

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia.* Edited by Johan Saravanamuttu. Abingdon, Oxford: Routledge, 2010. Hardcover: 188pp.**

A cursory glance at this neatly edited volume of essays might give one the simplistic impression of it being just another addition to the recent collection of works on contemporary Islam in Southeast Asia. With the recent upsurge of interest in the subject, fuelled in part by putative links between political Islamists in the region and Al Qaeda, it is imperative for any study staking a claim to theoretical and practical legitimacy to foreground its distinctiveness.

The perceptive student would therefore ask, what does *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia* have to offer *vis-à-vis*, say, Gordon P. Means' *Political Islam in Southeast Asia* (2009) or K.S. Nathan and Mohammad Hashim Kamali's *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2005)? Going by its title, *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia*, alone, one would not have anticipated anything much apart from trite expositions of majority Islamist politics in Malaysia and Indonesia, minority Muslim politics in Singapore and Muslim political separatism in Thailand and the Philippines. Yet, as one peruses the book's arguments, such pessimistic expectations are progressively dispelled. Unimaginativeness of the volume's title notwithstanding, its authors, via fairly novel discursive methods, do succeed in providing a nuanced and balanced interpretation of the resurgence of political Islam in one of the most economically dynamic and socially diverse parts of the world.

*Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia* represents the culmination of a project entitled "Political and Civil Islam in Southeast Asia" funded by the Tokyo-based TODA Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research, a non-partisan organization which, since 1996, has endeavoured to pursue peace through dialogue, international

cooperation with peace scholars and activists, and discourse on non-violent social transformation. The articles that make up *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia* were presented and discussed in a series of meetings in Budapest, Penang and Madrid, resulting in a commendable special issue of the journal *Global Change, Peace and Security* in June 2004 entitled “Political Islam in South East Asia”, in which I was invited to contribute. Both the earlier and later volumes were edited by Johan Saravanamuttu. Their essence and premise remain similar: that the plurality and diversity of the Southeast Asian phenomenon of political Islam is best interrogated through the prism of “authoritarian democracy” which has strongly influenced governance in the region ever since the end of the colonial era. Such a situational context would enable one to more easily establish the *sui generis* character of the Southeast Asian variant of such a contestable concept as political Islam.

While treading on the same path, *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia* does not merely reinvent the wheel inherited from “Political Islam in South East Asia”. Although all authors draw on their earlier work, new data and empirical evidence shine throughout their subsequent contributions. Southeast Asian case studies are dexterously utilized in dissecting the concept of political Islam. By the time the reader finishes digesting the book’s main arguments, his or her understanding of the phenomenon as previously propounded by non-Southeast Asian-centric scholars and media commentators will in all probability be debunked. Yet, in no way is this done so as to decouple politics from Islam or to devalue Islam’s political content. It is the distinctive manner and trajectory of political interactions with Muslim religious discourse and practice in Southeast Asia which are consistently foregrounded in the book’s chapters. Regardless of whether the expression of Islam is appropriated through seemingly apolitical civil bodies such as Al Arqam in Malaysia and Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia (Chapter 2), militant movements such as Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia (Chapter 3), the emerging Islamist state in Malaysia (Chapters 4–5), pro-state Muslim civil associations in Malaysia (Chapter 5), autonomist struggles in southern Thailand and the Philippines (Chapters 6–7), minority advocacy organizations in Singapore (Chapter 8) or faith groups of varying orientations in Islamcity in Malaysia and Indonesia (Chapter 8), Islam and politics, of not necessarily an authoritarian variety, are portrayed as being intertwined in a perennial and mutually interactive relationship. It is in fundamentally establishing such a premise that the volume’s substantive intellectual contribution lies.

Deriving obvious benefits from their long-term association with each other and commitment to a theme on and prism through which to present their discourse on Islam in Southeast Asia, the authors of *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia* have succeeded remarkably in their manifest project of crystallizing a mutual linkage between political Islam and authoritarian democracy. All chapters of *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia* are an engaging read for the target audience. For those readers familiar with “Political Islam in South East Asia”, *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia* serves as a wonderful advancement in discourse on a coherent theme. It is a pleasure to be able to read works which rely on cutting-edge research. The authors come from an exemplary mix of Western-based and Southeast Asian-based institutions, and are fairly established in their academic positions. This diverse group is united thematically and presumably intellectually; they hail from the diverse fields of Political Science, Anthropology, Sociology, Southeast Asian studies and Islamic studies — perhaps the addition of an economist would have lent this compendium an air of impeccability. With respect to gender, the composition of authors, with five men (Johan Saravanamuttu, Jacques Bertrand, Chaiwat Satha-Anand, Hussin Mutalib, Syed Farid Alatas) and three women (Judith Nagata, Carmen Abubakar, Maznah Mohamad), showcases a healthy balance just short of raw equality.

Future editors should heed lessons from this volume. Some edited books have been the output of hastily assembled contributions culled from conference presentations. Other, better edited volumes suffer from palpable deficiencies in their germinating phase, which more often consists of a single conference or workshop. Not only is *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia* bereft of such shortcomings, but it has also improved on its preliminary product. Whereas “Political Islam in South East Asia” had an evident Malaysian bias, this volume benefits from the Indonesian, Filipino and Singaporean dimensions discussed by Bertrand, Abubakar and Mutalib respectively. Nagata’s and Alatas’ chapters, in very ably comparing Malaysian and Indonesian cases and units of analyses, add value to the volume by accentuating the role of the comparative framework in Southeast Asian studies. A disproportionate number of past studies claiming to represent the whole spectrum of Southeast Asia have been no more than a discrete collection of single-country analyses. That said, it would only be fair to mention the failure of *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia* in redressing the bias exhibited towards Malaysia, Indonesia and separatist politics in Thailand and the Philippines, which has

coloured too many general works on Islam in Southeast Asia. A chapter or two on Islam in mainland Southeast Asia — Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar — which remains *terra incognita* for many interested parties and neighbouring governments, would have given this volume a distinctive quality unrivalled by others. Another useful addition would have been a sub-title clarifying the authors' and thus the book's overall emphasis on the concept of authoritarian democracy and its role as the lynch-pin tying together all the chapters into an integrated thematic whole.

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