

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

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The aim of this volume is to understand contemporary socio-cultural and political challenges facing Islam in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. It is particularly interesting to examine how Muslims in these three countries grapple with modernization and change which has significantly impacted laws, politics, ideas, and consumption patterns. Undeniably, there are many books in the market that have addressed similar concerns. Previously, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute has published books discussing similar issues. They include *Readings on Islam in Southeast Asia* (compiled by Ahmad Ibrahim, Sharon Siddique, and Yasmin Hussain in 1985); *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century* (edited by K.S. Nathan and Mohammad Hashim Kamali in 2005); *Voices of Islam in Southeast Asia: A Contemporary Sourcebook* (compiled by Greg Fealy and Virginia Hooker in 2006).

This edited volume does not attempt to cover Islam in all Southeast Asian countries, except for the three maritime states mentioned above. It is also focusing less on security issues such as the ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) or Al-Qaeda threat. In fact, the book makes a deliberate move not to cover separatist movements in the Southern Philippines and

Southern Thailand, or the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, even though these issues concern Muslims as well. The book is a modest attempt to take stock on recent developments facing the three countries that scholars used to consider the bastion of “moderate” Islam.

Quite the reverse, scholars today are alarmed that Islam in Southeast Asia is becoming more conservative, radical and intolerant. They are also anxious with groups promoting political Islam (also referred to as Islamism) and how such fundamentalist ideas will impact multicultural societies in the region. Conservative preachers can now mobilize thousands of people to support their exclusivist agendas, causing much distress to the scholars.

Undeniably, Muslims in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have begun to outwardly express their piety. The *dakwah* movement (referred to as Islamic resurgence by some) which emerged in the 1970s decreased the Malay and Indonesian character of how Islam is practised in the region. Today, scholars argue that “Arabization” is on the rise in the Malay world. Islamic resurgence altered the way Malays practise their faith, their relationship with the state, and their relationship with other communities. *Dakwah* groups demanded for a greater role of Islam in the public sphere. Their requests included the following: Islamic institutions, Islamic banks, Shariah-compliant goods, and Islamic state. Unlike in the past where Southeast Asian Muslims were able to integrate their religious beliefs with local practices, thus their dance, arts, and literature flourished while they remained committed to their religion, post-resurgence Muslims began to question whether their cultural practices are in-sync with Islam.

Judging from contemporary writings, there is a tendency to equate Arabization with radicalization. Undeniably, some

states in the Middle East are in political turmoil today, and Iraq and Syria are still recovering from their battles with ISIS which wants to establish an Islamic caliphate. The importation of extreme ideas from the Middle East is real and there is no denying of that. Arabization as a social phenomenon has impacted the way Malays think, dress, eat, and behave. The Sultan of Johor, Sultan Ibrahim Ibni Sultan Iskandar, criticized Malaysian Muslims who mimicked the Arabs. He opined that Malays are no longer practising their culture and Muslim men and women prefer wearing Arab-style garments compared to the traditional Malay *baju kurung* and *baju Melayu*. Since the 1970s, more Malay women are putting on the headscarf.

Wahhabi-Salafism is also making inroads into Southeast Asia, threatening the moderate style of thinking long promoted in the region. Wahhabi-Salafism is a puritan brand of Islam which is upheld by Saudi Arabia's religious elites. The ideology condemns a number of religious rituals commonly practised by Muslims in Southeast Asia as innovations (*bid'ah*) because they contradict the Quran or Prophetic traditions. It frowns upon rituals such as *ziarah kubur* (grave visits of pious Muslims), *kenduri* (communal feasting), and *maulid nabi* (celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday), even though these practices have been practised in the Malay world for centuries.

Is growing Arabization among Southeast Asian Muslims threatening their quest to modernize? Recent developments in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore would suggest so. In Malaysia, the government has undertaken a state-led Islamization by building institutions, enlarging the religious bureaucracy, and co-opting *ulama* (religious elite) in the name of Islamic development. These efforts were undertaken by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (1981–2003) and

continued by his successors Abdullah Badawi (2003–9) and Najib Abdul Razak (2009–present). Progressive civil society groups in the country have complained about the Islamic bureaucrats growing assertiveness in the religious sphere. The moral police have interfered with intellectual discussions and banned books they deemed as not in line with their orientation.

