Melissa Crouch


Christian proselytization has been a source of conflict between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia since colonial times. During the Soeharto era, the government maintained tight controls over public discussion of religion in order to prevent inter-religious conflict. The lifting of those controls following the collapse of the New Order resulted in a greater politicization of religious identity that intensified suspicions among some Muslims that Christians harbored plans to convert them. At the same time, democratization of the political system and decentralization of power created new opportunities for individuals and civil society groups, including extremist Muslims, to shape public discourse and influence the policies and actions of the state.

In this book, Melissa Crouch examines the way Islamists have adapted their campaign to prevent Christian proselytism in the context of a newly democratic Indonesia. The analysis focuses on the use of law and the legal system to counter perceived efforts to convert Muslims, because of the importance of law in democratic societies as the principal mechanism for balancing social interests and containing conflict. For that reason, an examination of how well Indonesian legal institutions have functioned in managing inter-religious conflict provides a window into the development of democratic institutions generally.

The book consists of five substantive chapters plus the Introduction and Conclusion. The substantive chapters are divided into two parts. The two chapters (Chapters 2 and 3) in Part I present background material. Chapter 2 summarizes the origin and history of Muslim resistance to Christian proselytization. This is followed in Chapter 3 with a discussion of the ideological and institutional context in which conflict between Muslims and Christians is played out.

The body of the study is contained in three case studies presented in Part II. The case studies each focus on one particular arena in which Muslims have sought to prevent actions perceived as attempts to convert Muslims to Christianity. Chapter 4 addresses actions taken by Muslims to prevent Christians from using schools as a means of proselytizing. Indonesian Muslims often find Christian schools attractive because they offer better educational opportunities than many other schools. At the same time, some Muslims believe that Christians seek to attract Muslim students to Christian schools in order to convert them. While this is not a new phenomenon, Crouch shows that in recent
years Islamists have increasingly turned to law in their efforts to counter the supposed threat posed by Christian schools. Islamists were principally responsible for the addition of a provision to a 2003 education law mandating that all schools, public and private, provide all students with instruction in their own religion. The significance of this requirement for the anti-proselytization campaign is that Christian schools are required to provide instruction on Islam for their Muslim students. Chapter 4 also recounts how Islamists orchestrated the trial and conviction of three Christian Sunday school teachers on charges that they tricked or enticed Muslim children who attended the program to convert to Christianity. The prosecution was initiated after the local Council of Islamic Scholars carried out an investigation of the teachers and reported the results of their investigation to the police. Radical Islamists attended the trial in support of the prosecution, and the arguments of the prosecutors and the court’s decision indicate that Islamist views had a major influence on the trial and decision.

The second case study focuses on Islamist efforts to thwart the establishment of Christian places of worship. For reasons that are not always logical, Islamists regard the presence of a church as an act of proselytism or an effort to convert Muslims to Christianity. Muslim opposition to the presence of Christian churches has often been violent, but attacks and intimidation targeting Christian places of worship were especially frequent during 2004 and 2005. In 2006 the government responded to demands for tighter controls on the establishment of places of worship with new regulations that have made it more difficult for Christians to obtain the permits necessary to operate a church. In addition to erecting bureaucratic hurdles, the new regulations give Islamist groups greater opportunities to pressure local officials to deny permit applications. Some Christian groups have successfully challenged the denial of permit requests in the administrative court, but these legal victories have often proved meaningless because of an inability to enforce the courts’ orders.

The third case examines prosecutions under Indonesia’s so-called blasphemy law. The statute makes it an offense punishable by up to five years in prison to insult or dishonor one of Indonesia’s six officially recognized religions. The law has been in effect since 1965, but during the Soeharto years prosecutions under the statute were relatively rare. Since 1998, prosecutions for insulting religion have become more frequent. Most prosecutions have been against members of minority Muslim groups, but Christians have also been prosecuted, both for alleged insults to Christianity and also for allegedly insulting Islam. Islamist groups play a key role in instigating the prosecutions, and often use pressure and intimidation to seek to influence the courts’ decision.
This book is valuable as a study of the evolving character of extremist Islam in Indonesia, but its more important contribution lies in what it reveals about Indonesian democracy and the underdeveloped state of the Indonesian legal system. Crouch shows that extremist Muslim groups have proven adept at manipulating the legal system to obstruct and deter actions by Christians construed as proselytization. The analysis also shows, however, that the key to Islamists’ success in the use of the legal system lies in their ability to exploit the system’s weaknesses. The utter lack of independence and professionalism of both the prosecutorial service and the judiciary has enabled Islamists to hijack the criminal justice system in the service of private ends. Corruption in the national police force and across the entirety of the legal system permits Islamists to use violence and intimidation to force church closures and to influence the actions of local officials with little concern for consequences. In sum, Crouch’s study of the use of the legal system by Islamists reinforces the view of many observers of the legal system generally: that law is largely irrelevant to how the system operates.

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