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Varieties of Religious Authority
Changes and Challenges in 20th Century Indonesian Islam

EDITED BY
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INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century was a period of profound political, social and religious changes in Indonesia. From a Dutch colony, Indonesia, the country with the largest number of Muslims in the world, was transformed into an independent, semi-secular state, in which “Belief in the One and Only God” (and not Islam) became one of the constitutional “Pancasila” pillars of political and social life. In the first decades of the last century, Islamic leaders and Islamic organizations had to operate in a setting in which the establishment of direct colonial rule was accompanied by strong competition between the state and Muslim authorities. Thereafter, political circumstances changed dramatically. From 1942 to 1945 Indonesia was ruled by Japan, while between 1945 and 1950 the War for Independence was fought and won. After 1950 Muslim religious and political leaders had to take into account different forms of government, each with its own specific ideas about the place of Islam in society: first a democracy modelled along Western lines; then, after 1959 a period of some forty years in which Indonesia was ruled by two successive totalitarian regimes and freedom of expression was curtailed; finally, the present-day situation in which, in reaction to what the country had experienced in the decades before Soeharto had to step down as President in 1998, civic liberties are stressed.

The economy also changed over time, resulting in transformations which posed new challenges to existing religious values and patterns of association. People were drawn into larger social, cultural and economic structures. The Indonesian economy developed from one which was rural-based and geared to the interests of the colonial power, first those of the Netherlands and than those of Japan, to one in which national interests and development became important catchwords. Initially the effort seemed to fail. In the 1960s the Indonesian economy went through extremely bad times. The year 1969 saw the start of the first of a series of Five-Year Development Plans. The result of the development effort was not only economic growth and the emergence of an extremely rich middle class, but also accelerated urbanization with the accompanying social and cultural dislocations and a wide gap between the rich and a great mass of urban and
rural poor. Economic development also allowed the government to use money to coopt social, political and religious leaders. The Asian financial crisis at the end of the 1990s hit Indonesia particularly hard. For a moment it seemed that its economy would cave in.

In the course of the last century the religious landscape only became more diverse. As was the case in the rest of the Islamic world, established, traditional Islamic beliefs and leaders got new “modernist” competitors, while at different moments throughout the period, political Islam made its voice heard. Developments in wider society contributed to the diversification of religious opinion. Because of the spread of secular education and the advent of first the printing press and later on other means of mass communication, there emerged a large audience of believers who had access to sacred and other texts and who reflected independently on the meaning and function of religious beliefs and practices. As a result, religious authority was redistributed over an increasing number of actors and increasingly tested and contested, also within the confines of learned tradition. Although many Muslims in Indonesia continued to regard the ulama (the “learned”) as the principal source of religious guidance, religious authority had become more diffused and differentiated over time. Pious behaviour and persuasive argumentation have become two of the yardsticks qualifying new groups of religious authority in response to the questions of the time.

This fascinating century in the history of Indonesia formed the time frame of the bilateral research programme Islam in Indonesia: Dissemination of Religious Authority in the 20th Century. This programme was executed in the framework of the so-called Scientific Programme Indonesia-Netherlands (SPIN). SPIN was launched in the year 2000. It is based on an agreement between the Indonesian and Dutch governments. In the Netherlands the responsibility for the administration and funding falls under the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), while the Indonesian counterpart is the Indonesian Ministry for Research and Technology (RISTEK). The Islam in Indonesia programme officially ran from 1 January 2001 to 31 December 2005 and was coordinated by the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) in Leiden, the Netherlands, and the Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat (PPIM) of the Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Syarif Hidayatullah in Jakarta, Indonesia. Other institutions which were involved were: the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV); the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM); the Research School for Asian, African and Amerindian Studies (CNWS), all three in Leiden; and the UIN Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.
The Islam in Indonesia programme aimed at the studying and documenting of changes and continuities in Muslim religious leadership in relation to the shaping of present-day Indonesian nationhood over the last hundred years. The underlying assumptions of this research programme were that Islam, like any other living religious tradition, evolves by constant repositioning of beliefs and practices, and that this repositioning often reflects — or gives meaning to — social, economic and political transformations. One of the ways to analyse this is by looking at the dissemination of religious authority. The concept refers to the development of points of reference and identity within a given religious tradition which evolve around the related notions of belief as religious “knowledge” and symbolic structure as expressed in ritual and community experience.

