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State Policies and Coffee: Indonesia–Brazil's Journey from Colonialism for Global Markets

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Abstract

This study examines the role of the state in shaping the coffee industries of Indonesia and Brazil within the global market during the 20th century. The objective is to analyze how state intervention influenced the competitiveness of both countries' coffee sectors. Using a qualitative and deductive approach grounded in international political economy and the concept of comparative advantage, the research finds that Brazil's structured state-led interventions through infrastructure development, labor management, and export-oriented policies enabled it to dominate the global coffee industry. In contrast, Indonesia faced persistent challenges in modernization, distribution, and post-harvest management, limiting its competitiveness. The findings highlight the importance of consistent and proactive state policies in building competitive advantage for national commodities.

Keywords: Brazil, coffee history, comparative advantage, Indonesia, state policies.

INTRODUCTION

Coffee has become one of the most sought-after commodities in the world since the 19th century. According to data from the National Coffee Association, coffee beans were first discovered in the highlands of Ethiopia. During the 15th and 16th centuries, a distinct coffee culture began to flourish in the Arabian Peninsula. The emergence of coffee houses, supported by the influx of pilgrims and travelers to the holy city of Mecca, contributed to the widespread dissemination of knowledge about coffee consumption and preparation. By the 17th century, coffee culture had gained immense popularity across Europe, with more than 300 coffee houses established in London alone. The growing interest in and demand for coffee sparked intense global competition to cultivate the crop outside the Arab region. This competition opened new economic opportunities for various regions, notably Brazil and Indonesia, which became major centers for coffee development (National Coffee Association, n.d.). A study by Muhammad Ibnu and Novi published by the Research and Development Agency of Trade (Litbang Perdagangan) on the trends of coffee production and trade highlights that between 2015 and 2020, Brazil ranked first among global coffee-producing countries, with an annual production volume of 3,103.5 tons. In contrast, Indonesia ranked fourth, producing 711.3 tons per year. Historically, however, Indonesia preceded Brazil as a coffee producer. The first coffee plantations in Indonesia were established in the 16th century, introduced by the Dutch through the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie or VOC). Coffee cultivation rapidly expanded, making Indonesia one of the largest coffee exporters in the world. In comparison, Brazil began cultivating coffee in the 17th century, introduced by Francisco de Mello Palheta under Portuguese influence.

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Coffee is not indigenous to Indonesian soil. The first coffee seeds were introduced to Indonesia in 1696, when the Dutch Governor of Malabar, India, sent Arabica coffee seeds from Yemen to the Dutch Governor stationed in Batavia. Indonesia became the first country outside Ethiopia, the birthplace of coffee, and Yemen to cultivate the crop (Dinas Pertanian Pemerintah Kabupaten Buleleng, 2019). Kedawung, an agricultural region in Batavia, was designated as the initial site for coffee cultivation in Indonesia. However, the first planting attempt failed. In 1699, coffee cuttings were reimported from Malabar, and the use of stem-cutting propagation techniques led to successful cultivation, making coffee increasingly popular (Juwita and Mufid, 2024). Indonesia's international coffee trade was managed by the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie or VOC), which first shipped coffee to Europe in 1711. Growing demand for coffee in the international market encouraged wider cultivation across the archipelago. By the mid-17th century, coffee plantations had expanded beyond Java to Sumatra, Sulawesi, Bali, and the Timor Islands. In 1900, the Dutch colonial government began introducing and cultivating Robusta coffee varieties in Indonesia.

Coffee is also not an indigenous plantation commodity in Brazil. Portuguese colonial authorities brought coffee seeds from plantations in French Guiana to be cultivated in Brazil. A Portuguese military officer named Francisco de Melo Palheta successfully introduced and planted the first coffee seeds in Brazilian soil in 1727. The planting took place in northern Brazil, specifically in the region of Pará. This initial cultivation was successful and intended solely for domestic consumption (Febrian, 2024). Coffee cultivation gradually expanded to the southern regions of Brazil, including Rio de Janeiro. The fertile soil and favorable climate allowed coffee plants to thrive. Climatically, Brazil experiences two distinct patterns: the northern region has a tropical climate hot, humid, and with high rainfall while the southern region is subtropical, cool and humid. This climatic diversity provides ideal conditions for coffee cultivation and has become a key advantage for Brazil (Bradford and Momsen, 2025). The expansion of coffee cultivation in Brazil continued due to increasing demand from European and American markets. The dominant variety of coffee produced from Brazilian plantations is Arabica.

