

## SOJOURN *Symposium*

### ***On Corporate Islam: Sharia and the Modern Workplace* by Patricia Sloane-White. Cambridge University Press, 2017.**

Review essays by Bryan S. Turner and Edmund Terence Gomez, with a response from Patricia Sloane-White.

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#### Review Essay I: Bryan S. Turner

Much of the social science literature on Islam, especially since 9/11, has focused on accounts of prejudice, victimhood, and Islamophobia. These victim narratives about Middle East refugees in Germany, North Africans in France, Rohingya in Myanmar or Malay-Muslims in Singapore are well known and much rehearsed. Much of the research is in fact about advocacy rather than about science. Patricia Sloane-White has produced something different, original and refreshing—a qualitative ethnographic study of the rise to power of the Muslim elite in corporate Malaysia. In fact this is her second book on entrepreneurship in Malaysia. She published *Islam Modernity and Entrepreneurship among the Malays* in 1999. In this recent publication, she contrasts her ethnographic approach to individual processes of pious self-augmentation with macro studies of Islamization as “a fractious struggle engaging state-makers and state-seekers” (p. 1). Against the background of Malaysian independence in 1957 and rapid economic growth fuelled by petrodollars, rent and multinational investment, she explores the rise of sharia advisors who provide sharia business knowledge to corporate executives,

capitalists and senior managers. They are thus distinguished from the more traditional arbiters of Islam, namely the *ulama*. These sharia advisers are at the forefront of the growth of Islamic economics, which defines the norms and ethical practices that determine the relationships connecting finance, business and people to provide desirable social and economic outcomes for citizens. Thus, the corporate Islamic workplace is more than a moneymaking engine; it is a space of moral production where various practices produce value for the public good. Here, then, is the new Muslim elite—self-confident, successful and, above all, pious.

Sloane-White divides this sharia narrative in the context of Malay development into two stages or phases. The pro-Malay government policy after 1957 classified Malay Muslims into bumiputera, the indigenous legitimate owners of the national wealth, and the “immigrant” minority of ethnic Malaysian Chinese who had dominated the higher echelons of the economy. In the New Economic Policy (NEP), which was in place between 1970 and 1990, a generation of bumiputera had been socialized into capitalist values and practices. The NEP was designed to provide poor and rural Malays with an education and thereby to reduce inequality between Malays and other ethnic groups. Chinese, Indians and aboriginals did not figure in the government’s growth policies. The NEP was in reality a mechanism for redistributing capital, and in the long run it was immersed in favouritism and patronage. By 2009, none of the top companies were under bumiputera ownership.

*Corporate Islam* documents the rise of the post-NEP generation of entrepreneurs and managers who have embraced sharia as the only trustworthy guide to ethical business; they have also shaped their personal lives by overt commitment to Islam and now guide their everyday world through the Qur’an and the teachings of the Prophet. They have rejected the intoxicated secular world of consumption and credit that they see as corrupting and undermining Malay society. In fact, Malay Islamism is part of the legacy of Islam and created the Malaysian Department of Islamic Development, which, through coordinating Islamic laws and procedures, set about defining what it

is to be a Sunni Muslim in Malaysia. The process of Islamization was intensified in 1988 when the Federal Constitution was amended to establish the principle that civil courts had no jurisdiction over sharia courts. Sloane-White's important argument here is that, while in much of the Muslim world Islamization grew in opposition to states that were thought to be secular and Westernized, the Malaysian state orchestrated Islamization to secure its base in the electorate.

