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# **Alternative Voices in Muslim Southeast Asia**

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# Alternative Voices in Muslim Southeast Asia

Discourse and Struggles

EDITED BY

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# Preface

In the past, Southeast Asia has been regarded as the bastion of “moderate Islam”. Some argue it is the “smiling face of Islam” compared to Muslim societies in the Middle East, where Islam originated 1400 years ago. Southeast Asian Muslims have always shown respect for local beliefs, traditions and cultures while remaining committed to their faith. The ulama or religious elites of the past did not consider respecting local traditions as compromising their religion. However, events in the 1970s, known as the Islamic revivalist period, led to Muslims in Southeast Asia embracing more conservative interpretations of Islam. Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore have shown an “Islamist turn”, some say. Muslim religious elites are promoting traditionalist discourses that are holding the community back from progress and modernity.

Recent episodes in the three countries feed this narrative. Chief among them was the 2016 mass rallies in Indonesia that sought to challenge Chinese-Christian governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, also known as Ahok. He was campaigning for re-election to the Jakarta governorship in 2017 when one of the speeches he gave was interpreted as constituting blasphemy. Ahok later lost the Jakarta election and was sentenced to jail. The mass protests were led by ultra and firebrand conservative Habib Rizieq Shihab. Indonesian president Joko Widodo was also banking on the rising conservatism to stay in power. In the April 2019 presidential election, in which he sought re-election, he chose the conservative Ma’ruf Amin as his running mate, despite the latter’s controversial position towards minority Shias, Ahmadis and liberals. Jokowi won the election, which means Ma’ruf will serve as

his vice-president between 2019 and 2024. In 2005, Ma'ruf endorsed the SIPILIS fatwa—anti-secularism, pluralism and liberalism—when he was head of the MUI (Ulama Council of Indonesia) fatwa committee. Ma'ruf has also concurrently been the chairman of MUI and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) since 2015, making him the leader of the largest Muslim organization in the country. This book presents chapters on Indonesia that deal with issues pertaining to minority rights under the first Jokowi government. In the same vein, one chapter discusses the contribution of the Ahmadiyah to modernist Islamic discourse in the country, despite the group being seen as a deviant sect today. Another chapter addresses the debates surrounding the “conservative turn” in Indonesia and questions whether this is really taking place.

The situation in Malaysia underwent a significant change after the May 2018 general election, which saw an end to the sixty-one-year rule of the Barisan Nasional government. The Pakatan Harapan government was swept into power, led by its leader, ninety-two-year-old Mahathir Mohamad. Some of the chapters in this book examine the policies undertaken by the Barisan Nasional government towards minorities, such as liberals and Shias, and address the question of whether there will be any significant change under the new regime. These chapters also examine whether progressives have the space to voice their views in a revivalist environment. To be sure, some people who were activists during the Islamic revivalist period of the 1970s held key positions in the previous Barisan Nasional government, and the same case applies for the current Pakatan Harapan government. Some of them have become mentors to young politicians and officials in government. On the other hand, the book also tackles engagements civil society has had with the government, under both the Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Harapan.

Singapore, too, has experienced changes on the Malay-Muslim leadership front. First, Masagos Zulkifli replaced Dr Yaacob Ibrahim as the Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs in 2018. In the same year, the Islamic religious council of Singapore (Muis) also celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. While issues beleaguering the Malay-Muslim community—which constitutes 13 per cent of the five million population—normally centre on radicalism, especially reports of individuals supporting radical groups such as ISIS or Jemaah Islamiah (JI), less attention has been given to minority groups such as Shias, Ahmadis and the so-called

liberals. Muslims in Singapore are predominantly Sunnis, while the Shiites represent a tiny minority. Due to the majority of Muslims in Singapore being predominantly of Malay ethnic descent, the issues members of this ethnic group in the country face are invariably intertwined with Muslim/Islamic issues, and vice-versa. Any Islamic issues that are brought to attention in the public sphere obviously focus on the Malay community. As a minority group, and with its socio-economic position being at the lowest rung in the country, the Malay Muslim community is facing a tremendous challenge to attain a decent level of socio-economic progress. It is also not uncommon for the fact of Malays in Singapore lagging behind in various dimensions of development to be linked to the cultural deficit, alongside Islam's purported conservatism and fatalism. An important question is how are progressive Islamic ideas articulated in the public sphere dominated by individuals from the same stream? Or, could progressive ideas be articulated by the religious elites themselves? The book examines some of the controversial ideas promoted in Singapore and how progressive views are being silenced. Yet, progressivism does not necessarily come from the religious elites, but also includes articulations from members of the Malay literati.

Who are the alternative voices? Despite the growing conservative views among the religious elites, there are groups promoting alternative ideas to those promoted by the religious establishment. These groups not only call for Islam to be practised according to context, they also agree that multiculturalism and secularism are the only way forward for harmonious living in diverse societies such as Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. They believe in respecting the tenets spelt out in the constitutions of their respective countries that guarantee freedom of religion. This book hopes to showcase the challenges and struggles faced by the champions of alternative discourses in the face of a growing conservative climate. It examines how state and quasi-state institutions and ordinary citizens police groups or individuals promoting alternative ideas. It also explores the avenues utilized by the progressives in championing their vision.

