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Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia

JOHAN SARAVANAMUTTU, ed.

London: Routledge, 2009, 188 p, with index.

The present volume seeks to understand “political Islam” which the editor, Johan Saravanamuttu, describes as “aspirations to political power and the remolding of state and society in accordance with Islamic teachings” (p. ix) in Southeast Asia. The project originated in 2004 and later adopted the notion of “authoritarian democracy” to serve as the contributors’ common frame of analysis. This is a key concept and has been theorized by one of the book’s contributors, Chaiwat Sathanand, as especially relevant to the study of Islam and governance in Southeast Asia. As presented, authoritarian democracy posits a ruling style that adopts a façade of democracy masking an inherently undemocratic regime that disadvantages the country’s minorities. Thus, regime power wielders could be Muslim, Buddhist or Christian while Islam might be either privileged or oppressed. In using this rubric, the contributors aspire to address a number of questions relevant to Islam and the region’s current political life.

The volume’s nine chapters cover Islamic Southeast Asia geographically and its Muslim majority and minority states. In his introductory chapter, Saravanamuttu concisely summarizes each contributor’s topics and major points of interpretation with sufficient detail to be of real value to the reader. The editor’s hand is also apparent throughout much of the book as many of the contributors reference each other in their own chapters, thereby demonstrating a degree of coordination and intellectual cross-fertilization and making for a stronger and more useful text. Still, there are some contributions that are not as tightly integrated into the study as one might anticipate, which is unfortunate, but this does not seriously detract from this worthy contribution to the study

of Islam in Southeast Asia.

In her masterful opening chapter, emeritus anthropology professor Judith Nagata considers the complexity of “democracy” and Islam both of which come in a variety of forms and the equally complex relationship of “engaged Muslims” to the state. While her introductory sections consider examples from the region’s Muslim majority and minority countries, her chapter’s emphasis is on political Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia. After a survey of the Malaysian state’s political-religious evolution under Mahathir and United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Nagata shifts her focus to alternative Islamic movements especially the revivalist *dakwah* movement Al Arqam which the government sharply curtailed in response to what appeared to be growing political aspirations. Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama provides a contrast as a well-established mainstream religious movement that accepts the country’s religious pluralism ground rules and has done well on the post-Suharto Indonesian political landscape. The lesson Nagata draws is that political Islam is only possible if it adheres to the limits created by the democratic authoritarian nature of the state.

Jacques Bertrand’s chapter on Indonesia presents a refreshingly positive assessment of the democratic role that Islam plays in the world’s largest Muslim state. He notes, quite correctly, that politically engaged Muslims have remained democratic and reformist even after controls originally imposed by Sukarno and continued under Suharto were removed after 1998 and they have rejected the terrorism of fringe groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah. Bertrand further underscores his thesis by an insightful discussion of the secular Free Aceh Movement (GAM) where democratic authoritarianism focused on a secessionist rather than a religious threat. The principle problem was that for some time the country’s leaders did not recognize that GAM’s agenda was secular and that its strength only increased in response to horrific military atrocities. Once Jakarta addressed Acehnese secular demands peace returned and since then GAM has ruled Aceh democratically and extreme Islamic activities have been curtailed.

Another strong contribution is Maznah Mohamad’s chapter on the Malaysian authoritarian state. The author states her case quite clearly by modifying the book’s unifying notion of authoritarian democracy simply to that of the authoritarian state promoting an ethnic agenda in which Islam, race and entitlements provide the core. In support of her modified thesis, she reviews post-1969 Malaysian developments that have privileged the Malay “not-so-large” majority versus the country’s non-Muslim “not-so-small” minority beginning with 1972’s New Economic Policy that sought to adjust the country’s economic imbalance, and soon expanded to other areas such as opening spaces for Malays in universities. However, the author’s most important contribution is her discussion of the country’s legal system wherein Islamic courts have used Sharia law to become hegemonic and usurp the authority of civilian tribunals by claiming religious grounds for matters that come before it. As a result, Islamic courts have created an Islamic “ring-fence” that excludes minorities and serves the authoritarian state.

Saravanamuttu follows with his chapter showing how Malaysia’s statist political Islam works

at the local level where local functionaries act as religious and moral police against the country's large non-Muslim minority. The author's review of highly discriminatory legal cases and his discussion of the aborted Inter-Faith Commission of 2005 provide further evidence to support Maznah Mohamad's arguments as do the distinctions he draws between the statist policies of UMNO and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and serve a welcome function for the volume.

