Delphine Alles


Delphine Alles’ book under review here offers an original and insightful analysis of Islam and contemporary Indonesian foreign policy. Drawing on a sociological framework that focuses on the interactions between state and non-state actors, Alles goes beyond the ‘standard’ state-centric approach that sees Indonesia’s foreign policy as merely a ‘state-to-state’ business. From this novel viewpoint, she proposes that transnational non-state actors, whose interests are underpinned by religious (that is: Islamic) motives, also shape Indonesia’s foreign policy. Alles argues that Islam in Indonesia’s foreign policy has always been connected, historically and sociologically, with various transnational Islamic actors beyond the archipelago—including other Muslim-populated states, Islamic intellectual movements, transnational Islamic organizations, and transnational individuals. The book extends the scholarship on Indonesia’s foreign policy by bringing about historical and sociological interpretation of Islam and places it within the transformation of Indonesia’s foreign policy since its independence in 1945.

Alles divides her analysis in four inter-related parts. In the first chapter, she outlines a historical analysis on the relationship between transnational Islamic actors, which plays an important role in shaping Indonesia’s foreign relations. In so doing, she traces the interconnection between Southeast Asia’s Islamic tradition, the political changes in the Middle East, and the rise of anti-colonial movements in the archipelago since the early twentieth century. For example, Alles traces the transmission of modernist Islamic discourses from the Middle East through the Sarekat Islam/Sarekat Dagang Islam (Islamic Union/Islamic Trade Union), the first Islamic social organization that, in the early twentieth
century, played a dominant role as an anti-colonial movement based on Islamic teachings (Noer 1973). This unique historical connection, as Alles argues, paved the way to the political construction of Islam in post-independence foreign policy, which witnessed the rise of a diplomatic struggle against the Dutch during the period between the proclamation of independence and the recognition of Indonesia’s sovereignty at The Hague Roundtable (1945–1949).

Alles moves in the second chapter to assess whether Indonesia’s postcolonial institutional transformation incorporates Islam in the country’s foreign relations. She argues that the inception of the Pancasila State in 1945—which partially accommodates Islam in the new state ideology (Pancasila), but at the same time avoids using any religious identity in the state institutions and public policies—has disarticulated Islam from Indonesia’s foreign policy. She also argues that both the Sukarno and Soeharto period of governance exemplify the case of “sociological continuities under evolving foreign policy institutions” (p. 38), in which Islam remains an important factor in crafting foreign policy. However, at the same time, both Sukarno and Soeharto practiced neutrality and secular orientation in their foreign policies, particularly with regard to diplomatic relations and participations in international forums. This secular orientation resulted in a contention between the Islamic non-state actors with the state in the formulation of foreign policies during both periods.

However, after Soeharto stepped down in 1998, Islamic transnational actors began to re-emerge in Indonesia’s foreign policy. Soeharto’s successors, in particular Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati, have articulated various forms of Islamic-influenced foreign policy, but generally framed these under an institutionalist platform and relatively secular orientation. Reformasi—the political project to reform Indonesian politics after Soeharto—has paved the way for the re-emergence of Islam in Indonesia’s foreign policy with its contending articulations. In the third chapter, Alles asks which Islamic interpretation and which narratives underpin Indonesia’s foreign policy after Reformasi.

In this context, Alles identifies three prominent Islamic non-state actors in post-Reformasi Indonesia. First, the state-allegiant Islamic organizations and political parties, which consist of Islamic social and political organizations whose existence is recognized by the government and who are able to give input to the governments (such as Muhammadiyah or Nahdhatul Ulama, Indonesia’s two oldest Islamic mass organizations rooted in the colonial period). Second, umma-oriented organizations, whose political narratives are bounded by local political context but with a global-oriented narrative and system of references. One example of this group is the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), an Islamic political party linked with the global network of the Muslim Brotherhood. The third category is comprised of local actors who trans-
pose their agendas within a global system of reference. An example is the *Laskar Jihad*—an Islamic militia involved in the Ambon conflict in the late 1990s, whose political origins can be traced to the Afghan War veterans. These interpretations are competing to define the position of Islam in Indonesia’s foreign policy. As Alles demonstrates, recent developments in foreign policy, particularly in the 2000s, brought about a unique moderate and non-theocratic Islamic identity, which is partially incorporated in Indonesia’s foreign policy after Suharto.

In the fourth chapter, Alles furthermore examines how these interpretations of Islam are incorporated in Indonesia’s foreign policy-making processes. Having analyzed the evolution of Indonesia’s foreign policy institutions such as the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the foreign policy circles around Indonesia’s presidents after Soeharto, Alles argues that the politics of the Reformasi period have facilitated a new venue for the re-articulation of Islam in foreign policy. This incorporation process was a dynamic one; featuring receptive integration processes between Islamic values and Indonesia’s foreign policy as well as sub-contracting and co-optation. Nevertheless, the democratization process following Soeharto’s exit in 1998—albeit limited in many ways—has made possible this re-articulation of transnational Islamic ideas in Indonesia’s foreign policy, which has been mobilized to represent Indonesia’s image in diplomatic fora and international politics.

By examining the complex relationship between Islam and Indonesia’s foreign policy, which is framed through historical and sociological analyses, Alles’ book has brought about a groundbreaking contribution in the existing literature on Indonesia’s foreign policy. She convincingly argues that foreign policy is not only about state-led diplomacy or security, but also about religion and culture. To this extent, Alles has successfully placed Islam as an important variable in explaining the transformation of Indonesia’s foreign policy from a relatively ‘secular’ policy orientation, with only a small reference to Islam and religious identity, into a moderate Islamic identity incorporated within internal democratization processes.

However, Alles’ analysis suffers from several shortcomings. Even though her analysis has convincingly explained the relationship between Islam and foreign policy, she did not locate this analysis in the broader trajectory of systemic change in world politics. For example, Alles paid little attention to the transition from the bipolar contestation in the Cold War to a relatively more globalized international order in the 2000s, which also affected Muslim-populated countries. It is important to address this systemic change on an international level and relate it with Indonesia’s foreign policy, since Indonesia has been considered as an important actor in both Southeast Asia and the Muslim
world (Sukma 2004; Aydin 2017). As a consequence, Alles’ book overlooks the ‘third image’ of international politics; the international system, which is considered an important variable in explaining foreign policy of a particular state (Waltz 1959; Singer 1961; Wendt 1999). This shortcoming will affect her reception among the International Relations audience.

This weakness is understandable, since Alles’ book gives scant attention to the question of Islam in Indonesia’s foreign policy. In this regard, Alles could have established a deeper link between the articulations of Islam in post-Reformasi foreign policy with, for example, the rise of the global War on Terror that has put Islam at the center of global politics. Establishing a more rigorous relationship between Islam, Indonesia’s foreign policy, and the changing international order might have enabled her book to contribute more meaningfully to International Relations scholarship.

Notwithstanding that, this book is a significant contribution for students of foreign policy and International Relations. The unique and interdisciplinary methodology that this book offers, as well as its rigorous analysis in explaining the relationship between Islam and foreign relations, would make it a rich and powerful intervention in the field of International Relations.

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References