

## SOJOURN Symposium

### ***On Improvisational Islam: Indonesian Youth in a Time of Possibility* by Nur Amali Ibrahim. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018.**

Review essays by Pradana Boy Zulian and Norshahril Saat, with a reply from Nur Amali Ibrahim.

**Keywords:** Islam, Indonesia, youth, liberal, conservative, university organizations.

#### Review Essay I: Pradana Boy Zulian

In describing current trends in Indonesian Islam, I usually present the five latest developments: (1) post-secular Islam, (2) hybrid Islam, (3) internet Islam, (4) Salafism, and (5) Islamic populism. Among these developments, for the second and third categories, I take advantage of Nur Amali Ibrahim's explanation in his current study on Indonesian Islam as described in this book. Although these five developments may be understood as independent phenomena, they are fundamentally interrelated. And in the context of understanding contemporary Indonesian Muslim society, Nur Amali's work is an important contribution, as it lays down a fundamental sociological analysis; namely, the interplay of social and political changes with the dynamics of religious discourse and orientations. For this reason, Nur Amali's depiction of the recent development of Islam as practised by Muslim youth, which he coined 'improvisational Islam', intersects with other phenomena in terms of factors and the political landscape conditioning the birth of those situations. In addition, in terms of actors, supporters of different orientations of Islam come from similar Muslim groups.

Interestingly, within this situation, a particular development has prevailed; namely, the adoption of external forces into the practice of daily Muslim life. This phenomenon is what Nur Amali qualifies as “hybrid Islam” (p. 91), which according to Nur Amali’s study is currently widely circulated among Muslim youth. From Nur Amali’s observation, ‘hybrid Islam’ is the phenomenon of practising Islamic teachings by taking advantage of Western methods and elements. This is an interesting fact to analyse because for some Muslim groups the West is regarded as the enemy of Islam. In the view of such groups, Western values, practices, ways of life and philosophies should not be adopted by Muslims. Although this belief is common among Muslims, in the context of Indonesia, Nur Amali observes that “Western methods are taken up not only by liberal Muslim[s] ... but also by conservative Islamists” (p. 11).

In light of these recent developments, Nur Amali’s study has revealed a situation that might not be well captured by other scholars, or even by Indonesian Muslims themselves. In this respect, one of the important aspects of Nur Amali’s work lies in its focus on how youth have been taking part in an open market of religious ideas and practice in post–New Order Indonesia. The phenomena of hybrid Islam and internet Islam relate mostly to the young Muslim generation, as members of the young generation are well versed in adopting new technology and they have the ability to absorb the elements of modernity into their religious life, especially in relation to the satisfaction of their religious and spiritual quest.

More importantly, although Nur Amali focuses on two distinct religious orientations developed among Muslim university students in Indonesia, his study can be employed to analyse the broader context of Muslim youth and Muslim society in Indonesia more generally, as the work fundamentally underlines ideological rivalry among Indonesian Muslims in a contemporary setting. Considering this context, it can be maintained that the progressive and literalist or Islamist Muslim groups that Nur Amali focuses on essentially represent the current contestation of religious orientation, and this trend will continue for a considerably long time.

Regarding the five developments I mentioned, by post-secular Islam I refer to the phenomenon whereby the thesis of secularism proposed by sociologists of religion has failed. Rather than being secularized and distant from religion in a situation where modernity dominates all aspects of life in society, Muslims in Indonesia are becoming more attached to religion, the extent of which I would qualify as never having been seen before in Indonesian history. This unprecedented attachment is obvious from such facts as the exposure of religious symbols in economic activities, the increasing aggressiveness over political issues of some Muslim groups, and the aggressiveness of conservative Muslims to Islamize almost all aspects of the lives of Indonesians in general.

The category of internet Islam among those I outlined is also derived from Nur Amali's description of recent religious developments within Muslim society. Broadly speaking it refers to a situation where Muslims, not only those in Indonesia but also globally, have benefitted from the internet as a source of knowledge in helping them understand many aspects of their religion. The abundance of information and knowledge on Islam on the internet has significantly changed the way Muslims seek religious knowledge. In the past, the most common way for Muslims to gain religious knowledge would be to rely on religious authorities. But this has now changed because the internet challenges religious authority.

The rise of internet Islam is also evidence of how Muslims have combined Western elements in their religious life. The information technology revolution began in the context of Western society, and conservative Muslims in Indonesia have taken advantage of technology from the West without hesitation, particularly in relation to the use of the internet as a medium for Islamic learning and propagation. Close attention to the dynamics of online Islamic learning will show how conservatism has grown significantly through the internet and that conservative Muslim actors play a significant role in this trend. A recent study revealed the surprising finding that conservative Muslims dominate the discursive Islamic religious

online sphere at 67.2 per cent, while moderate and liberal groups share only 22.2 per cent and 6.1 per cent respectively of the online sphere (PPIM 2020).