In the political realm, Malaysian Islamic politics have become more fluid since the 2013 general elections. The two biggest Muslim-led parties, UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) and PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia) faced internal split. Former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, along with his son Mukhriz Mahathir and former Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, left UMNO to form PBBM (Malaysian United Indigenous Party). In 2015, PAS left the opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat (People's Coalition) to go solo, while the progressive faction within the party parted ways with the conservatives and formed Amanah (National Trust Party). The enmity between UMNO and PAS since the 1980s has subsided. Already, the parties have collaborated in pushing for an amendment to ACT 355 Shariah Criminal Administration, which seeks to increase the maximum penalty for Shariah Courts from the present three years jail, fine of RM5,000 (US\$1,180) and six strokes of the cane to 30 years jail, RM100,000 (US\$23,600) and 100 lashes of the cane. Prime Minister Najib Razak and PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang are also comfortable sharing the same stage on many occasions.

In Indonesia, experts are worried about the country's conservative turn. Some called this the rise of "un-civil" Islam, the reverse of Hefner's terminology "civil Islam". These

concerned experts cite the recent “Ahok” blasphemy incident to substantiate their case. In November and December 2017, Jakarta witnessed large-scale demonstrations, believed to have involved thousands of participants, protesting against the then Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, who is known as Ahok. Protesters claimed that Ahok had insulted Islam during one of his campaign speeches for the Jakarta elections. In February 2017, Ahok beat two candidates in the first round of the polls, but lost in the second round held in April the same year. He was subsequently jailed for blasphemy. Apart from the Ahok case, scholars point to the recent treatment of religious minority groups Shias and Ahmadiyahs to demonstrate Indonesia’s conservative turn. Besides, the authorities uncovered some citizens who are influenced by radical ideas promoted by ISIS. Non-violent Islamist groups have also not disappeared as predicted in the last 2014 elections, showing that they still have substantial support from sections of the electorate.

Singapore Muslims are sandwiched between the two Muslim-dominant countries. The Muslim community, which comprises of 15 per cent of the total five million Singapore citizens, are mostly Malays. Since 2015, the government has revealed that some members of the community have travelled to the Middle East, or planned to do so, to fight alongside ISIS militants. Some foreign workers in Singapore were also found to be ISIS sympathizers, and they have been detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) or repatriated back. While majority of the community have rejected terrorism and radicalism, and have worked alongside the government to counsel potential ISIS sympathizers, many remain ambivalent about non-violent extremists. They have not outrightly condemned groups that show exclusivist

attitudes towards religious minorities and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) groups. For example, the conservatives have been against the Pink Dot movement, which celebrated the freedom to love and calling for LGBT rights to be respected. In 2017, the government expelled an Indian imam for praying for the destruction of Christian and Jews in a sermon. The imam apologized and returned to India. On top of these, there have been groups pressing for the rights of Muslim women to put on the *hijab* (headscarves) during their duties. At this moment women in uniform groups and nurses are not allowed to put on the headscarves, though in general, Muslim women are free to don them outside their duties.

This book explores how Muslims in the three Southeast Asian countries grapple with change. Their response to these issues provides insights on their mode of thinking. On the one hand, the book compares networks and flows of students, teachers, ideas, and literature from the Middle East to Southeast Asia, and within the region. On the other hand, it seeks to understand the evolving nature of Shariah Courts, bureaucracies and civil service; the emergence of Islamic culture/politics in contemporary society; as well as the reaction from both Muslim and non-Muslim communities towards increasing Muslim religiosity. There are several issues which this book seeks to answer. How strong is the Middle East influence on Southeast Asian Muslims today? Scholars have conveniently used the term “Arabization” to depict growing exclusivism among Muslims in the region. However, the discourse of Arabization and equating it with extremism neglects the local factors shaping Muslim societies. How the locals react to outside influence vary from one country to another. Some chapters in this volume point out that

progressive ideas emanating from the Middle East also found its way into the region. Moreover, not all exclusivists are Wahhabi-Salafis, as sensationalized by some scholars. Self-procalimed Sufis, the so-called counter to Wahhabi-Salafis, are also guilty of promoting ideas that are not in-sync with modern realities. Moreover, exclusivism could be episodic and in response to an event in the country.

This volume attempts to cover as much grounds as possible: in the field of politics, bureaucracy, social, authority and law. However, given the constraints of this book, it is unable to look at other areas that are equally important. The book is divided into three sections and they are based on the three countries to be focused on, namely Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. The central argument of this volume is that the Middle East influence is more nuanced than what scholars think: while the negative impact on changing the attitude of Malay-Muslim in the Nusantara is felt, there are also positive influence as well. On the other hand, there are also intra-regional dynamics that analysts have ignored.

The breakdown of the chapters is as follows. Focusing on the political aspects, Wan Saiful Wan Jan in Chapter 2 traces the evolution of Islamic political parties in Malaysia. The term Islamism has always conjure negative connotation, yet Wan Saiful highlights the contestation between the progressives and the conservatives. In his chapter, Wan Saiful traces the split within PAS which led to the formation of Amanah in 2015. The progressives have difficulties organizing themselves in the past but have been able to consolidate their struggle into one party (in the form of Amanah) since the split. Wan Saiful's chapter asks if the progressives can sustain their struggle against the dominant conservatives in the political arena.

