

Special Focus

**RELIGION AND POLITICS IN
SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Editor

Terence Chong

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Editor's Note

Religion and Politics in Southeast Asia

The articles and research notes in this Special Focus issue of *SOJOURN* were part of the proceedings from the international conference, “Religion in Southeast Asian Politics: Resistance, Negotiation and Transcendence”, held at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 11–12 December 2008. The conference, co-sponsored by Cornell University’s Southeast Asia Programme and generously supported by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, saw paper presenters from different parts of the world converge to examine the nexus between national politics and religion in the Southeast Asian landscape.

During the conference it was clear that the presentations fell into two broad categories — the politics of Islam and the rest. This should not be surprising given the political and cultural history of the region, as well as the deep scholarship on Islam in the disciplines of contemporary history, anthropology, sociology, and political science. The editorial decision was made to hive off the papers on Islam and politics into an edited volume to be published by ISEAS, with the more interesting and noteworthy “non-Islam” papers to be published in this Special Focus issue.

The papers here cover the countries of Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore and the religions of Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism and ancestor worship. Despite the diverse papers in this Special Focus issue, three general points can be observed from the findings presented. The first is the increasingly public role that religion is assuming, both in politics as well as in civic life. The traditional boundary between private and public spheres is clearly

porous with, on one hand, the private playing out in the public and, on the other, with the public becoming a conduit for the private.

The second point is the way religion does not eschew national politics but often posits itself as an active agent of nation building. Its perceived contributions to the nation are not just championed by marginal non-state actors who seek to use religion for their interests but also by the state itself, especially when it faces a crisis of legitimacy. No longer an alternative realm for spiritual fulfilment or identity formation, religion strives to influence and shape notions of the nation and national culture, either through the interpretation of folk myths, representation of heroes, or by affirming state structures and institutions.

The third point, related to the second, is how religion is not necessarily seen as a tranquil retreat from the capricious forces of modernity and capitalism, but a specific way in which to frame such forces, harnessing them with particular ideological (or spiritual) interpretations. It is thus no longer helpful to examine notions of modernity, capitalism, globalization or religion with rigid conceptual frameworks but, instead, seek the numerous points where they invariably intersect.

The conclusions offered in the papers here serve as pathways for further research into the multidimensional interfaces between religion and politics. They grapple with the implications of globalization, multiculturalism, post-colonialism and modernity on the interfacing of beliefs and politics in Southeast Asia, and will be a suitable springboard for the study of the complex evolution of religion and politics in the region.