Against such a backdrop, I noted three important points in Nur Amali's work: first, he has validly shown the diversity of orientations of Indonesian Islam. Although Indonesian Islam is often misunderstood, some works stand out for not becoming trapped in the simplification that Indonesian Islam is monolithic. Nur Amali's work has strengthened previous work such as that by Carool Kersten (2015) in describing how Islam as ideas and values is contested by different groups embracing different orientations. My own work also follows this pattern. In *Fatwa in Indonesia* (2018), I described the contestation of ideologies among fatwa-making agencies in Indonesia; namely, among the state version of Islam represented by Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), the so-called modernist Muslim group represented by Majelis Tarjih Muhammadiyah, and the widely known traditional Muslim group represented by Lajnah Bahtsul Masail Nahdlatul Ulama. Although the foci of these two works are different from that of Nur Amali's, they intersect in terms of the diversity of ideologies and religious orientations adopted by the many groups of Indonesian Muslims. This point is fundamental because for many people Indonesian Islam is seen as a monolithic entity and in a limited context; namely, as a home for radical Islam.

The topic of ideological contestation is becoming more relevant for describing recent developments in Indonesian Islam. While ideological contestation mostly takes place among different groups, recent developments in Indonesian Islam show how the rivalry of ideology and orientation can also occur within a group. As an example, Muhammadiyah, known as a modernist Muslim group that employs a rational approach to understanding and practising Islam, has experienced contestation between progressive and conservative wings within its movements. Furthermore, following the ascendance of the Salafi orientation in Indonesian Islam, Salafism has also sought an audience within Muhammadiyah. The relevance of this

situation with Nur Amali's work is that the ideological contest within Muhammadiyah mostly takes place among the youth. A similar situation can also be identified within Nahdlatul Ulama (a traditional Muslim group), although to a lesser degree.

Second, Nur Amali's analysis is important in presenting new actors in discursive contestation in Indonesian Islam. Although an interest by Muslim youths in discussions relating to Islam had emerged since the early 1980s—long before the collapse of Suharto's regime—the fall of Suharto has significantly contributed to the rising popularity of such movements. In post-New Order Indonesia, after the lifting of political restrictions, the youth have taken part in shaping Islamic religious discourse more openly. With youth rarely captured and presented as actors in religious discourse, this work has filled the lacuna, although its focus on only two organizations means it fails to capture similar situations occurring in other groups. It would have been a more comprehensive work if major groups had been included, as the two groups Nur Amali examines are not major groups, although they do represent major orientations.

Third, although the book does not directly mention topics on post-secular Islamic society in Indonesia, the issue it raises underlines the primacy of religion in public life, which contradicts the thesis of the marginalization of religion. The debate and controversies over the symbols of religion and how they are formally imposed upon the public in educational institutions (such as debates on the wearing of headscarves at the State Islamic University in Jakarta) show how religion penetrates deeply into public life.

Such an analysis, unfortunately, is absent from Nur Amali's work; placing the phenomenon of improvisational Islam in a context of post-secular Islam in its Indonesian implementation, I think, would be more sociologically rooted. Moreover, although this work could serve as a historical and sociological study of Indonesian Muslim youth over a certain period of time, it could be extended to cover more recent situations showing that Muslim youth involvement does not occur merely at a discursive level,

but also in the political realm on an empirical level. This could be considered for a follow-up study.

### Review Essay II: Norshahril Saat

After 9/11, security paradigms dominate studies on Islam in Southeast Asia. The emergence of terrorist networks and radical groups such as Jemaah Islamiah (JI) in the 2000s, as well as separatist movements in Aceh that used religious idioms in their struggle, further entrenched the dominance of the approach. Alongside security studies is the common application of the culturalist approach: referring to the role of religion, culture and ethnicity as the primary determinants for behaviour. In Indonesian studies, culturalism is also used to describe how identity politics primarily shapes political outcomes in Jakarta and several other provinces. The most widely cited example is the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, which saw how mass mobilization against the incumbent governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), who was deemed to have insulted Islam, led to his defeat in the polls and his imprisonment. Analysts hold the prevailing view that the rivalry between Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and Prabowo Subianto in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections revolved around the use of Islamic symbols or smear campaigns, even though other factors shaped and influenced the electoral outcome: money politics, economic inequality and local political dynamics. The prevalence of security and cultural paradigms used to study Islam in Indonesia thus eclipse other approaches—namely, the institutional and organizational approach—that focus on political parties, institutions and civil society groups such as Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, Persis, Front Pembela Islam (FPI) and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), or other more pressing issues such as the plight of Muslim minority groups (Shias, Ahmadiyahs and liberals) and their treatment by mainstream organizations.