Although Indonesia has a long-standing history as one of the first countries outside Ethiopia and Yemen to cultivate coffee, its position in the global coffee market remains below that of Brazil. Historically, Indonesia began producing and exporting coffee earlier, and was already recognized as a major exporter as early as the 17th century. However, data show that Brazil now dominates the global market with significantly higher production volumes and a more extensive and well-established export network. This situation raises a critical question regarding "the role of the state in both Indonesia and Brazil for coffee as a global commodity throughout the 20th century."

The study of international political economy views the state not merely as a bystander in the global market system, but as a central actor with the capacity to shape the direction of economic development through coordinated policies. Robert Gilpin (2001) asserts that even in the era of globalization, the role of the state remains crucial in regulating the relationship between domestic and international markets, including in strategic commodity sectors. In this context, the state plays a pivotal role in fostering competitiveness, particularly for high-export-value commodities such as coffee. Furthermore, international political economy also explores the theories of comparative advantage and competitive advantage. David Ricardo's (1817) theory of comparative advantage explains how a country can benefit from specialization in production based on relative efficiency and favorable natural conditions. However, this approach is deemed insufficient to explain the complexities of modern trade dynamics. Therefore, Michael Porter's (1990) theory of competitive advantage becomes

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increasingly relevant, as it emphasizes how countries can generate added value and competitiveness through innovation, product quality, institutional strengthening, and integrated national industrial strategies within the global market. In the context of coffee, both Indonesia and Brazil possess comparative advantages due to favorable geography and climate conditions for cultivation. Nonetheless, this framework alone is no longer adequate to explain global market competition. Thus, Porter's (1990) concept of competitive advantage serves as a complementary perspective in this study. Porter underscores that a country's competitiveness is not solely determined by natural resources, but also by the capacity of the state and industry actors to create added value through innovation, quality, production efficiency, and product differentiation. In his "diamond model," competitive advantage is formed through the interaction of factor conditions, industry strategy and structure, demand conditions, and the support of institutions and government policies.

Previous research by Bradford and Momsen (2025) has shown that Brazil's dominance in the global coffee market is not solely determined by natural factors such as climate and land area, but also by strong state intervention dating back to the colonial era, including the use of cheap labor and the establishment of structured export institutions. In contrast, earlier studies on Indonesia, such as those by Juwita and Mufid (2024), highlight the country's long history of coffee cultivation and the diversity of local varieties as distinctive strengths. However, they also note that the lack of substantial state intervention in coffee industrialization has caused Indonesia to lag behind Brazil in terms of market expansion and global influence. Supporting this analysis, data from the Trade Research and Development Agency (Ibnu and Novi, 2022) reveal a significant gap in coffee production and export volumes between Indonesia and Brazil over the past two decades. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to compare and analyze the role of the Indonesian and Brazilian governments in promoting coffee as a global commodity throughout the 20th century. The primary focus is on how each country designed and implemented strategic policies to strengthen the coffee sector as a key export commodity. Within this framework, the study seeks to identify the comparative advantages of both countries whether geographical, historical, or structural, and to examine how state intervention through policy has transformed those advantages into competitive strengths in the international market. Furthermore, this research aims to evaluate the effectiveness of state policies in enhancing the competitiveness of the coffee industry and to understand the key factors that have either contributed to or hindered the development of this commodity sector.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach combined with a comparative case study method to analyze the role of the state in advancing the coffee commodities of Indonesia and Brazil into the global market throughout the twentieth century. The qualitative approach is chosen as it enables the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of policy dynamics, historical contexts, and state strategies. The comparative method is applied to examine the two country cases, Indonesia and Brazil, in order to identify similarities and differences in patterns of state intervention, the formation of comparative advantages, and their transformation into competitive advantages.

