

and the CPP's electoral performance. The author states, "Hun Sen's success depends primarily on whether he will be judged to embody the model of just leadership he invokes" (p. 64). It is apparent that Hun Sen's success in perpetuating his power does not rest only on the appeal of his imagined roots — an imagination trapped in the past. Arguably, one could see a narrative of that kind as antithetical to the forward-looking and less superstitious youth of contemporary Cambodia. In the final analysis, Hun Sen's success in perpetuating his power lies in his pragmatism and his skilful use of both sticks and carrots in dealing with his political opponents.

### **Kheang Un**

Department of Political Science, Northern Illinois University, 415 Zulauf Hall, Dekalb, Illinois, 60115, USA; email: kun1@niu.edu.

DOI: 10.1355/sj32-3k

*Hamka's Great Story: A Master Writer's Vision of Islam for Modern Indonesia.* By James R. Rush. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016. xix+286 pp.

Notwithstanding the growing tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims in the capital Jakarta today, scholars have praised Indonesia for producing progressive and moderate Islamic scholars (ulama) of international repute. One individual who fit those labels was Professor Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah (1908–81), popularly known as Hamka. During his lifetime, he published numerous books, from commentaries on the Qur'an to fiction. Hamka's writings are still widely read in the Malay world, even after more than three decades since his passing. Until today, some of his publications serve as textbooks in religious classes.

James R. Rush's *Hamka's Great Story: A Master Writer's Vision of Islam for Modern Indonesia* analyses the scholar's life story and thought-styles through his writings. It begins with an overview of Hamka's childhood and teenage years, and his passion for writing and

publishing. This overview is followed by an analysis of his writings in the magazine *Pandji Masyarakat* (Society's compass) and of his novels. The book then focuses on Hamka's father, the famous Haji Rasul, who played an instrumental role in shaping his son's religious thinking. It then analyses Hamka's religious and political outlook during the Japanese Occupation, traces Hamka's rise to national prominence and discusses the benefits to him of being loyal to the Japanese. In fact, his ties with Japanese Occupation elites enabled Muhammadiyah, the modernist Islamic organization formed in 1912 in Yogyakarta, to extend its reach in Sumatra. Towards the end of the occupation, Hamka distanced himself from the Japanese, for fear of backlash from Indonesian society.

The book then focuses on the post-war years: the early post-independence period, the nationalist phase under President Sukarno, and the New Order period under Soeharto after 1966. Some of the important episodes covered include Hamka's house arrest under President Sukarno and his service as chairman of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Ulama Council of Indonesia) during 1975–80.

*Hamka's Great Story* is an important contribution to the study of — and also a celebration of the importance of — one of the greatest thinkers in Indonesia's modern history. The book includes a deep examination of Hamka's writings, and incorporates Rush's interviews with Hamka's close associates. It serves as a critique of scholars who fail to see the heterogeneity of the modernist Islamic movement in Indonesia. Modernism is associated with progressive interpretation of religious doctrines in the spirit of promoting values, taking context into account and adhering to principles rather than focussing on literal reading of texts. The book shows the ways in which politics, economics and social circumstances shaped a modernist like Hamka.

Despite its important contributions, the book could in several respects be stronger. It lacks the clear central questions that could have bounded the chapters better. The first chapter, for instance, offers review after review of Hamka's writings without any clear objective. Furthermore, Rush does not clearly state how this book

fits into the broad literature about the man, to whom Indonesian academics have devoted considerable research. Many previous books on Hamka have appeared, most published in Bahasa Indonesia. It is clear that Rush's book is written for a Western audience, because Indonesians are unlikely to find any new claims in it. Moreover, there is minimal discussion of Hamka's *Tafsir Al-Azhar*, his thirty-volume exegesis of the Qur'an, which symbolized the pinnacle of his writing career and cemented his status as a religious scholar and intellectual. These volumes contain not only his interpretations of Islamic history and texts, but also his imaginings about an Islamic post-colonial Indonesia. Coverage of his *tafsir* would do more justice to the man, because the work encapsulated his deeper reflections on Indonesia's transition from a colonial to post-colonial state. The incorporation of sociological grounding, including works that deal with sociology of knowledge, would also have improved the book. To be sure, Hamka's behaviour was not shaped solely by theology; factors such as class, upbringing, political and social circumstances also played parts.

Nonetheless, Rush's efforts to showcase the complexity of Indonesian Islam through Hamka is commendable. It is a good start for researchers to analyse the thinking of important personalities in the most populous Muslim country by mapping out their writings and tracing the evolution of their thought. Hamka's story needs to be told to and shared with the younger generation: he was indeed an important contributor to Indonesia's modern Islam of the twentieth century. Rush's approach is in a way different from contemporary trends in academic research, with their focus on actors having no or minimal impact on their societies. Hamka shaped Indonesia's intellectual discourse for at least thirty years of his life, and, more importantly, has had great impact on the generations that came after him.

**Norshahril Saat**

Regional Strategic and Political Studies Programme, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Singapore 119614; email: [norshahril\\_saat@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:norshahril_saat@iseas.edu.sg).