Sloane-White recognizes in chapter 4 (Islam at Work: Personnel of the Sharia Generation) a valuable comparison with similar research undertaken by Daromir Rudnycky (2010) in Indonesia into self-improvement programmes or ESQ (Emotional and Spiritual Quotient Training) that were designed to promote ethical and productive work practices among both workers and managers. The connections between these developments and Max Weber's famous Protestant Ethic thesis, in which Calvinism was the driving force behind early capitalist accumulation, are relatively obvious. Sloane-White argues that the sharia elite aspired to the creation of a "virtuous capitalism" (p. 185) that would not only refashion Malay capitalism but would also act as a model for Muslims worldwide. Yet this elite, while critical of the NEP generation, fails to recognize its own protected status and the funding that is allocated annually from taxes raised on Muslims and non-Muslims to JAKIM (the Malaysian Department of Islamic Development). She is critical of the role of "corporate Islam's *zakat*" that shows little concern "with directly serving the everyday needs of the hardcore poor" (p. 186). In general terms, the Islamization of the economy has had the effect of marginalizing non-Muslims, especially the Chinese minority.

The Islamization of the economy was seen by many as a solution to several of the problems of corruption that had characterized the political career of Najib Razak, who was accused of purloining US\$700 million from public funds. Public frustration with the running of the economy and the effects of the Goods and Service Tax on ordinary Malays rose to the political surface. The electoral victory of ninety-two-year-old Mahathir Mohamad in May 2018 was welcomed by many as an important triumph of democracy in

Asia generally. The surprise election victory was achieved despite Mahathir's often authoritarian and controversial policies, including defining Malaysia as an Islamic state. He had also argued that "inbred" Malays were inferior to the ethnic Chinese, and that justified the remedial actions of the NEP and its redistribution of wealth to the bumiputera. His legacy raises questions about the nature of the 2018 electoral victory—was it simply a transfer of power among competing elites, and what is the composition of those elites? Was this an example of Asian populism or a routine transition of power among the elite?

*Corporate Islam* is a valuable contribution to Islamic Studies, but it also constitutes an important addition to economic sociology. Sloane-White is in fact an anthropologist and it is the ethnographic richness of her research that is the real value of her project. Because she does not write from the perspective of political theory, she fails ultimately to explore or explain the connections between this sharia elite and the wider political system. In most forms of capitalism, the economic and the political elite are somewhat differentiated. The Malaysian state has obviously played the central role in economic development, the Islamization of society and the subsequent marginalization of the Chinese and Indian business class, but is this an integrated power elite or is there a political class that has ultimate control of the economy and, thereby, control of the sharia elite? Of course, attempting to resolve the theoretical issues raised by notions such as the 'power elite', 'the business class' or the 'political class' has been an ongoing problem in the social sciences (Shipman, Edmunds, and Turner 2018). However, this absence of a political analysis is genuinely puzzling in her study. In a previous publication (Sloane-White and Beaulieu 2010), she refers specifically to C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* (1956) as a key concept in understanding the continuity of power in Malaysia's rentier state. Malaysian taxation fell mainly on outside companies and individuals, while domestic economic growth allowed for some redistribution of wealth to Malay citizens. Malaysia's developmental policies gave an emphasis to agricultural and rural development to raise the incomes

of poor peasants, and investment in health and education in rural areas was important in retaining the support of rural communities.

Contra James C. Scott, Sloane-White and Beaulieu developed the idea of “weapons of the elite” to explain Malaysia’s long-term social and political stability despite periodic economic crises. In such crises, “the situation was rapidly brought under control by Malaysia’s powerful authoritarian laws.... each crisis was followed by the adoption of vast additional public investment measures” (Sloane-White and Beaulieu 2010, p. 397). Malaysia’s power elite has been successful in building a meritocracy and consolidating its hold through networking. The more complex question is whether the long-term survival of such a political elite depends on its ability to form a political compromise with its emerging middle class or whether it mobilizes its urban-working class and peasants against fractions within the elite (between business and politics). The return of Mahathir Mohamed and the arrest of former political leaders may offer some clues towards an answer.