From these considerations as the overall research subject emerged the question of how religious authority manifested itself in twentieth century Indonesia in the changing national and international context. Sub questions were: What was the relationship between the state and religious authority in its many manifestations? Which institutions play a role in spreading religious authority and what is the role of the state in this? How did the Middle East contribute in shaping and maintaining religious authority in Indonesia? In order to further implement the research questions four themes were defined. These were: ulama and fatwa; tarekat in urban communities; dakwah activities in urban communities; and education. The start of the research programme Islam in Indonesia in 2001 coincided with a dramatic increase in (or at least increased visibility of) the activities of radical Islamic groups in Indonesia and in the rest of the world. In the last couple of years, terrorist attacks by Islamic groups have taken place all over the world. These and other developments in and outside Indonesia more or less directed the participating scholars to pay attention to the processes of radicalization of Islam in Indonesia.

This book consists of contributions which were presented in the final conference of the research programme, in Bogor on 7–9 July 2005, organized by Azyumardi Azra, Kees van Dijk, and Nico Kaptein, with managerial support from Josine Stremmelaar (IIAS). The conference was jointly organized by IIAS (Leiden) and UIN (Jakarta), in cooperation with the KITLV (Leiden/Jakarta) and ISIM (Leiden). During this conference, a number of the issues related to the concept of religious authority were tackled, mainly in relation to Islam in Indonesia. However, in order to make comparison of the Indonesian case possible, specialists from other regions were also invited.

All contributions in this book deal with the multifaceted and multidimensional topic of religious authority and aim to complement each other. However, the editors have not been so strict in their guidelines that the
conclusions cannot be read separately. Most chapters deal with Indonesia, but two have been added in order to provide a comparative dimension to the Indonesian case. The order in which the chapters are presented here is partly chronological (from historical to contemporary), while chapters which focus on the same aspects of religious authority have been grouped together.

The first contribution by Marc Gaborieau stresses that the notion of religious authority in Islam is secondary, in the sense that it has always been derived from the ultimate source of authority which is God. After having studied the concept of religious authority in the Indian subcontinent in the period 1919–56, he concludes that the concept has changed in two ways: firstly, the future of the South Asian Muslim community has been determined largely by laymen and not by the traditional holders of religious authority, the ulama; and secondly, they derived this authority largely from their own charisma and the messianic aspirations of the Muslim community.

In the second chapter, Michael Laffan examines the debate surrounding tariqa practices in Southeast Asia in the early twentieth century and amongst other things, discusses the authority of the local Sufi shayks vis-à-vis more sophisticated elitist Sufism. The third contribution links up with this and deals with the role of the ulama in twentieth century Indonesia. In this chapter by Jajat Burhanudin, he maintains that despite the rise of an Islamic public sphere, which ended the monopoly of the ulama as the sole voices of Islam, the ulama are still a powerful force in society, resulting amongst other things from the new technologies which they have embraced to strengthen their position in society. The author of the next contribution, Abdulkader Tayob, thinks along the same lines, but broadens his geographical scope by not only looking at the position of the ulama in Indonesia, but also in South Africa and Egypt. The author ends his chapter by suggesting to look more carefully at the organization, role and instruments of the ulama in modern society.

The author of the fifth chapter, Didin Nurul Rosidin, deals with a hitherto little-explored Muslim mass organization in Indonesia, the Mathla’ul Anwar, and examines the contest for authority among the elites of the organization in the last years of the Soeharto administration. In the following chapter, Machasin deals with yet another aspect of religious authority in Indonesia and discusses the contest between formal religious institutions and the local ulama, which operate on a less formal and more personal level.

The seventh chapter, written by Arief Subhan, gives a broad overview of the Indonesian madrasahs and shows that these institutions are very diverse in nature and reproduced and transmit different concepts of religious authority,
ranging from a curriculum which gives ample room to secular subjects to a purely Salafi understanding of Islam.

The chapter by Noorhaidi Hasan also examines the presence of the Salafi ideology in Indonesia and offers an interesting case study of a particular form of religious authority by going into the influence of the transnational contemporary Salafi da’wa movement. The author shows how the concept of jihad served as a vehicle to mobilize the radical Islamic organization Laskar Jihad in Post-New Order Indonesia. Andrée Feillard studies the reactions of the Javanese established holders of religious authority, the ulama, on the rise of new forms of this authority. These reactions are very different, ranging from indifference to feelings of incompetence to cope with the new situation.

The concluding chapter by Kees van Dijk underlines that most of the research of the previous contributions approaches the notion of religious authority by means of historical and sociological concepts and as a result tend to downplay the specific theological or “supernatural” dimension of the issues. The author shows how in a number of case studies this supernatural dimension was decisive in the outcome of particular historical events, thus making a plea for including this theological dimension in future research.