The data collection technique employed in this study is documentary analysis, drawing upon scientific publications, government reports, academic journals, historical trade archives, as well as official documents from relevant institutions such as the International Coffee Organization (ICO), the Indonesian Ministry of Agriculture, the Brazilian Coffee Industry Association (ABIC), and various other credible literature sources. The collected data will be utilized to describe and analyze patterns of state policies. The data analysis in this study is conducted using a deductive approach, beginning with a theoretical framework established

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prior to the analysis namely, the theories of comparative advantage and competitive advantage. The data obtained from various secondary sources will be analyzed with reference to the key concepts embedded in these theoretical perspectives. The deductive approach is employed to examine the extent to which the empirical realities in Indonesia and Brazil align with theoretical assumptions about the role of the state in fostering the global competitiveness of commodities. The analysis is carried out using both thematic and comparative methods, by categorizing data into themes such as the role of the state in coffee industry development, forms of policy intervention, processes of building comparative advantage, and strategies for transforming it into competitive advantage. Subsequently, the findings from both case studies will be compared to identify patterns, differences, and dynamics relevant to the research questions and objectives.

By employing a deductive approach, this study not only describes the data but also explains and evaluates it based on the theoretical framework established from the outset. This approach enables the researcher to draw more structured and conceptual conclusions regarding the relationship between state policy and the global competitiveness of coffee commodities. Deductive research follows a sequence of scientific inquiry consisting of the following stages: Theory → Model → Hypothesis → Concept → Variable → Indicator → Fact (Wendt, Levy, and Little 2014, 20). The timeframe of this study focuses on the 20th century, based on the consideration that this period encompasses critical phases in the development of the coffee industry in both countries, including the expansion of production and integration into the global market. Notably, the 20th century also marks the era of independence, during which both Indonesia and Brazil emerged as sovereign states following the end of colonial rule.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The coffee plants that grow in Indonesia today are a legacy of Dutch colonialism. Coffee beans were first introduced to the archipelago in 1696 by Adrian Van Ommen, a Dutch governor based in Malabar, India. The cultivation was successful, and Indonesia exported coffee to Europe for the first time in 1711, with an initial shipment of 405 kilograms, which later increased to an annual export volume of approximately 60 tons (Yacob 2013, 18). The international trade of Indonesian coffee was managed by the Dutch government through the administration of the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC). The VOC was a state-chartered trading company established by the Dutch government to dominate the spice trade in Southeast Asia. It was equipped with its own private military forces, a fleet of ships, and the authority to govern certain territories, including Batavia (now Jakarta). The economic value generated from the coffee trade provided significant financial returns to the VOC's shareholders, namely the Dutch government. However, by the late eighteenth century, the VOC fell into decline. Poor management and rampant corruption led to its official bankruptcy in 1799, prompting the Dutch government to assume direct control over all its assets and colonial holdings. Under the Dutch East Indies administration, coffee (among other spices) continued to play a vital role in generating state revenue. During the tenure of Governor Johannes Graaf van den Bosch, the colonial government implemented the Cultuurstelsel (Forced Cultivation System). This policy mandated that landowner allocate 20% of their arable land for export-oriented crops, including coffee. Those without land were required to work for the colonial state for 75 days each year. The forced cultivation system had a significant fiscal impact, greatly increasing the financial income of the colonial administration. Between 1831 and 1871, the Dutch East Indies government generated a net profit of 823 million Guilders, which substantially strengthened the Dutch state treasury and enabled the repayment of national debts amounting to 12 million Guilders (Angela, n.d.).