### Review Essay II: Edmund Terence Gomez

Patricia Sloane-White in her second—and equally compelling—book on Corporate Malaysia assesses the “sharia generation” (p. 60), one that emerged after what she referred to as the New Economic Policy (NEP) generation in her first book, *Islam, Modernity and Entrepreneurship among the Malays*, published in 1999. Two decades into the twenty-first century, has a profound transition occurred in Corporate Malaysia? Sloane-White assesses this sharia generation in her new book and argues that a reframing of business has indeed occurred, manifested in the ubiquity of Islamic practices in enterprises run by Malay-Muslims. This turn to religion in business is due to the failure of the NEP generation to create an equitable form of capitalism. Interestingly, the spirited promotion of Islamic-based businesses was carried out by the same political leaders who were active proponents of the NEP generation of Malay capitalists.

As Sloane-White notes, when Mahathir Mohamed served as prime minister between 1981 and 2003, he endeavoured, with the NEP generation, to promote “Malay-Muslim entrepreneurial capitalism”, but failed to achieve it. What emerged, to her mind, was “Malay-Muslim managerial capitalism and its many white-collar workers” (p. 8), led by the sharia generation. With race and religion so intently intertwined among Malays, why the ethnically based model of business practised by the NEP generation failed while one defined by Islam emerged as a major force in Corporate Malaysia is a puzzle that Sloane-White grapples with in this study. Her respondents among the sharia generation are clear that this change occurred because the NEP generation stressed wealth accumulation, had little or no “social concern” (p. 9) and was “entrapped by ... that most *haram* (prohibited by Islam) of all ills: usury” (p. 9).

But what exactly is the nature of this Corporate Islam, and is this sharia generation fundamentally different from the ‘Korporat Melayu’ who epitomized the rise of the NEP generation that Mahathir and his then deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, enthusiastically nurtured in the 1990s? Since both politicians, though Anwar in particular, also actively promoted Islamic-based enterprises, commencing with the incorporation of Bank Islam in 1983 and the insurance-based *takaful* in 1984, other important questions arise, but are not adequately reviewed: why did these Islamic-based institutions only appear to gain much currency from the early 2000s? And, are not the core features of the sharia generation similar to those of the Korporat Melayu, or NEP generation? After all, Sloane-White defines the “sharia elite” as those who “were frequently overlapping and tight, like the interlocking circles of the ‘power elite’ ... that connect bureaucracies, businesses, political, social and faith groups” (p. 20). Importantly, too, she notes that while many of the sharia generation had a political agenda, they had diverse political loyalties. Among the Korporat Melayu, however, the leading figures were closely linked to Mahathir, but had no political affiliation, while a number of those aligned with Anwar were active UMNO members. No

Korporat Melayu was affiliated with or supported the other major Malay-based party, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS).

Three related issues merit deeper consideration. First, the neoliberal-religion nexus. In fact, attention is drawn to the theme of “pious neoliberalism” (p. 64), an oxymoron if one is familiar with the literature critical of this model of development. Second, while the sharia generation strove to distinguish themselves from the NEP generation, they too were privy to rents from state-owned companies as well as sub-contracts from well-connected businesspeople. Third, while ideas about Islamic-based finance and insurance pioneered in Malaysia have gone global, companies such as Bank Islam and Bank Muamalat have not managed to emerge as major enterprises, even in Muslim-majority countries, a feature also of companies associated with the NEP generation.

On the nexus between neoliberalism and religion, Sloane-White constantly draws attention to the similarity in discourses in Malaysia and the United States, where evangelical Christians run major business enterprises, about how faith shapes business. The suggestion here is that a ‘born-again’ form of Islam prevails among her respondents, who have gone on to fervently implement their religious-based ideas in their companies. What is different in Malaysia, as opposed to the United States, is how powerful Islamic institutions in government, as well as Malay-based parties, zealously endorsed the implementation of religious-based dogmas in the way companies were managed. The sharia generation argue that Islam and sharia provide an ethical and moral code that determines the way they develop their firms and manage their personnel. However, the trends in the United States and Malaysia are similar in terms of one core issue in the workplace, gender inequality, a theme reviewed at length in this volume.

