
Southeast Asia has long been regarded as a region peripheral to Muslim communities compared to the Middle East as the ‘center’ of Islam, despite the fact that Indonesia is the world’s largest Muslim-majority country and Islam is the region’s most widely practiced religion, by about 42 percent of the population, with majorities in Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, and Indonesia. One possible cause of this neglect is the fact that Southeast Asia has for centuries seen syncretic manifestations of Islamic rituals (Saravanamuttu 2010: 3), which do not correspond to the standard image of Islam. In fact, the region houses a significant diversity in cultures, customs, and historical patterns that have traditionally precluded the emergence of a unified religious realm. The same situation can be observed with other religions, such as Catholicism, other Christian denominations, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and animism, as well as local religions (Schottmann and Camilleri 2013: 5).

Nevertheless, things have changed, particularly after the Islamic revivalist period of the 1970s. This period has caused Muslims in the region to embrace more conservative and ‘purer’ interpretations of Islam that may, some say, reflect more authentic Islam. This edited volume, however, does not focus on recent developments in Islamic conservatism in Southeast Asia. By contrast, it accentuates alternative ideas to those promoted by established religious elites. The book calls the proponents of these ideas “alternative voices.” Its editors argue that they do not only call for Islam to be practiced according to the context, but also contend that multiculturalism and secularism are the only ways to achieve harmony in the diverse societies of Southeast Asia. In addition, these voices believe in respecting the constitutional provisions that guarantee freedom of religion. While the title seems to indicate Southeast Asia as the focus of this book, the case studies are taken from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

The volume’s chapters are as diverse as the phenomena they seek to discover. They contain investigations by scholars, activists, and observers. The central theme of this collection of twelve essays, both academic and op-ed pieces, is represented by the editors as an investigation of the challenges and struggles faced by the champions of alternative discourses in the face of growing religious conservatism in the three countries. The chapters examine how both state and quasi-state institutions and ordinary groups and individuals promote alternative ideas and scrutinize the avenues utilized by these progressives in championing their vision.
Chapter 1 by Norshahril Saat examines the political development of Islamic discourse in Malaysia. In this short essay, Saat shows that Malaysia is currently undergoing an era of post-Islamic revivalism, where the promotion of *shariʿa*-based ideas, instruments, and institutions is no longer considered a struggle, but has been integrated into the social psyche of the population. However, he also demonstrates that there are doubts as to whether alternative discourses can flourish in the country, given the alleged rise of puritan ideas and the strengthened authority of federal religious institutions (p. 7). In Chapter 2, Dina Zaman discusses civil society-state engagements pertaining to religion in Malaysia. She reveals how racism and religious conservatism have become rampant in the country and how civil society organizations are attempting to counter them. She argues that if Malaysia does not address the lack of social cohesion, the situation will only deteriorate further (p. 15). Pradana Boy explores religious orientations in contemporary Indonesia in Chapter 3. He asserts that the direction of Muslims’ religious consciousness in the country will manifest itself among the masses and affect their political, economic, ideological, and civilizational orientation (p. 18).

Azhar Ibrahim highlights the challenge of developing a critical Islamic discourse in Singapore in Chapter 4. He argues that the opponents of religious reform see it as unnecessary, if not an approximation of heresy, since the religious formulations and commandments of the past are considered to be complete and final. Ibrahim suggests that to keep the commitment and reformist spirit alive, the stamina of reformist intellectuals must be sustained through discourses, public engagement, and publications (p. 30). In Chapter 5, Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman investigates the major fixations and agenda issues promoted and embedded in the resurgence discourse, analyzing how they are sustained and reinforced. She argues that this narrative has become so dominant that it negates and marginalizes competing Malay schools of thought and perspectives that are vital to the development and well-being of the community and the larger society. Chapter 6 by Azhar Ibrahim delineates Malay literary and cultural expressions in Singapore, highlighting that the literary realm is a creative and critical site where progressive ideas are articulated. He contends that the trials and tribulations of progressive ideas are always complex, yet progressive voices and ideas have surfaced and evolved throughout history, impacting individuals and communities (p. 85).

In Chapter 7, Syed Farid Alatas analyzes the notion of progressive Islam as conceptualized by Syed Hussein Alatas and others. He discusses the idea of a progressive society and enumerates some of the specific traits of a progressive Islamic orientation that are compatible with it. Alatas maintains that progressive Islam is a broad orientation encompassing proponents from dif-
ferent theological and theoretical backgrounds, who are united on a number of themes and objectives (p. 113). Norshahril Saat covers the challenges facing the progressive Islamic discourse in Malaysia and examines how its promotors have been marginalized in Chapter 8. He points out that the religious bureaucracy has prevented progressive views from being aired in seminars (p. 133). Zainal Abidin Bagir and Azis Anwar Fachrudin examine democratic developments and the “conservative turn” in Indonesia in Chapter 9. They argue that paying more attention to the political dynamics yields a better understanding of the situation. Accordingly, this chapter scrutinizes the kind of interventions that may lead to a more inclusive democracy (p. 140).

In Chapter 10, Mohd Faizal Musa describes Sunni-Shia reconciliation in Malaysia. He raises issues such as the 1996 fatwa against Malaysian Shiis and the events after 1979 that changed the Sunni-Shia relations. He suggests that reconciliation is in the hands of the Pakatan Harapan government (p. 173). In Chapter 11, Ahmad Suaedy examines various dynamics pertaining to the collective rights of minorities and marginalized groups in Indonesia. He reveals that despite efforts to improve human rights issues, the situation remains stagnant and is yet to be fully resolved. Many instances show that these efforts have encountered anti-communist and anti-atheist stigmatization (p. 184). Lastly, Chapter 12 covers the role of the Ahmadiyah movement in Islamic revivalism in Java. The author, Ahmad Najib Burhani, concludes that the Ahmadis from the Indian subcontinent could be perceived as a source of Islamic revivalism in Indonesia in the early twentieth century, competing with movements originating from the Middle East (p. 215).

The chapters are concerned with the state and politics, while less emphasis is put on the people and the question of how socio-religious groups or individual actors have shaped the state and influenced the character of non-mainstream religious life in Southeast Asia. This is so despite the claim that the volume showcases the challenges and struggles faced by the champions of alternative discourses in the face of a growing conservative climate (p. ix). Moreover, the volume has neither an introduction nor a conclusion. This precludes a further discussions on the main findings and topics of interest in the arena of alternative discourses or actions of Islam in the Malay world. Lastly, the chapters in this book show little internal coherence; they seem to chart their own paths. The authors fail to build arguments that connect the chapters. All these things may be regarded as shortcomings.

These issues, however, do not invalidate an otherwise fascinating edited volume. As a whole, the collection provides a firm scholarly update on alternative discourses and actions in Southeast Asian Islam. Throughout, it accentuates the major concerns facing socio-political religious movements and attempts to...
implement multiculturalism and secularism in the region. The volume is certainly a firm and valiant attempt to delve into these neglected themes in the midst of the region’s flourishing “Islamist turn.” Overall, it is suitable for graduate students and scholars of Islamic studies, area studies, politics, sociology, and anthropology, and is a valuable and timely addition that complements existing scholarship.

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References