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The period of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia came to an end on March 8, 1942, marked by the unconditional surrender of Lieutenant General Ter Poorten to Japanese forces at Kalijati, Bandung. This event officially signaled the beginning of the Japanese occupation in Indonesia, following Japan's previous successful occupations of Hawaii, Singapore, and the Philippines. Japan entered Indonesia under the pretense of supporting the country's independence, launching a propaganda campaign known as the Three a Movement (Gerakan 3A): Nippon, the Light of Asia; Nippon, the Protector of Asia; and Nippon the Leader of Asia. Technically, the Japanese allowed the Indonesian national anthem Indonesia Raya to be broadcast on the radio, permitted the use of the Indonesian language, and facilitated the formation of organizations aimed at preparing the country for independence. All Dutch-owned private companies and colonial assets were nationalized and monopolized by the Japanese government. The focus of plantation agriculture also shifted significantly; crops deemed unrelated to Japan's war efforts (such as cloves, pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg, and coffee) were restricted in their cultivation. Instead, the Japanese prioritized commodities that supported military logistics, namely rubber, quinine, and castor oil plants. As a result, coffee production was disrupted and largely neglected due to land conversion and labor shortages. On August 15, 1945, Japan formally surrendered unconditionally to the Allied Forces. This moment was seized by Indonesian youth as an opportunity to declare national independence. On August 17, 1945, the Proclamation of Independence was read aloud by Soekarno, marking Indonesia's official declaration as a sovereign nation (Wiharyanto 2011, 21).

Following the proclamation of independence, the Indonesian government has been characterized by three distinct political periods: the Old Order, the New Order, and the Reform Era. The Old Order period spanned from 1945 to 1965. During this era, the government did not prioritize the plantation sector, and therefore, no significant increase in coffee commodity exports was observed. The primary focus of the Indonesian government at that time was to defend its independence from the Dutch, who sought to re-establish colonial control, and to secure both de facto and de jure recognition of the newly established Republic of Indonesia. Nevertheless, the process of nationalizing foreign-owned companies (particularly those owned by the Dutch and Japanese) was gradually initiated. President Soekarno, as the country's first head of state, enacted legislation to nationalize Dutch-owned enterprises operating within Indonesian territory. This legal measure was codified in Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 86 of 1958. The regulation stated that the nationalization policy was implemented in the interest of public welfare. Furthermore, it stipulated penalties for non-compliance (Pemerintah Republik Indonesia 1958, Article 4). Under government supervision, the nationalized foreign-owned plantation companies, including those cultivating coffee, were reorganized and rebranded as Pusat Perkebunan Negara (State Plantation Center or PPN). Between 1957 and 1960, approximately 700 foreign companies operating in Indonesia were successfully nationalized (Darini, M.Hum and Dr. Miftahuddin, M.Hum 2018).

The subsequent political period, known as the New Order (1966–1998), led by President Soeharto, placed greater emphasis on economic development through the implementation of Five-Year Development Plans (Rencana Pembangunan Lima Tahun or REPELITA). REPELITA I (1969–1974) focused on improving management systems, developing Perkebunan Inti Rakyat (PIR or Nucleus Estate and Smallholders Scheme), and rehabilitating production facilities. The government established several institutions such as PNP, BKU-PN, LPEN, and SEKI to support coffee governance and marketing systems. The PIR program was also implemented to address the disparity between high levels of coffee production and relatively low export values. To promote export efficiency, the government enacted Government Regulation No. 16/1970 and Minister of Trade Decree No. 68/1970, which

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simplified trade, banking, and foreign exchange procedures. During REPELITA II, beginning in 1974, the government continued to promote coffee export development by standardizing procedures for exporters. Companies were required to meet a number of administrative conditions, including the submission of form E-3, obtaining an Export Coffee Approval Letter (Surat Persetujuan Ekspor Kopi or SPEK), paying Additional Export Taxes (Pajak Ekspor Tambahan or PET), and providing export credit and insurance guarantees (Pamungkas and Rinardi 2023, 108–116). REPELITA III then placed policy focus on increasing both productivity and quality of smallholder coffee production through intensification, extensification, and plantation rehabilitation programs. The government also provided production input assistance, including fertilizers and pesticides, technical guidance, and encouraged the adoption of modern cultivation technologies. In the area of trade, the government granted private companies the right to export coffee directly, under government supervision. Additionally, during this period, the government introduced a devaluation policy for the Indonesian rupiah, adjusting the exchange rate from IDR 415 to IDR 625 per USD. This policy was intended to enhance the competitiveness of Indonesian export commodities in international markets (Pamungkas and Rinardi 2023, 108–116). Soeharto's REPELITA I to III policies successfully increased the global export value of Indonesian coffee. In REPELITA I, the export quota rose to 82,420 tons by 1968, generating an export value of USD 69.3 million in 1970. In REPELITA II, Indonesia managed to boost coffee export volumes to between 128,000 and 135,000 tons in 1975–1976, reaching an export value of USD 138 million. By 1979–1980, during REPELITA III, the government achieved coffee exports of 238,000 tons with a total value of USD 715 million. Key export destinations included the United States, the Netherlands, Italy, Japan, Germany, and Singapore. However, coffee commodity liberalization in the international trade community during the 1990s led to a significant decline in Indonesian coffee exports. Between 1994 and 1998, the export value dropped from USD 753.63 million to USD 529.67 million, reflecting an average annual decrease of 5.37% (Sahat, Nuryartono, and Hutagaol 2016, 64).