Crucially, too, since religious beliefs shaped the corporate activities of the sharia generation, ethical issues persistently arose when they entered into ventures with the well-connected or well-received sub-contracts from those who were privy to state rents in a covert, even corrupt, manner. This is, in fact, a striking similarity between the sharia and NEP generations; that is, businesspeople in

both cohorts were privy to state patronage, ostensibly as part of the government's endeavour to redistribute wealth among all ethnic groups. This issue of patronage is closely linked to the theme of "dirty money" (p. 61), one that persistently crops up in this study. After Sloane-White exposes readers to the constantly repeated argument of her respondents—such as how stringent Corporate Islam is, in terms of its mode of running a business, with an emphasis on good practices, corporate social responsibility (CSR)—she draws attention to the "other side". When confronted with dirty money, how does the sharia generation deal with it? To justify their handling of dirty money, the sharia generation argues that they can redeem themselves by practising charity. The profits obtained from such business deals are channelled as alms to the poor and donations to charity-based foundations. Indeed, this nexus between the sharia generation and 'dirty money' contributed to the phenomenon of "Islamic Corporate Social Responsibility" (p. 166). Sloane-White cryptically notes that "charities often benefited richly from 'dirty money'" (p. 61). And what of sub-contracts from a well-connected contractor whose business practices this sharia generation disdain? Her respondents contend that this was permissible as long as their own business practices thereafter "remained sharia-compliant" (p. 61).

This 'flexibility' emerges as a core theme in this study and serves to justify business decisions made by the sharia generation when it involved dirty money. On this issue, Sloane-White argues "[f]ollowing David Harvey's notion that 'flexibility' characterizes the practices of those who control and accumulate capital and power but not the experiences of those without it, I argue that sharia premises in corporate Islam generate, as capitalism does, structural, ideational, ethnic—and in the Malaysian case, possibly even spiritual—asymmetries" (p. 19).

This trend of flexibility in business decision-making to justify access to patronage and dirty money draws attention to the third query in this review. Just as Malay capital failed, no Islamic-based enterprise of any repute has emerged. Pioneering state-backed institutions such as Bank Islam did not go global, even though Islamic

banking, finance and insurance, all well developed in Malaysia, went on to become forms of business emulated and practised in not just Muslim-majority countries but also in Europe and North America. Meanwhile, other forms of business where Islamic ideas were central emerged. The halal industry, also pioneered in Malaysia, has become a global phenomenon. Interestingly, too, Al-Arqam, the *dakwah* movement that first actively ventured into the production and sale of halal-based products, was banned by the government in 1994. Members of Al-Arqam eventually reconstituted the movement as the Global Ikhwan, operating out of the Middle East, and its business operations are of global repute.<sup>1</sup> The case of the Global Ikhwan reinforces the need to determine why Islamic-based business ideas originating from Malaysia have gone global while the firms espousing them have not. In fact, no Islamic-based enterprise figures among Malaysia's top one hundred on the stock exchange. In this regard, the business performance of the sharia generation is extremely similar to that of the NEP generation.

This is undoubtedly a “compelling and original” book, as stated in its blurb, one with an immensity of themes that serve to deepen and expand our understanding of this phenomenon called “Corporate Islam”, how its businesses are run, while also showing the contradictions that exist, all done without drowning us with details. As we read Sloane-White's assessment of the sharia generation and their form of Corporate Islam, she builds a momentum in her argument that suggests that there are major differences between them and the NEP generation. Then, an alternative narrative gradually emerges as she highlights major inconsistencies about the sharia generation and business-based Islamic institutions. For example, a sharia “star” (pp. 32–33) in Corporate Islam turns member of parliament and becomes a deputy minister in the Department of the Prime Minister, a leader who by then was globally reputed as a kleptocrat. Tabung Haji, the government-controlled Islamic Pilgrims Fund, mired in serious allegations of corruption, takes the high moral ground of reducing its equity interests in several sharia-approved companies. While the sharia generation actively dissociated themselves from

the NEP generation, whom they argued lacked a moral centre, both generations showed a similar reverence, even subservience, to a political establishment deeply mired in corruption. So, is Malaysia's Corporate Islam profoundly different from the failed *Korporat Melayu* endeavour? And, are not these two generations merely representatives of ethnic and religious forms of capitalism, concurrently nurtured by state elites bent on creating Malay capitalists subservient to their political and economic interests? These questions need to be explicitly answered.