This book features articles by scholars, activists and observers. We have kept the authors' preferred writing styles as far as possible to bring out the key messages of their works. Some of the writers themselves have been victims of repression and discrimination by both

quasi-state and non-state actors, and we want to ensure their voices of struggle are represented. Most of the pieces here are academic in nature, while others are shorter think pieces in the form of opinion editorials. These shorter pieces provide an overview of the case studies and concepts discussed in the later chapters.

The editors would like to express our gratitude to Director of the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute Mr Choi Shing Kwok and Director of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) Mr Christian Echle for supporting the publication of this book. We wish to record our special thanks to our partners from KAS and the Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS) for making this publication possible. We wish to thank ISEAS Publishing for their professional help, especially Mr Ng Kok Kiong, Head of ISEAS Publishing, and Mr Stephen Logan. Special thanks also goes to Ms Aninda Kurnia Dewayanti for her editorial assistance.

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**Azhar Ibrahim** is Lecturer at the Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore (NUS). He obtained his doctorate and master's from the same department. His doctoral dissertation focuses on humanism and intellectualism among the Malay literary intelligentsia, while his MA thesis deals with the study of religious orientations as reflected in feudal Malay society and its continuities in the present. He majored in both Malay Studies and Southeast Asian Studies at NUS. He teaches Malay-Indonesian literature and ideologies of development. His research interests include the sociology of religion, the sociology of literature and critical literacy, and Malay-Indonesian intellectual development. Among his published books are *Emancipated Education* (2019), *Historical Imagination and Cultural Responses to Colonialism and Nationalism: A Critical Malay(sian) Perspective* (2017), *Menyanggah Belenggu*

*Kerancuan Fikiran Masakini* (2016), *Contemporary Islamic Discourse in the Malay-Indonesia World: Critical Perspectives* (2014), and *Narrating Presence: Awakening from Cultural Amnesia* (2014).

**Azis Anwar Fachrudin** currently works as a researcher at the Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (CRCS), Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta. He completed his bachelor's degree in Arabic Literature in 2013 and obtained his master's from CRCS in 2016 following his graduate student fellowship at the Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore. His latest publications include *Linguistik Arab: Pengantar Sejarah dan Mazhabnya* (2017) and *Polemik Tafsir Pancasila* (2018). He has penned many opinion columns for the *Jakarta Post* and Indonesian newspapers since 2014, mostly on the topic of Islam in Indonesia. During Indonesia's 2019 elections he was an Indonesia Correspondent Fellow for *New Mandala* (an academic blog based at the Australian National University's Coral Bell School of Asia and Pacific Affairs), specifically covering issues on Islam and social change.

**Dina Zaman** is a former columnist who wrote about Muslim life in Malaysia. She wrote for *Malaysiakini.com*, the *Malaysian Insider* and the *Malay Mail Online*. In 2007 she wrote a book, *I AM Muslim*. In 2017, her latest book, *Holy Men Holy Women* was published. With friends, she founded IMAN Research in 2015. The main focus of IMAN's work is on countering violent extremism and on deradicalization. IMAN Research has worked on violent extremism among urban and rural youths, on refugees and radicalization, voluntary repatriation in Sabah, and young peoples' perceptions of Malaysia's regime change. She is a former British High Commissioner Chevening scholar and a Senior API Fellow.

**Mohd Faizal Musa** (also known as Faisal Tehrani) is a Research Fellow at the Institute of the Malay World and Civilization (ATMA), National University of Malaysia (UKM). The *Jakarta Post* (28 August 2017) called him "Malaysia's Rebel Author". Andrew Fowler, famous Australian journalist and author of *The Most Dangerous Man in the World*, stated that Faisal's translated works into English, *The Nurse (Misi)* and *Crises (Kegawatan)*, were "great narratives on the battle for

ideas and freedom in Malaysia". Seven of Faisal's literary works were banned by the previous Malaysian government. His best remembered novels are *1515* and *Professor*, which has been translated into English by Brigitte Bresson as *The Professor*. Among his key academic publications are "The Malaysian Shi'a: A Preliminary Study of Their History, Oppression, and Denied Rights" (*Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, 2013); "The Axiology of Pilgrimage: The Malaysian Shi'ites Ziyarat to Iran and Iraq" (*International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology*, 2013); "Religious Freedom in Malaysia: The Reading of the Qur'an 2:256" (*The Qur'an in the Malay-Indonesian World*, Routledge Studies in the Qur'an, 2016); and "State-backed Discrimination against Shia Muslims in Malaysia" (*Critical Asian Studies*, 2016). He is now an Associate of the Global Shi'a Diaspora at the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs at the Weatherhead Centre for International Affairs, Harvard University.

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**Zainal Abidin Bagir** teaches at the Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies, Graduate School of Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia. He is also a board member of the Indonesian Consortium for Inter-religious Studies, Yogyakarta. He was a visiting lecturer at the Department of Religious Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand (2013–14). In 2008–13 he was the Indonesian Regional Coordinator for the Pluralism Knowledge Programme, a collaboration between four

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