Situated in the body of work on Islam in Indonesia, Nur Amali's approach in *Improvisational Islam* is refreshing. Focusing on youths, the book covers issues beyond the scope it intends: to observe the

changing character of Islam since the democratization period, known as the post-*reformasi* period (since the fall of Suharto's New Order regime in 1998). Nur Amali uses a strong anthropological research method, conducting in-depth interviews with youths, participant observation and lengthy field research. In the field as early as 2008, his focus was on two ideologically opposing youth groups: the conservative or Islamist Campus Proselytization Association (Lembaga Dakwah Kampus) and the liberal group Formaci. The former's support base comes from secular universities such as the University of Indonesia, a premier national university in Jakarta focusing on sciences, medicine and engineering (p. 26). It has about two hundred members. On the other hand, Formaci draws support from some of the branches of Islamic universities in the country and has about fifty members.

The book has six chapters in total. However, I find Chapters 3 and 4 the most intriguing and crucial for the book's argument. As Nur Amali puts it succinctly, the purpose of the two chapters is to "examine how Islamists and liberal Muslims, respectively, translate between Islam and secular liberal ideals that have become dominant under democracy" (p. 28). Central to the book's theme is the concept 'improvisational Islam' adopted as the book's title. Credit should also be given to the author for creatively applying a concept in jazz to demonstrate how, at the individual level, Muslims tweak and apply what they understand from Islamic traditions differently. What Nur Amali is trying to say is that at the day-to-day level, Muslims relate to their faith in different ways. His choice of studying youth movements is also important here, given the dearth of studies focusing on this segment of the Indonesian Muslim community and the failure to understand that this group will eventually be the trendsetters of Islam in the years to come.

*Improvisational Islam* has more strengths than weaknesses. The strengths lie in the overall choice of concept—one that will easily debunk the security studies and culturalist approaches dominating the literature on Islam in Southeast Asia. This highlights the diversity of views within so-called Indonesian Islam. On the other

hand, the book also counters the arguments of another group that tends to claim that Islam is moderate in Indonesia. Often, while conducting my own research at around the same time as Amali, I heard claims that as long as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah remain powerful and dominant in Indonesia, Islam in the country would be moderate. Dissecting the two organizations based on age would provide a better understanding of the day-to-day nuances between the moderates and conservatives, shifting away from the constant spotlight on Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah elites. Certainly, the choice of case studies here demonstrates that both Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah are only fragments that shape the religious discourse in the country. However, Nur Amali needs to better justify the selection of his cases beyond saying that they are polar opposites and that key Indonesian figures have historically emerged from them. Specifying who they are will strengthen his case. Moreover, the impression readers may get is that Nur Amali relies too much on three informants. Nevertheless, scholars on Indonesian Islam would be able to relate to the trends discussed.

The other strength of the book is Nur Amali's ability to raise interesting concepts such as DIY (do-it-yourself) Islam or "practices that do not necessarily follow conventional or recommended religious scripts written by religious authorities" (p. 58). Nevertheless, as Nur Amali cautioned, the concepts do not raise anything new or develop new interpretations about the local or day-to-day behaviour of Indonesian Muslims, particularly for those who are already aware of the diversity of views of the world's most populous Islamic country.

To be sure, the author's approach shows that the book was written with an academic audience in mind rather than activists and ordinary observers with a strong interest in Indonesian Islam. Understandably, anthropologists often adopt the 'thick description' approach, and there are those who do not wish to become entangled in theological debates, fearing they will be considered biased or ideological. Having read Nur Amali's other scholarly works, this book pales in comparison because he does not take a normative position in *Improvisational Islam*. This, however, is not a weakness on either the part of Nur

Amali or the book, given the limitations of an academic book format. It is my hope that a reframing of research questions that make use of the significant amount of data that Nur Amali has gathered over the years will be taken up in the future. Moving beyond the current focus on the diversity of Indonesian Islam, I hope to see more efforts made to deconstruct misperceptions of liberal Islam; the term Islamism; and how Indonesian Islam can be reformed. I also hope to see some additional questions addressed in Nur Amali's future work: (1) Who are the intellectual or spiritual mentors of the two groups? It will be interesting to place this book alongside current works that examine overseas influences and organizations and how these impact Indonesian Islam, particularly Ikhwanul Muslimin, the Gullen movement, Salafi-Wahhabism, Shiism, Sufism and more; (2) What does the relatively low membership numbers of the two organizations mean? This implies that the two organizations may be part of a bigger and broader network of movements in Indonesia or other parts of the world; (3) Can Nur Amali explain the channels for lobbying the key stakeholders, politicians or policymakers? Do they have clear strategies?