Chaiwat Satha-Anand's chapter on authoritarian democracy in Thailand is a highpoint in the volume. As a principle developer of the authoritarian democracy theoretical model, his contribution demonstrates its adaptability in a non-Muslim state where a Buddhist central authority suppresses Muslim minorities and protests. The author uses the story of the mysterious disappearance of Somchai Neelapaichit, a politically engaged Muslim defense lawyer, to demonstrate the pernicious nature of state power more effectively than within the framework of a purely theoretical discussion.

In contrast, the chapters on the Philippines and Singapore are not as strong. In the Philippine case, Carmen Abubakar incorrectly posits the real existence of a "Strong Republic" that President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo proclaimed in 2002, a statement that was roundly dismissed at the time and soon forgotten. This incorrect assumption leads Abubakar to overlook more systemic problems in the southern Philippines such as the role of locally prominent political leaders who have consistently undermined peace efforts. The article also loses focus by pursuing tangents such as controversies over Arroyo's executive orders, government policies and cases of grotesque extrajudicial killings that the author does not relate to the chapter topic. When the author does return to the chapter topic her discussion is limited and rushed and includes occasional errors such as the assertion that Islam came to the Philippines in the ninth century, hundreds of years too early.

Hussin Mutalib's thesis that the Singapore government is discriminatory against Muslims is not very strong. Of course, the government has been authoritarian since its founding, but its authoritarian nature is general and hardly more so for Muslims than others. In fact, the author acknowledges numerous instances where the government has gone out of its way to insure the effective integration of Muslims into Singaporean society and its political life. He even mentions the government instituted "team MPs" for elections to insure that outnumbered Muslim voters will get at least some of their candidates into office. This chapter which wanted to show the "plight" of Singapore's Muslims and their "restiveness" (p. 147) simply falls short of its objectives.

And finally, it is not clear why the concluding chapter by Syed Farid Alatas was included in this volume. His comparative chapter on the discourse of civil society in Indonesia and Malaysia would be a welcome addition if he used authoritarian democracy in his analysis. Instead, he presents an exercise in the sociology of knowledge based on very unique definitions of "ideology" and "utopia" put forward by Karl Mannheim in the 1930s and long ago dismissed as "vague and unconvincing" (p. 170). This chapter is similarly vague, such that the author can only conclude that any Islamic orientation can be either ideological or utopian.

Overall, this book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on Islam in Southeast Asia. Interpretative notions such as authoritarian democracy and engaged Muslims are intriguing and should promote discussion and analysis, as will other terms such as “ring-fencing.” While some of the chapters might be assigned to undergraduate students in specialized upper division courses, the volume’s principle audience will be graduate students and specialized scholars.

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Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma

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Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011, 239 p.

Chie Ikeya’s excellent book offers deep insights into Burma’s social and cultural history under colonialism and modernity mainly through depictions of modern Burmese women. Based on archival research and a meticulous compilation of facts and figures taken from primary sources, the book makes a unique contribution to our understanding of the struggle and progress made by Burmese women in the early part of the twentieth century.

Chapter 1 offers a comprehensive overview of the social landscape of nineteenth-century colonial Burma, ranging from descriptions of the country’s ethnic composition and economic specialization to those of its political situation and legal system (in the form of cases that garnered public attention). Ikeya examines the demographic changes incurred by waves of immigration, mainly Indian and Chinese, which resulted in a high rate of mixed marriages and an ethnically plural society that required an enforcement of a plural legal system by the state. In addition, she describes how the country saw the first expansion of modern education and development of printing and the press, which helped increase the literacy rate and created a discursive forum for public debate.

In Chapter 2, Ikeya draws our attention to the fact that although Burmese women were represented by colonialists and early Western scholars as having high social status, this was a tactic to discredit the British colonial project and demand greater political power for the Burmese people within the modernization process (p. 51). Ikeya examines the various legal positions of Burmese women—marriage, divorce, property ownership, inheritance—and states that, contrary to the prevailing image of women’s relative high status, they in fact had to fight for political equality and improvement of their lives. Education became an essential issue in Burma’s modernization process of catching up with the rest of the world, and “. . . debates concerning the education and progress of women were also about the empowerment and advancement of the nation” (p. 71). As a result,