In Chapter 3, Norshahril Saat looks at the discourse of the Malaysian muftis, the heads of state Islamic religious councils, portraying the diversity among them. Their differences counter the many perceptions that Malaysia is heading towards Arabization, or becoming inclined to Saudi Arabian brand of puritan Islam, called Wahhabi-Salafism. The chapter does not deny the existence of such ideas though they remain marginal. However, Malaysian religious elites remain conservative despite their differences in theological viewpoints.

Mohd Faizal Musa examines the impact of puritanical ideas on Malaysian institutes of higher learning in Chapter 4. Here, he traces the role of Wahhabism (particularly Salafi-Wahhabism) resulting from Saudi Arabian Pan-Islamism movement. Applying forensic theological approach, he examines how Wahhabism underpins the setting up of MEDIU University based in Malaysia.

In the second section, the book discusses how different actors negotiate modernity in the realms of education, politics, and discourse. Yon Machmudi in Chapter 5 traces the Middle East influence on the Indonesian campus movement. Existing works have looked at the influence of Saudi Arabia and Egyptian groups (particularly the Ikhwanul Muslimin), but the chapter also looks at other influences such as Shi'ism (Iranian) and the Hizmet (Turkish). Tensions between groups that are Middle East-inclined with Indonesia's traditional ones, such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, are bound to happen. To counter these Southeast Asian chapters of Middle East organizations, Indonesian movements conceptualized Islam Nusantara or Islam Berkemajuan. Yon argues that the Ikhwanul Muslimin and Hizmet are accommodative towards local Indonesian Islam. However, Shia, Salafi and Hizbut Tahrir are less inclusive.

In Chapter 6, Azhar Ibrahim paints a rather optimistic picture for Indonesian Islam. Observing from the discursive standpoint, Azhar observed that the overview of religious discourse is a contested terrain; on the one hand, there are books circulated with a fundamentalist bend, but on the other hand, works by progressive Muslims from the Middle East are also widely translated, published and circulated. Books by progressive thinkers in the Middle East such as Hassan Hanafi, Abed al-Jabiri, Nasr Abu Zaid, and Muhammad Syahrur have been discussed within the Indonesian circles, even though these works may not be representative of mainstream Islam in Singapore and Malaysia. Azhar observes that the presence of these diverse range of translated works would only generate a critical mass of Indonesian public.

Ahmad Najib Burhani takes the discussion of contestations further to the religious elite level in Chapter 7. Relating to the incidents surrounding the movement *Aksi Bela Islam* in 2016 and 2017 against former Jakarta Governor Ahok, Ahmad Najib questions the strength of traditional Islamic organizations, NU and Muhammadiyah, in the eyes of the Muslim public. He argues that non-mainstream Islam are gaining a foothold in Indonesia and steadily growing, undermining the two organizations that have dominated Indonesia for decades. Central to Ahmad Najib's argument are the challenges posed to traditional religious authority and how these may impact Indonesian Islam in the long run.

Najib Kailani in Chapter 8 moved away from conservative–progressive tensions to understand yet another phenomenon in Indonesian Islam: the rise of capitalist-driven religious market. In this chapter, Najib discusses religious preachers promoting market Islam, which targeted the growth of the middle class in the country. The chapter traces the influence

of Imaduddin Abdulrahim and Toto Tasmara as pioneers of preacher-cum-trainer in the Indonesian Islamic landscape, introducing Islamic management theory. It also examines the presence of new actors in the field such as Ary Ginanjar, Muhammad Syafii Antonio, Abdullah Gymnastiar and Yusuf Mansur. The chapter argues that despite the changing socio-political context between the New Order period and the post-New Order period, there have been some continuities in terms of the efforts to promote Islamic management methods.

The book concludes with a chapter on Singapore by Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, who traces the growing trend of Shariah revivalism among the religious elites in the country. Muslims in Singapore constitute a minority, though culturally, they are similar to their Malaysian counterparts. While not openly promoting Islamist discourse, the religious elites continue to hold minority *fiqh*, looking at modern and Islamic discourses in dichotomous terms. Noor Aisha cited the example of marriage, inheritance, and laws.

I hope that this book will spur greater debate on the role of Islam in Southeast Asia and counter discourse that merely paint Middle East influence in a negative light. In essence, the Middle East impact on Southeast Asia is diverse, with local actors constantly engaging and contesting external influences. On the other hand, merely focusing on Middle East influence—through the phenomenon known as Arabization—ignores regional and local dynamics which colours Islamization in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore.