

5-22-1998

Trends. Change of Government in Indonesia: The Reinforcing and Shattering of Myths

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Recommended Citation

Editor (1998) "Trends. Change of Government in Indonesia: The Reinforcing and Shattering of Myths," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 20 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol4/iss20/5>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Trends. Change of Government in Indonesia: The Reinforcing and Shattering of Myths

Author: Editor

Volume: 4

Issue: 20

Date: 1998-05-22

Keywords: Freud, Indonesia, International Politics, Suharto

With the reported change of government in Indonesia, one myth has again been shattered and another reinforced. The former is that Asian democracy is inherently different from the West and entails authoritarian government that facilitates economic progress as it constrains political liberties. A variant of this myth is that economic progress constitutes political liberty, while the West's notion of the latter is some abstract reification that does not apply to Asia. Post-World War II Japan was a special exception. However, in the last twelve years, events in the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia, and Hong Kong have belied this myth. Events in Indonesia seem to be heading in this direction--as to a much lesser degree and in respectively unique ways are events in the People's Republic of China, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore. Myanmar (Burma) has demonstrated aborted but significant potential.

The latter myth was offered by Sigmund Freud in his Totem and Taboo and constitutes an ineluctable tendency for the people to rise up against an authoritarian figure. Although not as literal and graphic as the sons conspiring to kill and then eat the flesh of the father, events in Indonesia and in many other authoritarian regimes throughout history have presented dramatic variations of the myth.

Suharto's seeming benign and contrite acceptance of loss of power suggests that he may understand both mythic implications better than most observers of international politics. (See Freud, S. Totem and taboo. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. 13. Hogarth Press; Landler, M. (May 21, 1998). Movement lacked a leader in the streets. The New York Times, p. A9; Mydans, S. (May 21, 1998). Suharto, besieged, steps down after 32-year rule in Indonesia. The New York Times, p. A1, A8.) (Keywords: Freud, Indonesia, International Politics, Suharto.)