The coffee cultivated in Brazilian territory also traces its origins to colonial legacies, having been introduced from coffee plantations in French Guiana for cultivation in Brazil. A Portuguese military officer named Francisco de Melo Palheta successfully brought and planted the first coffee seedlings in Brazilian plantations in 1727. The initial cultivation took place in northern Brazil, specifically in the region of Pará. This early coffee cultivation was successful and initially intended for domestic consumption only. Over time, coffee cultivation expanded to southern Brazil, including Rio de Janeiro. The combination of fertile soils and favorable climate conditions contributed significantly to the successful growth of coffee in the region. Climatically, Brazil benefits from two distinct climate zones. The northern region tends to have a tropical climate (hot, humid, and with high rainfall) while the southern region has a subtropical climate (cool and moist). These diverse climate conditions have provided Brazil with a distinct advantage in coffee cultivation (Bradford and Momsen 2025). The continuous expansion of coffee cultivation in Brazil was driven by increasing demand from European and American markets. The dominant variety cultivated across Brazilian plantations has been Arabica coffee. The vast plantation areas and varied geographical conditions have resulted in a wide range of flavor profiles and varieties of Arabica coffee. In addition, Brazil's coffee processing methods have added significant value to its coffee products. Besides advantages in land area, climate, geography, and processing techniques, Brazil has also benefited from the availability of cheap labor. Under Portuguese colonial rule, the slave system became the backbone of Brazil's coffee production. Thousands of enslaved Africans were employed on large plantations, particularly in regions such as Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Minas Gerais.

Brazil successfully declared its independence from Portuguese colonialism on

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September 7, 1822, following a series of prolonged conflicts. After gaining independence in 1822, the first Brazilian Empire was led by Dom Pedro I, the son of the Portuguese king, who ruled from 1822 until his abdication in 1831 to return to Portugal. The imperial throne was then passed on to his son, Dom Pedro II. By 1850, during the reign of Pedro II, coffee exports accounted for over 60% of Brazil's total national export value. Brazil's dominance in controlling up to 80% of the global coffee market established coffee as the backbone of the national economy. Following the overthrow of Emperor Pedro II, Brazil transitioned into a republic. During this period, the country began constructing railway lines connecting inland coffee-producing regions directly to export ports. The government also implemented several policies to stimulate national income through the coffee sector, including the provision of credit lines and the establishment of institutions supporting cultivation, research, and trade in coffee. However, these policies resulted in overproduction, which eventually disrupted coffee prices. In response, President Campos Sales took action by securing international loans to purchase excess coffee stock, aiming to stabilize and raise international coffee prices. Unfortunately, the onset of the Great Depression in 1929 severely impacted the international market. Brazil's coffee export volumes dropped by nearly 50% compared to its usual export capacity. As coffee was the mainstay of the national economy, this decline triggered a severe domestic economic crisis. President Campos Sales was eventually overthrown and replaced by Getúlio Vargas. Vargas introduced drastic measures, including the destruction of coffee stocks, the imposition of tree taxes on coffee producers, an increase in customs duties, and the establishment of the Coffee Stabilization Council, an agency dedicated to maintaining price stability in the coffee market. Between 1931 and 1944, an average of 27% of annual coffee stock was destroyed. The peak occurred in 1937, with up to 70% of the annual stock incinerated. In addition to burning, coffee was also dumped into the sea or compressed into fuel bricks as substitutes for coal (Ferraresso 2021). During the 1945–1959 period, Brazil's gross internal product grew at an average annual rate of 5.8%, with per capita growth of 3.3%. Data from the Getúlio Vargas Foundation shows that Brazil's agricultural export index rose from 62.7 in 1945 to 139.1 by 1960. The government's domestic production controls and market stabilization policies effectively positioned Brazil as the world's largest coffee exporter (Paiva 1961, 1092). During this era, the Brazilian government also actively participated in the formulation of the International Coffee Agreement (ICA) under the United Nations, which later laid the foundation for the establishment of the International Coffee Organization (ICO), a body designed to stabilize global coffee prices.

