

The political life of images

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Karen Strassler's book *Demanding Images: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia* engages with the role played by images in the political public sphere and the dynamics unfolding around these in contemporary Indonesia. Its focus lies on the first decade and a half of the 21st century, a period in which images, and specifically photographic pictures, have come to be seen as vehicles for attaining the democratic ideals of accountability, transparency and popular political participation in the country (p. 12, 243). Yet, as Strassler notes, it is precisely because of this status that images have also become the primary means through which major political struggles of the time were fought (p. 12). In these struggles, the malleability of images and their proneness to being altered turned out to be a crucial characteristic, as they provided a stage both for contesting the truth value of certain pictures and for producing new truths with doctored images figuring as evidence (p. 223, 231).

Core to the book's argument is the notion of the *image-event*, which denotes the political processes that unfold when images become central to the public discussions in which they intervene (p. 9-10). As such, Strassler argues that "conceptualizing *all* images as unfolding events enables us to see them as contingent and politically consequential processes in their own right" (p. 13-14). Here, images happen, again and again, rather than move as things built to completion before released to the public (p. 243). This draws attention away from the particular image itself and onto the processes in which images impact public politics, processes in which these images themselves are made and remade (p. 17-18).

The book moves through a series of image-events, providing the empirical ground on which Strassler's theory is built and offering rich insight into the nature of politics and the public sphere in *reformasi* Indonesia. Chapter One revolves around montaged Rupiah bills displaying the face of the former dictator that circulated in the early post-Suharto period. As instruments of commentary critiquing the prevalence of corruption under the old regime, they reflected the newly won freedoms that made the spread of such images possible. Chapters Two and Four engage with events unfolding from the emergence of different images of sex and sexual violence. While the former discusses debates about the truth-value of photographic images in the context of rape, the latter traces the development of a controversy surrounding artworks labeled pornographic by conservative hardliners. Meanwhile, Chapter Three centers on the particular figure of the expert, equipped to judge the authenticity of photographic material in

the context of public debates. This figure aligns its own mode of presenting their claim to expertise in public with a generally prevalent trust in technological forms of distinguishing truth from forgery. Chapter Five turns to more recent battles over forms of street art and public signs that intervene in political debates and the resulting backlash against these public expressions of political opinions. Finally, the conclusion discusses the first presidential campaign of Indonesia's reformist candidate Joko Widodo, and the uses of and debates surrounding images and videos of rallies made on smartphones by his mostly young supporters.

In recentering the debate about the politics of images, authenticity and fakeness around the playing out of processes through which these are contested, Strassler's book offers a valuable approach for exploring contemporary image politics. As politicized images proliferate through increasingly diverse modes of circulation while their production and manipulation is accessible to a wider public, it is precisely this attention to the events, which make and are made possible by images, that can help us grasp the dynamics of this novel political landscape. Here, the book's final discussion, revolving around the presidential election campaign of 2014, is particularly instructive. The role of social media, of images and their manipulation in the context of election campaigns has been a major point of contention in many countries over the past years and the concluding chapter will thus be of particular interest for many readers. Yet, the book's real strength is that Strassler's careful discussion of diverse instances of image-events offers a much more thorough treatment of these dynamics than any ever-so-detailed analysis of a singular event could have provided.

At the same time, *Demanding Images* presents a careful ethnography of the political public sphere in *reformasi* Indonesia. Like any ethnography, it is situated within a particular place and, perhaps more importantly for the book's structure and theme, a particular time. These temporal limits, however, are well chosen, spanning the entire period from the tumultuous beginnings of Indonesian democratization in the last years of the 20th century to the election campaign of popular reformist candidate Joko Widodo, itself a break of sorts with the political landscape of the preceding decade and a half. The book, then, offers a vivid ethnography of the political culture in the streets, the newspaper articles, television shows, and online forums of contemporary Indonesia, weaving together the voices of an astonishing set of characters. Street artists, activists and students appear alongside self-proclaimed experts in photographic analysis, religious hardliners, and politicians of all shades, reflecting the diverse voices of the contemporary political public sphere in the country.

Finally, the book itself forms an experiment in writing ethnography, at least to some extent. As it focuses on the role of images in political debates, pictures themselves are central to the book. They are well integrated into the text, being neither overbearing nor hidden away in appendices. The decision to stick with black-and-white reproductions when it comes to the pictures chosen for the main text avoids distracting ruptures between the numerous images and the printed text among which they appear. Luckily, the reader can get a sense of the colorful reality of the images discussed as the main text is preceded by a well-assorted, color-printed photo essay that assembles a selection of the images that appear in the book (p. xv-xxxi).

Demanding Images, then, caters to readers with interests as colorful and diverse as the images it discusses. Whether one is interested in contemporary Indonesian politics, in understanding the role of images in public spheres more generally, or in the production and life of images themselves, this book will certainly be a valuable read.

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