R. Michael Feener

Shari'a and Social Engineering: The Implementation of Islamic Law in Contemporary Aceh, Indonesia. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, xxxii + 335 pp. ISBN: 9780199678846. Price: GBP 50.00 (hardback).

In 1999, the government of Indonesia offered the province of Aceh 'Special Status' as part of a broader effort to end the protracted separatist conflict in the region. The law contained, among others, the formal right to implement (a local formulation of) Islamic law. In subsequent years, the Acehese provincial government implemented a series of bylaws and local regulations on creed, worship, and Islamic symbols, 'proper' Muslim dress, as well as the criminal persecution of the use of intoxicants, gambling and illicit relations between (marriageable) men and women. This intervention in the legal system did not end the conflict. Instead, it took another tragedy—the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami—to create the conditions for successful peace talks, and, eventually, the signing of peace in August 2005.

The implementation of Shari'a in Aceh is sometimes presented as a natural consequence of the assumed orthodoxy and rebelliousness of the Acehese people. Other, better informed analyses have maintained that the Acehese have 'never asked for Shari'a' and that the decision to implement Islamic law was little more than a strategy or a 'trick' on the part of the central government to discredit the (essentially secular) Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM). Both interpretations, according to Michael Feener, are wrong. Instead, he presents a larger and more complex story of Shari'a law in Aceh, which is grounded in local history, the gradual integration of Acehese religious and political elites in national institutions and ideological frameworks, and the Indonesian interpretation (and application) of law as a 'tool' for effecting social change. Based on the analysis of a staggering amount of primary data, including vernacular literature, archival materials, government reports, newspaper articles, and interviews, this book presents a 'fine-grained picture of both the structural design and the everyday work of one of the most complex experiments with the implementation of Islamic law in the contemporary world' (p. 276).

Feener's main argument is that the implementation of Shari'a law in Aceh constitutes an experiment in social engineering. For Islamists, it is commonly thought, the proper application of Islamic law is the ultimate goal. But in Aceh, Shari'a is regarded as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. The more ambitious aim is to create a perfect society, based on a 'complete Islam' (*Islam yang kaffah*) and populated by perfect people. Shari'a, put briefly, is part of a wider, deliberative and systematic effort to re-order society on the basis of a

coherent set of future-oriented ethical ideals. In order to achieve this vision, Shari'a proponents believe, involvement of the state is necessary. The ideological basis of Shari'a implementation in Aceh is what Feener refers to as the '*da'wa* paradigm', a synthesis of Islamic scripturalism, economic developmentalism, and Indonesian nationalism first developed during the early New Order period and supported, primarily, by (a segment of) the urban middle class. The *da'wa* paradigm is an Indonesian, not an exclusively Acehnese, phenomenon. What is special about Aceh, Feener argues, is that the province has functioned as a kind of 'laboratory' for the development of new institutions of state Islam.

The fact that Shari'a in Aceh is not limited to formal legal institutions calls for 'an historical and ethnographic, rather than a doctrinal approach' (p. 7). While the book focuses on the institutions and actors that have driven the implementation of Islamic law forward, it is thus sensitive to the contexts in which they have emerged and carry out their work. The setup of the book is thematic rather than chronological. Following on the first introductory chapter, Chapter 2 provides a general overview of historical developments from the rise of the Acehnese Sultanate in the sixteenth century until the present. Subsequent chapters then proceed to discuss particular elements of the state Shari'a legal system, and their social, political and historical background, including the State Islamic Institute Ar-Raniry (1960) (Chapter 3) and the Consultative Council of Ulama (Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama, MPU, 1965) (Chapter 4). In 1975, the MPU was expanded by Soeharto to become a national organization, the Indonesian Council of Ulama (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI). Both the IAIN and the MPU/MUI have played crucial roles in the process of drafting Islamic legislation in Aceh, which is the focus of Chapter 5.