### Author's Response: Patricia Sloane-White

I am delighted to engage with two knowledgeable readers whose experience and scholarship is, as in the case of Bryan Turner, global in scope and theoretically pathbreaking and, in the case of Edmund Terence Gomez, wholly authoritative in their deep examination of the political and economic realities of contemporary Malaysia. They have posed probing questions in response to my work, asking what are the larger political dimensions of the contemporary reassertion of Islamic capitalism and Islamic finance in Malaysia, and how the Islamic business elites I studied 'leverage' (to use a capitalist term) their religious ideals into economic success and transformative political power in Malaysia. My commentators want to know what role the self-styled 'ethically committed' corporate Islamic elites I write about in my book play and what role they will play in the transformation of the Malaysian political economy—especially important given the recent toppling of an old political elite (and the return of an even older political elite, Mahathir)—and what role, if any, their perspectives and ideals will play in the remaking of the NEP era (or what my research subjects called 'UMNOputera') business practices of the Malay economic elite.

Byran Turner takes two directions in his commentary; he notes my "absence of a political analysis", and wonders if the sharia-centric business elite I describe (like the 'UMNOputeras' were before them)

are integrated with the political elite and whether they penetrate the state apparatus. Edmund Terence Gomez focuses more on the economic questions raised by my book. What, he wonders, is the future of the corporate Islamic enterprises I have examined, and why have neither of Malaysia's two original Islamic banks, Bank Islam and Bank Muamalat, nor Malaysia's *takaful* industry—despite being an industry forerunner—nor its halal enterprises become regionally or internationally significant. While Malaysia fashions itself as a global innovator, international pacemaker, and role model in sharia scholarship for the Islamic economy everywhere, none of its firms or enterprises has 'gone global'. As *Corporate Islam* points out, none of the sharia-compliant firms in my study or in Malaysia as a whole appear on the Malaysian top one hundred listed firms, and except for the Islamic banks and *takafuls* in my study, the majority of the enterprises I describe are consultancies and other service providers. Gomez asks the same question that people asked of my earlier book on Malay entrepreneurs, *Islam, Modernity and Entrepreneurship among the Malays*—what does all this conversation about Islamic business really amount to, and where is it going?

Even though their questions are motivated by different urgencies, in some regards I can answer both of them with a similar response—we do not yet know if the deeply pious corporate owners and managers and the sharia elite who guide them are going to succeed in collaborating, as did Malays of the NEP generation, with the new regime's politicians. If they do, will this bring about long-term social and political stability in multiethnic Malaysia? Will their enterprises succeed? Or is this merely another Malay-led manifestation of Islamism, the goal of which is not just to make the economy Islamically compliant but also to use economic life and space, economic purposes and institutions, to remake Malays and Malaysia in line with their Islam? My goal with *Corporate Islam*, as with my earlier book, was not to evaluate the political or economic engagements of the people I engaged with but to reflect on the outcome of their claims. As such, I sought to explore the impact of several decades of a more strident Islamism that I saw

in Malay society: the growing role of Islamic jurisprudence and the vast expansion of highly conservative sharia into the public and private lives of Malay Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and how these changes had dramatically altered the nature of social, political, and economic experience. *Corporate Islam* is about Islam in Malaysia, and about the rise of Islamism. But in it, I seek to tell a wholly different story than is most often told about the growth of Islamism. I investigate the position and effect of traditional sharia in the modern corporate workplace where business owners argue they offer the world a version of Islam that builds, in their words, ‘banks not bombs’, as they define new rules for profit, capitalism and socially responsible corporate practice. *Corporate Islam* explores the modern Islamic corporation as a site where power, relationships, individual identities and practices—and often massive financial resources—are mobilized on behalf of orthodox Islam. It examines how Islam’s corporate power and its redistribution of resources from corporate and institutional coffers mark a trend in Malaysia towards radical marginalizing of those without resources.