#### Author's Response: Nur Amali Ibrahim

Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to Norshahril Saat and Pradana Boy Zulian for their generous responses to my book. Scholarship demands extended periods of solitude, so it is a privilege to be given the opportunity to be in conversation with and to think alongside other scholars. My work is truly enriched by Norshahril's and Pradana Boy's comments, particularly since they both have conducted such excellent research on Indonesia.

I began the research for my book a few years after revolutionary movements led by university students forced Suharto to step down from office in 1998, paving the way for democracy. The research, as I conceived it initially, was to find out what students were doing in the democratic era they helped to create. Between 2007 and 2010, I spent about eighteen months in Indonesia's major educational

centres, predominantly Jakarta, but also Yogyakarta, Bandung and Bogor, and I discovered that students were actively involved in political discussions about their country's future. The students I met organized themselves in groups and clubs that had relatively small membership numbers on a day-to-day basis, as Norshahril pointed out. What I found interesting was that in times of crisis, such as when there were public debates over a contentious issue, everyone could suddenly become an activist. I have found it helpful to think about the political significance of Indonesian student activism not in terms of membership numbers but as a space in the public sphere that young people can occupy at any moment. This structural position is a testament to the symbolic importance of the *pemuda* (youth) and *mahasiswa* (undergraduate) in the Indonesian political imagination, one that dates back to the anti-colonial revolution that established Indonesian independence. I admired the sense of political duty that many of my young informants had, especially given what I knew from other contexts. In the United States, where I lived for many years, student activism has declined since its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s; in Singapore, where I am from originally, student activism has virtually been obliterated by the state.

One key observation I made was that political discussions in Indonesia's democratic era frequently took place within the ambit of religion, specifically Islam. In other words, the young Indonesians I knew expressed their hopes and aspirations for their nation through their religious identities. There were numerous religious ideologies and orientations, some of which have been mentioned by Norshahril in his review. It was not my aim in the book to discuss this diversity in an exhaustive manner. Instead, I focused on two groups as a heuristic technique to convey this multiplicity: a conservative Islamist one (Lembaga Dakwah Kampus) that was inspired by the Ikhwanul Muslimin and a liberal Muslim one (Formaci) that regards Indonesian progressives like Abdurrahman Wahid and Nurcholish Madjid as their major influences. As both Norshahril and Pradana Boy have recognized, these groups exist outside of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, the two mass movements that define standards

of religious orthodoxy in Indonesia. It is of course imperative to study the construction and maintenance of orthodoxy, but Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah are already at the centre of many analyses of Indonesian Islam. I wanted to redirect attention to the non-mainstream, marginal and underground groups that are redefining or offering alternatives to orthodoxy. It seems to me particularly necessary to do this in post-Suharto Indonesia, where the lifting of restrictions on personal expression has resulted in a proliferation of new religious actors.

The two groups I write about promulgate different religious interpretations and political visions and thus compete with one another for social influence and followers. I wanted to showcase intra-Islam contestations precisely because I was pushing back against what Norshahril called the security paradigm that has become so dominant in studies of Islam. In conceiving of ordinary Muslims as vulnerable to capture by intolerant forces within their religion, the security paradigm frequently overlooks the foundational role of debates and discussions in the formation of religious subjectivities. I am glad that Pradana Boy also examines intra-Islam contestations in his study of fatwa-making in democratic Indonesia, though his focus is on the gatekeepers of orthodoxy. The groups I study rely on a variety of methods to compete with one another and exert their political will. As Norshahril mentioned, student activists in both organizations put pressure on politicians and policymakers through street demonstrations, and they have campaigned for certain parties during elections. The important point for me, however, is that the students understood politics as being not simply about influencing the political elites or seizing the state. Politics, for them, is also about transforming everyday behaviour—how they act with one another, how they move about in the world, what they consume, etc.—to cultivate particular understandings of ethics, morality and justice. The students would teach one another about ‘correct’ behaviour in spaces like study circles, routine organizational meetings and day-to-day interactions. It is in these quotidian and less-than-spectacular arenas, I suggest, that the future of the nation is charted.

