

BOOK REVIEWS

***Political Islam in Southeast Asia.* By Gordon P. Means. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009. Softcover: 293pp.**

Given today's heightened interest in Islam in Southeast Asia, the appearance in recent years of several well-written and researched books on aspects of the topic ranging from Islamic education, Islamic finance and individual country studies — mostly on Indonesia but also on Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines — should not be surprising. The daunting challenge for scholars in the field, however, is to produce a coherent, single-authored comparative study of the region that makes developments in each Southeast Asian country speak to one another. It is in this regard that Gordon Means book is received with great anticipation.

To be sure, Means's discussions on the rise and demise of political Islam in Indonesia during the Sukarno and Soeharto administrations, the evolution of the Islamization race between the United Malays National Organization and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia in Malaysia, and the origins of Muslim-based insurgencies in the southern Philippines as well as Thailand's restive southern border provinces, while well informed and eloquently written, covers a fair amount of old ground. Nevertheless, the book stands out for the author's ability to harness, digest and compare much of what we already know has been taking place in these Southeast Asian settings. This comes across, for instance, in the pithy comparison of colonial policies towards Islam, as well as the author's informed ruminations in the concluding chapter, aptly titled "Southeast Asian Islam in Transition".

One of the overarching themes of the book is the fact that Southeast Asia's narratives of Islam drew much from rich and varied religious and cultural traditions, including indigenous ones. Again,

while this is hardly a novel observation, there remains little in the existing literature that deals substantively with the origins and impact of external ideas and practices on Southeast Asian Muslims, particular in the post-colonial era. In this regard, the author's attempt (Chapter Eight) to locate what has been taking place within Muslim communities in Southeast Asia in broader trends of transnational Islam through a discussion on transnational ideologies and networks warrants scrutiny. For Means, one of the clearest manifestations of the impact of transnational Islam lies in the emergence of radical ideas and networks that eventually paved the way for terrorism. And while radical Islamic groups had been operating in the region since the colonial era, "the homegrown characteristic of radical Islamist groups in Southeast Asia began to change as a result of political developments in Afghanistan from 1978 to 2001" (p. 161). While Means has identified an important expression of Southeast Asian Muslims' susceptibility to foreign influences in his detailed discussion on extremism, militancy and terrorism, it is unfortunate that, for a volume that clearly has potential to be the definitive reference for the study of political Islam in Southeast Asia, the vast topic of transnational Islamic influences was narrowed down to "Southeast Asia and the Global Jihad".

To be fair, it is not clear from the substance of the discussion what the author intends in his use of the term "jihad", particularly given the freight that the term carries. That being said, upon further reading it is clear from the preoccupation with topics such as the influx of Saudi funding, the Afghan Jihad and the Al-Qaeda/Jemaah Islamiyah nexus that for Means, the only external influences worthy of investigation are those that have primarily served to drive Muslims in Southeast Asia towards extremism, jihadism and terrorism. Here, the author missed an opportunity to provide a deeper understanding of the rich and complex tapestry of Southeast Asia's encounters with transnational Islam. For instance, aside from cursory references to Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, there is no further discussion of the Ikhwanul tradition emanating from Egypt in the 1920s but which has since become an international phenomenon of different hues, the South Asia-based Jamaat Tabligh movement that is slowly but surely expanding its following in the region or the Hizbut Tahrir that in Indonesia (and to a lesser extent, Malaysia) has emerged as a political actor that may have a telling impact on the configuration of Muslim politics in the region in the future. Likewise, while an interesting discussion is provided on Qutb, Maududi and Khomeini, there is little discussion of the vehicles through which their ideas were transmitted to Southeast Asia, i.e. the Malay and Jawi

Halaqah (study circles) in Mecca and Medina, the narratives of the Kampong Melayu (Malay communities) in Cairo, the visits that young and impressionable Muslim youths from Malaysian and Indonesian Muslim civil society and political movements made to Iran after Khomeini's revolution, etc. Southeast Asia's encounters with "foreign" Islam has in truth been far richer and variegated, and to essentially limit the scope of such an important discussion to insular Saudi-funded madrasahs, the handful of Afghan veterans in Southeast Asia and the Jemaah Islamiyah is to gloss over a raft of deeper issues which may well bear consequences that will outlast the scourge of terrorism.

Moreover, the otherwise admirable effort in this book is to some extent dampened by the author's occasional use of questionable sources in his study of Muslim-based insurgencies in the region. For instance, in the discussion on southern Thailand the author claims (p. 236) that the Runda Kumpulan Kecil was a "split off" from BRN-C, when in fact it remains unclear if it was indeed a splinter group, an independent group altogether or if it remains a section of the BRN-C. Later, he reprises the assertion, made by "Indian intelligence sources", that insurgents from southern Thailand were being trained in Bangladesh via Myanmar (p. 238). When it was first made in 2004, these claims puzzled those who were observing the unfolding southern Thai conflict. The fact of the matter is that despite coming under intense scrutiny over the last five years, there has not been any conclusive evidence of foreign actor involvement in the southern Thai insurgency. Similarly, the author somewhat carelessly overstates Al Qaeda's attempts to gain a foothold in the Aceh conflict (p. 264).

To be sure, *Political Islam in Southeast Asia* has its shortcomings. Yet at the end of the day, it should be recognized that a monumental attempt such as this could only be undertaken by a scholar with a deep knowledge of the region. As a scholar whose work has been compulsory reading for generations of Southeast Asianists, Gordon Means is well-equipped to write such a book. For that reason alone, this book is essential reading for those who wish to have a better understanding of the dynamics that define much of Muslim political activism and engagement in Southeast Asia.

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