which informed him of his popularity. This information paired with the institutional shift to one man one vote system bolstered his confidence to run for office.

Readers interested in Indonesia's political history or conducting research on it will find this book invaluable. Unlike other monographs in political science or history, this book does not present a specific argument but serves as raw interview material, offering a wealth of data and important contextual explanations from Yudhoyono himself.

There are at least two reasons why the raw materials in this book are invaluable. First, the wealth of data it provides is simply unmatched. The editors pose many important and sensitive questions, and Yudhoyono offers relevant answers, often with crucial contextual explanations of why certain episodes in his career unfolded as they did.

Second, producing such a scholarly work requires enormous effort, particularly in gaining access to presidents or ex-presidents, which is notoriously difficult. Researchers must be highly trusted to secure the time and cooperation of such high-profile individuals. The editors of this book, being prominent Indonesianists with significant connections in presidential circles, managed to achieve this. Without their expertise and connections, producing a book of this nature would be nearly impossible.

Thus, the editors have rendered a great service to the community of scholars studying Indonesia. This book will be especially important for those focusing on presidential studies in the country. Admittedly, the study of presidents and presidentialism in Indonesia has not yet attained the popularity it enjoys in other established democracies, such as the United States. However, this book could serve as a crucial starting point for many significant future studies. ♦

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