As the student activists occupied autodidactic spaces that were relatively free of adult authority, they could experiment with new and often non-mainstream religious interpretations and practices. This religious playfulness is also enabled by the new ideas, opportunities and challenges presented by the democratic context. I call this phenomenon improvisational Islam and am delighted that Pradana Boy saw resonances between it and what he referred to as hybrid Islam and internet Islam. One specific form of religious improvisation that caught my attention was how students were mixing Islamic beliefs and practices with the Western secular liberal ideals that had gained more currency in the new age of democracy—issues such as human rights, gender equality, transparency, citizenship and accountability. The conservative Islamists and the liberal Muslims may have found different liberal ideals useful for their respective projects and agendas, but neither could ignore the influence of Western modernity. I wrote about this mixing of ideas to make the point that Islam is a porous public. In recent years, scholars of Islam have argued that while Western secular liberals are informed by Enlightenment ideals of individual freedom, Muslims are guided by the authoritative scriptures and doctrines in their religion. Such work importantly shows that the standards and parameters set by Western modernity do not necessarily define how Muslims behave. I do worry, however, that this line of argumentation draws an overly stark divide between Islam and the secular liberal West, which is problematic given how often Westerners portray Muslims as the quintessential ‘other’ (see, for example, the European restrictions on Muslim immigration and the hijab). My work, therefore, seeks to dissolve the stark binaries between these worlds.

I am intrigued by Pradana Boy’s observations that Indonesians are becoming more attached to religion than ever before and gradually transforming the nation into what he described as a post-secular society. I think he is correct, but some refinement to the argument is necessary. From my point of view, the increasing ubiquity of religion in Indonesia has occurred alongside the destruction brought about by the burning of rainforests, wage inequality and plastic pollution, all

of which can be understood as symptoms of neoliberal capitalism. How might these different trends intersect? My fieldwork took place over a decade ago and does not directly address these recent developments; nonetheless, my book offers some useful insights. In the book, I noted how religious conservatives, in particular, have been influenced by neoliberalism, resulting in the incorporation of discourses such as self-help and entrepreneurship into their religious practices. This observation remains true today. For instance, religious conservatives are spearheading the demand for halal consumer items thereby boosting the expansion of the halal market in Indonesia as the country attempts to rival Malaysia's dominance in this sector. There are also so many religiously conservative influencers on social media today who not only promote virtuous lifestyles but also merchandise to aid in the attainment of piety.

Studies from other cultural contexts have indicated that neoliberalism goes hand-in-hand with political conservatism and authoritarian techniques of rule because restrictions on speech and action prevent the mounting of effective challenges to the concentration of wealth at the top, which is the aim of neoliberalism. Similar inquiries should be made about religious conservatism—for example, how might the actions of religious conservatives in Indonesia offer protections to neoliberalism? Questions should also be asked about religious progressives. They wish to challenge the small and big violence done in the name of religion, as my book details, but are they also concerned about the injustices that occur outside religion, such as the injuries of class? An investigation into this question will help us better understand what religious progressives want to accomplish—a task that Norshahril rightly regards as crucial.

While my book does not offer analyses of these newer trends, I hope that it has created openings for future research. The major themes of the book—namely, the entanglements between religion and secular modernity, the fierce debates that occur between different religious factions, and the role of youths as religious and political innovators—should remain central in our continuing attempts to understand Indonesia.

**Pradana Boy Zulian**

Department of Islamic Law, Faculty of Islamic Studies, University of Muhammadiyah Malang, 246 Tlogomas Street, Malang, East Java, Indonesia; email: pradana@umm.ac.id.

**Norshahril Saat**

ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Singapore 119614; email: norshahril\_saat@iseas.edu.sg.

**Nur Amali Ibrahim**

Yale-NUS College, 16 College Avenue West #01-220, Singapore 138527; email: nai@yale-nus.edu.sg.

## SUGGESTED CITATION STYLE

Pradana Boy Zulian, Norshahril Saat, and Nur Amali Ibrahim. “SOJOURN Symposium on *Improvisational Islam: Indonesian Youth in a Time of Possibility*”. *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 36, no. 2 (2021): 322–35.

## REFERENCES

- Kersten, Carool. 2015. *Islam in Indonesia: The Contest for Society, Ideas and Values*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat (PPIM) [Center for the Study of Islam and Society]. 2020. *Beragama di Dunia Maya: Media Sosial dan Pandangan Keagamaan di Indonesia* [Religion in the virtual world: Social media and religious perspectives in Indonesia]. Jakarta: Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University of Jakarta.
- Zulian, Pradana Boy. 2018. *Fatwa in Indonesia: An Analysis of Dominant Legal Ideas and Mode of Thought of Fatwa-Making Agencies and Their Implications in the Post–New Order Period*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.