

***Radical Pathways: Understanding Muslim Radicalization in Indonesia.* By Kumar Ramakrishna. Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009. Hardcover: 292pp.**

Islamic radicalism continues to cast a shadow over Southeast Asia. Following Jemaah Islamiyah's (JI) attacks in Bali in 2002 and 2005, and in Jakarta in 2003 and 2004, the terrorist group demonstrated that it remains active and viable with twin bombings in the Indonesian capital at the Ritz Carlton and Marriott hotels in July 2009. Despite several high profile security operations over the past few years which led either to the capture or killing of key JI leaders, ordinary Indonesians continue to be recruited for suicide attacks. What leads to the radicalization of such individuals? Kumar Ramakrishna's *Radical Pathways* endeavours to uncover the geopolitical, cultural, political, historical, psychological and ideological factors that allow individuals to engage in the mass murder of people they do not know.

The central argument in *Radical Pathways* is that radicalization occurs when individuals suffer from amplified existential anxiety over their identity. This condition develops when a person's identity and culture interacts with geopolitical factors, local historical forces and ideology to create the fear of group extinction. In the case of JI members, Darul Islamism is particularly central as this ideology not only provides a shared belief system and cohesion amongst its adherents, but also creates a sense of historic victimization which in turn develops into an us-versus-them vision of the world. The consequence for JI members is then an unmistakable aspiration to ensure that Islam prevails in any circumstance, including the killing of innocent civilians.

Ramakrishna's book brings theoretical and methodological rigour to the study of militancy and terrorism in Southeast Asia. Earlier studies were largely empirical and journalistic accounts that have not gone beyond describing the circumstances that led to the terrorist attacks. *Radical Pathways* is one of the first that focuses explicitly on the JI and one that specifically examines its success in recruiting new members. In doing so, the book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding about the causes of radicalization.

A perennial critique from policy practitioners is that academics often use theory that is not only unintelligible to people outside academia but also has no bearing on the real world. Although *Radical Pathways* draws amply from social-psychology and cultural theory, Ramakrishna's study cannot be accused of this shortcoming.

The book's framework has strong empirical basis. It brings together an understanding of both societal influences and individual level factors to make sense of the motivations guiding the actions of the members of JI.

Ramakrishna, a historian by training, brings his craft to the book. The analyses are detailed and empirically rich, particularly in his biographical examination of JI members. Another notable strength is the book's strong discussion of the "Garden" and "Bouquet" of Indonesian Islamic thought and practices. The author leaves no stone unturned, citing and referencing almost all the key English language texts in this subject area.

In developing the *Radical Pathways* framework, the book extensively reviews the studies on social-psychology and culture. Ramakrishna does a commendable job in referencing and discussing these concepts and demonstrating their applicability in Indonesia and for the JI.

The main strength of the book is probably the chapter on policy implications. Ramakrishna brings his expertise on the Malayan Emergency (1948–60) and uses the findings of his earlier book (*Emergency Propaganda: The Winning of Malayan Hearts and Minds*) to demonstrate how the lessons of an earlier ideological war could be won today.

These strengths notwithstanding, several shortcomings are apparent, particularly in the framework of the book. First, in arguing that culture is important in the calculus of key JI members, Ramakrishna chooses to draw almost exclusively from the work of the Dutch psychologist, Geert Hofstede. While not disputing that Hofstede is an important scholar in the field of cross-cultural studies, the book does not explain why Hofstede's theoretical approach is the most pertinent to the study of militancy and terrorism. Indeed, the use of culture is vast in the social sciences but *Radical Pathways* ignores the importance of other cultural approaches.

Second, although Ramakrishna argues that Darul Islamism and its understandings were important pathways to the radicalization of JI members, the real causal impact of this ideology remains largely unproven for two reasons. First, the author does not define precisely what the characteristics or core tenets of Darul Islamism were. We can only know that Darul Islamism is being propagated, accepted and ingrained into the cultural milieu of its adherents if we know what the ideology looks like empirically. Second, as scholars of culture have long argued, normative practices are not non-tangible and observable traits — people who accept certain cultural practices,

verbalize and actualize their beliefs. Only if we discern a persistent and consistent pattern of discourse or practices over time can we then infer that these cultures or normative practices exist and impact social life. *Radical Pathways*, while making a cultural argument, does not demonstrate the salience of Darul Islamism beyond that of the public proclamations of the captured JI members. The problem with relying on such public statements, and more so from apprehended JI elements, is the possibility that these proclamations might not be a reflection of their cultural beliefs but instead convenient political rhetoric for public consumption and also a religious cry for recognition and legitimacy.

Third, in ascribing a major cause of radicalization to Darul Islamism, the author appears to treat this religious ideology as a cultural monolith, with consistent and overarching core tenets. However, as Ramakrishna acknowledges several times in his book, Darul Islamists are factionalized with varying ideological practices. This fact casts doubt on the centrality of Darul Islamism in shaping the actions of JI members. Cultural beliefs can only be salient when they are homogenous, cohesive and well codified.

The book's methodological and theoretical weaknesses should not, however, detract from the larger contributions the author makes to our understanding of radicalism and in particular its processes within JI. *Radical Pathways* is a welcome addition not only for academics but policy practitioners as well.