While I make no statements about the challenges that the sharia elites in my book present to the political elites, I make it clear that they harbour hopes to convert their Islamic ideals into political institutions in the future—the Islamic state. In so doing, I contend that my analysis, while not an explicitly political analysis, is ‘deeply’ political as it addresses regimes of control at the intersections of ethnicity, social class and gender. These are dimensions of power that, as an anthropologist of Malay life, have long concerned me. I write of the systems of domination and hierarchy, not at the level of the state, but within Islamicized corporate settings. The sharia elite participate in and support overarching structures of power, as we see in the example of Mohammad Daud Bakar, who, while leading an international conference on sharia advisory, informed a massive audience of attendees that addressing questions of poverty, inequality and the needs of the working poor “do not belong” at a high-level, star-studded conference like his (p. 44). I address at length the mix of power and shifting systems of domination that

occur in corporate Islam's gender asymmetry by focusing closely on day-to-day interactions between working men and women, and reflect on topics such as the rise of polygyny among elite men and the ironies of widespread sexual banter, provocation and sexual harassment in the modesty-enjoining Islamic corporate workspace. I reflect on the decreasing presence of Malay women in economic life, and the marginal role allocated to non-Muslims in sharia-centric corporate settings and imagined for them in the Malaysian economic future. Finally, my book seeks to understand the day-to-day dynamics of social class in an Islamic setting where powerful bosses exert significant control over the behaviour, piety and practices of their employees and their employees' families, casting themselves as *khalifah* or stewards, claiming to perform God's work while at the same time enforcing the distance between owners and workers.

Will their politics succeed? Will their businesses succeed? I can only present what my sustained participant fieldwork conducted over many years in an elite corporate environment and within an avowedly and self-consciously Islamic corporate Malaysian milieu has sought to reveal: an observation of events and people, an investigation of economic and corporate dynamics, and the result of conversations about religion and life, work and faith, money and salvation, self-interest and Islamic public responsibility among a sector of Malay Muslim society whose Islamist influence, I believe, is moving ever closer to the centre, not just of Malaysian economic life but of Malaysian national politics and society as well. The expansion of their ethos—not the success or failure of individual companies—is how they define their own success.

I find evidence of Islamist centrality in Malaysian life when I explore the concepts around Islamic money and the capitalist bureaucracies that have emerged to handle it. I discuss how the sharia of Islamic tithing, or *zakat*, helps advance the goals of corporate Islam, a consequence of the vast professionalizing and administering of systems and procedures for collecting and distributing religious money. Describing how *zakat* in contemporary Malaysia is now

primarily a vehicle for state-sponsored socioeconomic development and a source for capital investment, I argue that its premise of social justice has been transformed into policies that do less to support the poor than to pay the salaries of the professional corps of ‘human resources’ who work in such enterprises.

I find further evidence of Islamist centrality in economic, social and political life when I explore the sharia variant of CSR and philanthropy in Islam. The corporate sharia elite in Malaysia describes what they call I-CSR, an Islamic model for serving the ‘public good’—*maslahah* in Arabic. To them, I-CSR is a way to recuperate capitalism, unhinge it from its Western form—which, they argue, lacks an absolute principle of ethical or moral conduct—and ensure its Islamicity. I-CSR, money donated by Malaysian capitalists in the millions to Muslims in Malaysia and the Middle East, is often used to advance Islamist interests and the Islamist cause. Finally, if my book tells of any future outcome, it suggests this: that the wealth and power of Islamic capitalism in Malaysia fuels the growth of the Islamic orthodoxy—and that in Malaysia, the goals of corporate Islam and political Islam grow ever closer. As such, the corporate Islamists I write about are not, as Gomez wonders, subservient to state elites. Instead, I contend that they are often conjoined, foretelling a possible—and powerful—Malaysian trajectory of change.

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## NOTE

1. See Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid (2016) for a history of this movement.

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