
Salafism is probably the most elusive of the various new Islamic trends and movements that have had a profound impact on Indonesia’s public sphere since the demise of the New Order. Unlike the major Islamist movements (the Muslim Brotherhood-based PKS and the Indonesian chapter of Hizb ut-Tahrir, HTI), Salafis tend to avoid political engagement and shy away from formal, hierarchical organization, and their discourse focuses almost obsessively on correct belief and ritual practice rather than social and political issues. Salafi networks are fluid and diffuse, and they do not open themselves up easily to foreign researchers. They have faced much suspicion, locally as well as internationally, during the ‘War on Terror’ because Al Qaeda, the Southeast Asian jihadist network Jamaah Islamiyah, and their financial sponsors also adhered to a version of Salafism.

The author of the book under review, Chris Chaplin, carried out anthropological fieldwork among Salafi university students in Yogyakarta, one of the early centers of Salafi preaching in Indonesia, in 2011–2012 and again, on shorter visits, in 2016 and 2017. Most of his interviewees were affiliated with what might be called the most ‘established’ branch of Salafism, the Al-Turots (‘Islamic Heritage’) network, but he also briefly discusses other major Salafi groups, notably the more marginal and rural network of ‘Yemeni’ Salafis (from which the short-lived Laskar Jihad had sprung) and the group that he considers to be the largest, Wahdah Islamiyah. (On the latter remarkable movement Chaplin recently [2018] published a separate brief study.) His research clearly builds on the pioneering work by Noorhaidi Hasan (2006, 2010), Sunarwoto (2016), and Din Wahid (2014) but adds a different perspective due to his anthropological focus on ‘micro-practices,’ his privileging ordinary followers over leading figures in his interviews, and his emphasis on the fluidity of Salafi groups and their adaptability to local culture and opportunities.

In the first of three sections, Chaplin narrates the history of Salafi preaching in Indonesia, from the early 1980s, when the influential preacher Abu Nida and several colleagues returned from study in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, through the split in the Salafi community when Laskar Jihad was founded and took part in the interreligious conflict in Maluku in 2000, to the current accommodation of Abu Nida’s At-Turots network with the country’s military and political institutions. He identifies three types of agents for these movements: the ustaz (religious teachers/preachers), ‘moral entrepreneurs’ (a broad category that
includes the managers of religious programs and media, providers of services such as halal banking or marriage counseling, and vendors of various ‘Islamic’ commodities), and da’i (preacher-missionaries, a term he uses exclusively for those who disseminate simplified versions of the Salafi message to unsophisticated rural communities, unlike the ustadz, who primarily address educated urban audiences). For the relations of the movement with (potential) followers, protected spaces are important: Salafi-controlled mosques and schools, and enclaves such as student housing and ‘religious villages’ where committed followers and members live together.

In the second section, he discusses two important modes of dissemination of the Salafi message and habitus: the public lecture and mediated communication. According to his interlocutors, after the demise of the New Order the public lecture (called kajian, ‘study’) and week-long training seminar (daurah) have come to replace the more secretive study circles (halqah) of the past, which were more closely associated with Muslim Brotherhood-style disciplining anyway. Chaplin followed one such weekly kajian, in which a dozen young men took part while an unknown number of women listened, out of view, on the second floor. There were at the time 46 such Salafi kajian groups, at four local universities. The ustadz who led the kajian and who was one of Chaplin’s key informants had himself gone from attending kajian in Yogya to a few years study at a major Salafi institution in Yemen before returning as an ustadz in the At-Turots network. The media Chaplin discusses range from single page bulletins distributed free at mosques, glossy magazines, and a broad range of books and booklets to local radio and television stations to an internet portal offering access to digital content provided by a large number of individuals and groups more or less affiliated with At-Turots. Among the ‘moral entrepreneurs’ Chaplin encountered, IT specialists were a conspicuous category, and online da’wa (preaching) was strongly favored by students.

Some of the most interesting observations, to my mind, are to be found in the final section of the book, where the author discusses his Salafi interlocutors’ engagement with Indonesian society and politics. Throughout the book he stresses the fluid and multifarious nature of the At-Turots network, the absence of hierarchical order between the various forms of association and activities. His interlocutors do not always live up to the moral ideals they claim to uphold but that does not make their efforts less serious and genuine. Contrary to much of the literature on Salafism that emphasizes Salafis’ rejection of local cultural practices and avoidance of politics, Chaplin shows how his interlocutors seek to accommodate Salafi sensibilities with the cultural environment and how they strive beyond the improvement of personal belief and religious practice to a change of society, though in less radically political ways
than the Islamists. ‘Far from creating passive citizens,’ he concludes, ‘Salafi narratives of development, modernity, and the economy have led to a growing desire to change society by building up the Muslim economy and securing religious rights for the presumed majority’ (p. 173). Perhaps somewhat overstating his case, he speaks of the Salafism he encountered as a modern Indonesian subjectivity, reflecting a gradual change over the past decade in which Indonesian flags and batik attire—previously anathema to Salafis—could be observed at some of the kajian.

Chaplin suggests that this gradual integration into the cultural and political environment—the At-Turots network not only has adopted the national curriculum in its schools but also cooperates with the military and police authorities in counterterrorism programs—was perhaps due to pragmatism but he does not mention the degree of pressure, of carrot and stick, exerted by the authorities to this effect. After 9/11 and the 2002 Bali bombing, foreign funding of Salafi schools was severely curtailed and local sponsors had to be found (and, no doubt, vetted by the authorities). Suspicions of involvement in jihadist propaganda could only be averted by courting the military and making gestures of good citizenship. The Islamist parties, PKS and HTI, had earlier experienced similar changes in habitus, accommodating to some extent with the existing political system and de facto power relations.

The author could also have distinguished more clearly between Salafis and other conservative or Islamist movements. Some of his ethnographic observations concern specifically Salafi discourse and practices, but others describe phenomena to be found in a range of Islamic movements and groups. In some passages he appears even to conflate Salafism and conservative Islam in general, as when he describes the flourishing of conservative values and increasing intolerance towards minorities such as the Shia under Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s presidency (2004–2014). Salafis benefited from as well as contributed to these developments, and he suggests that Salafi university graduates played a part in the major shift in professional middle class attitudes from most tolerant to conservative and intolerant. It might be argued, however, that it has been especially the more numerous and more activist PKS- and HTI-affiliated graduates who shaped the burgeoning Islamic urban middle class and its dominant values and that Salafis at best benefited from the process simply through the general momentum.

On the other hand, Salafism has had an impact well beyond the relatively small circles of committed Salafis themselves. The hijrah phenomenon, a broad and popular movement of self-conversion to a pious life style (Akmaliah 2020), is pervaded by Salafi values though its protagonists do not identify with any of the Salafi groups—another illustration of the fluidity and diffuseness of the
Salafi movement on which Chaplin insists. The unique contribution of this book consists of the detailed ethnographic description of the various localities, subgroups, events and activities that together are part of one of the major Salafi networks in Indonesia. As Chaplin rightly notes, his observations cannot be simply generalized, for in other settings even in the same country, Salafism may find other expressions and accommodations. But he has opened a window to a world that tends to remain secluded and introduces the reader to a set of characters who do not conform to common prejudices about Salafis but are complex persons with their concerns and anxieties, with agency and the courage of inconsistency.

Unfortunately, the book is poorly edited and marred by typos and other minor errors. The author deserved a more attentive publisher.

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**References**


