Iza R. Hussin

The Politics of Islamic Law: Local Elites, Colonial Authority, and the Making of the Muslim State. Chicago / London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016, viii + 351 pp. ISBN 9780226323206, price: USD 115.00 (hardcover); 9780226323343, USD 37.50 (paperback); 9780226323480, USD 10.00–37.50 (ebook).

The British signed the Treaty of Pangkor with several Malay chiefs in January 1874, installing Raja Abdullah as the successor to the throne of Perak. They favored Abdullah because unlike other claimants he seemed amenable to ruling under the supervision of a newly appointed British resident. The man who would soon assume the position of resident, James Birch, commenced his responsibilities by setting off in a small boat to comb the waters off the western coast of Malaya in search of another claimant to the Perak throne, Raja Ismail. Ismail was in possession of the sultan's regalia, including ceremonial weapons and royal elephants, without which Abdullah could not be crowned sultan. While they remained in Ismail's possession, the Treaty of Pangkor was little more than scrap paper. Despite his best efforts, Birch was not able to seize the regalia, and was later assassinated, amid controversies over his handling of matters such as taxation and slavery. The British only captured the regalia at the conclusion of the Perak War in 1876. In the aftermath of the hostilities they exiled both Ismail and Abdullah, the former to the neighboring state of Johore and the latter to the more distant Seychelles.

This colorful episode is just one of many that pepper the pages of Iza Hussin's masterful new book, *The Politics of Islamic Law: Local Elites, Colonial Authority, and the Makings of the Muslim State*. More than just an entertaining anecdote, the so-called 'Pursuit of the Perak Regalia' illuminates Hussin's core arguments about the crucial role that local elites played in shaping new legal regimes that arose across the Muslim world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As she explains, 'While they may have conducted treaty negotiations at a military and economic disadvantage, local chiefs and rulers were more than equal to the task of avoiding, resisting, and deliberately sabotaging the agenda of their colonial counterparts' (p. 81). The resulting account is one which takes equally seriously the agency of local elites and the power imbalances they faced in relation to expanding European empires.

Given the flurry of new scholarship on Islamic law in recent years, what sets Hussin's book apart is her deft deployment of a method that she terms 'networked comparison' (p. 215). Dazzling in its empirical scope, her study weaves across the interconnected geographies of Malaya, India, and Egypt. This approach allows her to tell a global story of how Islamic law was forged into a state-centered legal institution focused on the family. Hussin shows that this

process was animated by a key paradox: the institutional marginalization of Islamic law coincided with its symbolic centralization as an idiom of Muslim politics. By moving across three case studies, Hussin tracks how this converging outcome was the product of macro-historical shifts, including the increasing scope and penetration of modern state power. Her innovative method also draws out more direct processes of circulation which knit together processes unfolding in different parts of the Muslim world, including the movement of colonial officials between postings and the translation of texts on Islamic law. Even more impressive, Hussin also remains attuned to critical differences between her three cases. For example, even as she makes an overarching argument about the rise of state dominance over Islamic law, she notes the continuing importance in India of non-state sites of Islamic legal scholarship, such as the *madrasa* at Deoband.

Hussin narrates this complex story of convergences and divergences through an innovative structure. The book's three core chapters focus respectively on treatises, trials, and representations. By focusing on different forms and sites of law, the chapters together illuminate the many registers on which law operates. These range from formal treaty negotiations, to the public spectacle of courtroom dramas, including the trials of the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar and the Egyptian revolutionary Ahmed 'Urabi, to visual representations of legal authority in portraits of Muslim sovereigns.

In the final chapter of the book, Hussin brings her story up to the present through an ethnographic study of contemporary apostasy cases in Malaysia. Reinforcing her key argument about the paradoxes of Islamic law, she shows how the trials simultaneously minimized the importance of *fiqh* in the actual adjudication while nonetheless serving as a 'theater for the performance of Islamic legitimacy' (p. 255). By drawing attention to the performative power of Islamic law, Hussin takes seriously its ongoing salience in politics across the Muslim world. Recent scholarship, most notably Wael Hallaq's *Impossible State* (2012), have focused on showing how Islamic law has been gutted of its pre-modern logics. While Hussin largely concurs with Hallaq's story of radical transformation, she is less concerned with detailing what Islamic legal cultures have lost than in understanding the logics they have acquired in their place. Hussin shows that this new politics of Islamic law, while wrought with contradictions and ambiguities, is at least as influential as earlier Islamic legal forms. Her work therefore argues for the need to understand contemporary constructions of Islamic law not just as misrepresentations of past practice but also as symbolic nexuses for defining Muslim subjects and their relationship to modern states. This is a powerful argument, and should attract attention across a range of academic disciplines and regions of study. The book, while scholarly

in tone, also deserves attention from non-specialists with its lucid insights into questions that top global headlines.

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Reference

Hallaq, Wael B. (2012). *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament*. New York: Columbia University Press.