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Varieties of Religious Authority

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Varieties of Religious Authority

Changes and Challenges in
20th Century Indonesian Islam

EDITED BY
AZYUMARDI AZRA, KEES VAN DIJK,
AND **NICO J.G. KAPTEIN**



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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Arief Subhan received a scholarship under the project “Dissemination of Religious Authority in Twentieth Century Indonesia” sponsored by the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), Leiden University to undertake a doctoral degree. He is a lecturer at the Faculty of Da’wa and Communication, Islamic State University (UIN), Jakarta. He is also a researcher in the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) at the same university.

Azyumardi Azra (editor) received his Ph.D. degree in 1992 from Columbia University and is Professor of History at the UIN in Jakarta. From 1998–2006 he was Rector of this university. He has published widely on various aspects of history, religion and politics.

Didin Nurul Rosidin, Java, Indonesia. After finishing his study at the Islamic High School Special Programme (*Madrasah Aliyah Program Khusus* or MAPK) in 1992, he studied Qur’anic Exegesis and Prophet Tradition at the Faculty of Theology, Walisongo State Institute for Islamic Studies (Institut Agama Islam Negeri or IAIN) in Surakarta, Central Java. He received his undergraduate degree in 1996. From 1998 to 2000, he took his Master’s Programme in Islamic Studies at Leiden University sponsored by the Indonesian-Netherlands Cooperation in Islamic Studies (INIS). Under the same sponsor and at the same university, he took his Doctor’s programme from 2001. In addition to formal education institutions, he has also studied at a number of Pesantren, including Gontor, East Java, Darussalam, Ciamis, West Java, and Jamsaren, Surakarta, Central Java. From 1998 to the present, he has been working as a lecturer on the History of Islamic Civilization at the Faculty of Theology, Walisongo State Institute for Islamic Studies in Semarang, Central Java. In 2002, he was appointed as a vice-supervisor of Pesantren Al-Mutawally, Kuningan, West Java. He continues to hold this position today.

Kees van Dijk (contributing editor) is a researcher at the KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies since 1968. Since 1985, he has held a chair as Professor of the History of Islam in

Indonesia at Leiden University. He studied Non-Western Sociology at Leiden University, and during his study, specialized in Indonesian Studies. He graduated in 1970. He obtained his Ph.D. at Leiden University in 1981. The title of his Ph.D. thesis was “Rebellion Under the Banner of Islam: The Darul Islam in Indonesia” (1991). He also published “A Country in Despair: Indonesia between 1997 and 2000” (2001).

Andrée Feillard is Senior Researcher with the French Public Centre of Scientific Research (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, CNRS). She was Representative for the Jakarta bureau of the École Française d’Extrême-Orient, the prestigious French research institution. Her field of research is traditionalist Islam (her Ph.D. dissertation is on the large Islamic organization, Nahdlatul Ulama), and she has more recently worked on new radical groups, and published a book on the emergence of radicalism, titled *La Fin de l’Innocence? L’islam indonésien face à la tentation radicale, de 1967 à nos jours*, Les Indes Savantes, Paris; Irasec, Bangkok. She was a foreign correspondent for *Agence France Presse* and *Asiaweek* in Indonesia from 1981 to 1989.

Marc Gaborieau is attached to the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris.

Jajat Burhanudin (Ph.D. Leiden University 2007; MA 1996 Leiden University) is a lecturer at the Faculty of Adab and Humanities of the UIN in Jakarta and a researcher at the PPIM of the same university. From 2001–05 he conducted Ph.D. research within the framework of the “Dissemination of Religious Authority in Twentieth Century Indonesia” sponsored by IIAS.

Nico J.G. Kaptein (editor) teaches Islamic Studies at the Department for Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures at Leiden University. Moreover, he is Senior Research Fellow at the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), Leiden (where he together with Josine Stremmelaar coordinated the programme “The Dissemination of Religious Authority in Twentieth Century Indonesia” 2001–05). Having coordinated the Indonesian Netherlands Cooperation in Islamic Studies (INIS) Programme which ended in 2005, he is at present Academic Coordinator of the INIS follow-up, the Training of Indonesia’s Young Leaders Programme.

Michael Laffan gained his Ph.D. from Sydney University in 2001 and was a Research Fellow at the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden

until December 2004. Since then he has been an assistant professor with Princeton University's Department of History. He has published various articles on aspects of Islam in the region, ranging from pre-colonial and trans-oceanic connections to issues relating to imperialism and the forms of modernity. While his first book, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia* (2003), dealt with the role of religion in the making of Indonesia, his current project looks at the linkages between Dutch colonial scholarship on Islam and local debates, with specific reference to the place of Sufism in that future nation.

Machasin is Professor of History of Islamic Culture at the Faculty of Letters, UIN Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. He also teaches for the World Religions MA Programme at Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta. At present, he is Director of Islamic Higher Education, Directorate General of Islamic Education, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Republic of Indonesia.

Noorhaidi Hasan is a Senior Lecturer at the Islamic State University (UIN), Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. His main interest includes various manifestations of political Islam in contemporary Indonesia, on which he has published various articles in international journals. In 2006, he published the book *Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militancy and the Quest for Identity in Post-New Order Indonesia*, which was derived from his 2005 Utrecht University dissertation prepared within the programme "The Dissemination of Religious Authority in Twentieth Century Indonesia".

Abdulkader Tayob teaches Islamic Studies at the University of Cape Town. He was previously ISIM Professor at Radboud University in Nijmegen, Netherlands. He has published a number of books and articles on Islam in South Africa, and the study of religions. Presently, he is working on contemporary Islamic thought, and Islam and the public sphere in Africa.

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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 then 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

contributions 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.