The Comparation

Both Indonesia and Brazil began cultivating coffee as part of their colonial systems. In Indonesia, coffee was introduced by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in the late 17th century and became a major export commodity through the forced cultivation system (cultuurstelsel) under the Dutch East Indies administration. In contrast, coffee was first planted in Brazil in 1727 by Francisco de Mello Palheta, supported by a system of slavery and driven by the Portuguese colonial elite. From the outset, Brazil enjoyed greater local control over its coffee production and distribution systems, as well as access to cheap labor through slavery. Indonesia, on the other hand, was more centrally controlled by Dutch colonial authorities, with an exploitative forced cultivation system that did not empower local structures to independently manage coffee exports. After gaining independence, Indonesia faced political instability and prioritized the consolidation of national sovereignty. Attention to the plantation sector, including coffee, remained limited during this period. It was only during the New Order era that significant focus was given to the sector through the nationalization of foreign companies and the establishment of institutions such as the PPN

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(State Plantation Corporation). In contrast, Brazil had already developed a strong coffee-based economic structure since the early Republican era. Policies such as the provision of credit, infrastructure development (notably railway lines), and the establishment of research and trade institutions had been implemented since the early 20th century. Even during periods of crisis, such as the Great Depression of 1929, the Brazilian state actively regulated market prices through measures like coffee burning programs and the formation of the Coffee Stabilization Council. Brazil was faster and more aggressive in integrating coffee production into its national strategy and macroeconomic policies, including during times of crisis. Indonesia was slower in developing a post-colonial strategy and only became actively involved through the Five-Year Development Plans (Repelita) beginning in the late 1960s.Domestically, Brazil actively established research institutions and participated in the formation of the International Coffee Agreement (ICA), which laid the foundation for the International Coffee Organization (ICO), positioning coffee as a pillar of its economic diplomacy. The state systematically regulated prices, export volumes, and market interventions. In Indonesia, structured state intervention only began with the First Repelita (Five-Year Development Plan) through regulatory reforms and the establishment of national institutions such as PNP, BKU-PN, and SEKI, as well as the simplification of export procedures. Brazil had developed a more robust and consistent institutional framework for coffee exports since the early 20th century. Indonesia, by contrast, only began to organize its coffee export system after 1969 and continues to face challenges related to efficiency and regulatory stability.

CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis of state roles in the development of the coffee sector in Indonesia and Brazil reveals that success in penetrating global markets is not solely determined by historical legacy or natural resource endowment, but more crucially by the quality of state intervention its consistency, strategic foresight, and institutional capacity. While both countries inherited colonial systems of coffee cultivation, Indonesia through Dutch forced cultivation and Brazil through Portuguese slavery. Brazil demonstrated an earlier and more proactive institutional development, integrating coffee into a broader national economic strategy since the early 20th century. Brazil's approach encompassed infrastructure development, varietal research, price stabilization mechanisms, and international trade diplomacy, forming a coherent and sustained coffee governance system. In contrast, Indonesia's efforts only gained momentum during the New Order era, with institutional and regulatory development occurring later and facing challenges in policy continuity and export competitiveness. This comparison underscores the centrality of the state in transforming agricultural commodities from raw potential into global economic assets. Brazil exemplifies how comparative advantage can be transformed into competitive advantage through a strong and adaptive state. For Indonesia, strengthening institutional capacity, ensuring policy coherence, and embedding export strategies within broader economic diplomacy will be essential to enhancing the global competitiveness of its coffee sector.

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