Chapter 6 concentrates on the development of Aceh's Islamic courts. One of the important conclusions in this chapter is that, in fact, there is not a very big difference, in terms of everyday practice and the nature of most cases, between the Islamic courts in Aceh and its counterparts elsewhere in Indonesia. While the images of public canings—a Shari'a punishment—have made international headlines, criminal cases have constituted only a minor part of the cases, most of which concern issues of family law (marriage, divorce and inheritance). This observation is an important correction of the simplistic view (prevalent especially in the West) that Shari'a law revolves solely or primarily around the punishment of alleged 'sinners'. I would have been interested to know more about the possible impact of the implementation of Shari'a law on the ways in which family law cases are settled, or its consequences for the (traditionally strong) position of women in Acehnese society. In my view, this might have been a useful addition to what is otherwise a lucid and comprehensive analysis.

Chapter 7 focuses on the origins of the *da'wa* paradigm and its continuing effect in the present. Its central topic is the State Shari'a Agency (Dinas Syariat Islam, DSI, 2002), a coordinating body responsible for the 'propagation', 'socialization', and 'implanting' (through seminars, instructions for local administrators and community leaders, promotion materials, and so forth) of the totalizing vision of state Shari'a in society more broadly. Chapter 8 deals with the Wilayatul Hisbah (WH), or 'Shari'a police'. Since 2002, WH officers have patrolled the streets of Aceh's cities, as well as places known for attracting 'un-Islamic' behaviour (such as beaches and other recreation spots). The WH is also responsible for carrying out corporal punishments. Feener acknowledges the (sometimes grave) social and emotional consequences for those who are stopped on the street, arrested or even punished, as well as the disturbing impact of the WH (which has a very bad name in Aceh) on society more generally. However, his general argument is that, in line with the overall aim of future-oriented social transformation, the main intention behind the effort to enforce Shari'a is to 'educate' and 'socialize' rather than punish, and, in the case of (public) caning, to cause shame in front of the community rather than to inflict (physical) pain.

While most Acehnese adhere to Islam, the implementation of Shari'a law is deeply contested, and the process has met with obstruction at every level, from local communities guarding their relative autonomy from state institutions to the attitude of the provincial government alternately supporting and frustrating its enforcement. In fact, Feener argues, the whole process might have withered from the start had it not been for the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, which came with a 'religious revival' of some sorts. The idea that Aceh had to be rebuilt 'from the ground up'—implying spiritual as much as physical reconstruction—helped to 're-energize the work of state Shari'a institutions which had only a minimal impact on society during the first years of the twenty-first century' (p. 2). Despite this revival, the success of the state Shari'a system, in terms of producing 'tangible results in the formal legal sphere' (p. 269) has been limited. Yet, according to Feener, it would be a mistake to underestimate its impact on the long term. The overall effect, as argued in the final, concluding chapter, must be viewed in terms of a 'reconfiguration of public discourse—one in which the future of Aceh as both an "Islamic society" and as part of the Indonesian Republic are now largely accepted as a given' (p. 269).

This cursory summary omits a range of important subthemes, digressions, and historical and ethnographic details. If there is one aspect, which, in my view, could have been given more extensive treatment, it would be the personal experiences, social backgrounds, and motivations of those people who have been most centrally involved with the attempt to implement Islamic law. While

the book contains very useful biographies of key figures like Ali Hasjmy or Alyasa Abubakar, as well as interviews with WH officers and other ('lower level') staff, I would have liked to learn more about the various factors leading to the pursuit of this technocratic (and ultimately rather impracticable) vision of Islam. This is a minor comment, however, which should not distract from the fact that *Shari'a and Social Engineering* is a major accomplishment. Michael Feener has succeeded to combine an authoritative intellectual history with an unrivaled expertise and fascinating insight into the contemporary state Shari'a legal system in Aceh. There is no doubt that this book will become a standard reference in the study of Islamic law, the relevance of which reaches far beyond the study of Aceh or Indonesia alone.

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