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1

INTRODUCTION

Norshahril Saat, A'an Suryana, and Mohd Faizal Musa

Due to its strategic location, maritime Southeast Asia serves as an economic hub that connects the East and the West, with the Straits of Malacca serving as an important route for business access. Maritime Southeast Asia remains essential today, if not more significant, as the economies within the region continue to grow faster than many other regions in the world. Its strategic location and the advancement of its combined economy make the region a premiere meeting point, offline and online, for many people worldwide as more people look for investment opportunities and leisure activities in more prosperous Southeast Asia.

Apart from its economic and strategic positioning, maritime Southeast Asia is a significant area for analysis as the region also serves as a hub for the cross-pollination of ideas. During the Cold war period (1945–91), Southeast Asia became the battleground for the forces of neo-liberal capitalism and communism. But an equally interesting scope of scholarly interest is the development and exchange of religious ideas, particularly concerning Islam. Azra's (2004) study

The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia, among others, remain one of the most important contributions capturing the network of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern ideas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Maritime Southeast Asia is home to the largest Muslim society in the world, namely Indonesia. Eighty-nine per cent of its 281 million people are Muslims. However, the community is not homogenous, depending on where they live, and the extent to which they immerse cultural and ethnic influences into their religious life. Some would reckon that the country is also changing, from one that was referred to as the smiling face of Islam to one that is currently experiencing a conservative turn (Van Bruinessen 2013; Feillard and Madinier 2011); or a hotbed of political Islam and radicalism (Ayoob 2008).

Maritime Southeast Asia is also home to the relatively homogenous and traditional Islamic polity of Brunei Darussalam, which ties the concept of the monarchy to Islam and Malay culture. Based on its 2021 census, Brunei has a population of 333,600 citizens, 89 per cent of which are Malays (Department of Economic Planning and Statistics, Brunei 2023).

Though less homogenous due to its multicultural demography, modern-day Malaysia also combines Malay royalty and Islamic identity, and has a Muslim-majority population. 61.3 per cent of its 28 million population are Muslims, spreading across West and East Malaysia, though the majority reside in the former. Three states in maritime Southeast Asia—Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines—host sizeable Muslim minorities. Singapore, where 15 per cent of its 5.4 million population profess Islam, upholds secularism and multiculturalism as non-negotiable in the social contract, and the government's relationship with Muslims is generally peaceful.

Still, in Thailand and the Philippines, Muslims are well-concentrated in specific locations, often termed as the Deep South, far from the capital cities. There have been occasional occurrences of tension and some that witnessed violence between Muslims and the respective governments. Covering maritime Southeast Asia does not negate the fact that Muslims live as minorities in other Southeast Asian states too; there is a sizeable Muslim community in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar. While some are at peace with the government, others, such as in Myanmar, are not (i.e. the Rohingya crisis).

The Transmission of Islam: Emerging and Old Ideas

In the past, Islam was transmitted to Southeast Asia through, first, Middle Eastern *ulama* (religious scholars), preachers and missionaries; and second, Southeast Asian *ulama* who went to study in the Middle East and then disseminated either puritanical or reformist ideas of Islam to their students and people in their respective countries of origin (Burhanudin 2012, pp. 31–37). Nowadays, due to the advancement of Internet technology, the transmission of Islamic ideas in Southeast Asia is faster and more widespread as people in this increasingly prosperous region can quickly get access to the Internet due to the increase of their purchasing power. World Bank data shows that more and more people across the world—including in Southeast Asia—have been gaining increasing access to the Internet in the last few decades (World Bank 2021). For example, in Singapore, 71 per cent of the population used the Internet (through their computers and mobile phones) in 2011, and this number increased to 92 per cent in 2020. Malaysia experienced a similar increase in the same time period, from 61 per cent in 2011 to 97 per cent in 2020. In contrast, in Indonesia, the figure rose by five times from 12 per cent in 2011 to 62 per cent in 2021. This data thus underlines the crucial role that the Internet can play in the transmission of ideas.

The Internet has democratized the way Muslims interpret the tenets of Islam. To be sure, the *ulama* class no longer hold exclusive access to interpreting and disseminating Islamic ideas (Norshahril and Ahmad Najib 2021). In the past, religious transmission happened in classrooms, madrasahs, mosques, through the pulpits; in written form, through books, columns in newspapers, and newsletters. Today, even radio and television are considered anachronistic. Slowly, the televangelist era is making way for social media *imam* and *ustaz*. Even rituals commonly practised in Southeast Asia—such as communal prayers and recitation of the Qur'an—that once required face-to-face contact, are now conducted online. The lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digitization of Islamic rituals.

The democratization of the public sphere is fruitful for human civilization because it offers societies, including Muslims, access to a variety of ideas in Islam. Muslims can therefore make their own choices about which ideas suit them. At the same time, greater access

to the Internet or social media also means that these platforms can be used to promote religious moderation and tolerance for alternative ideas.

However, social media serves as a double-edged sword; it can either be beneficial or detrimental to social relations. On the other hand, the lack of surveillance and unmitigated use of Internet technology can bring harm to society. Many people, including Muslims, are trapped in social media algorithms and filter bubbles promoting dangerous ideas such as violent jihad, which are no longer spread only in physical religious classes or in remote battlefields in the Middle East. Social media is also being used to propagate hatred against particular religious groups, including religious minorities. It is also the culprit behind deep social polarization in Indonesia which is especially fanned by fake news. For example, the country suffered from deep social polarization ahead of the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections that pit Joko Widodo's supporters against his rival candidate, Prabowo Subianto. Additionally, Denny Januar Ali and Eriyanto (2021) found that the use (read: abuse) of Twitter hashtags on topics related to Joko Widodo's policy in handling the spread of COVID-19 divided the public into pro- and anti-Joko Widodo camps. In Malaysia, elections are no longer fought only on campaign trails and through grassroots machinery, but also on social media. Politicians continuously utilize online campaigns to respond to questions regarding policy positions. Furthermore, the online battle is no longer targeted only at the urban electorate, but rural voters too are increasingly integrated into politicking via social media. This was clearly the case in the last three General Elections (GE) in 2013, 2018, and 2022. For example, during GE15, the last election held in November 2022, some quarters used Tik Tok to promote exclusive ideas and used race and religion to fan fear among the electorate. The outcome was that parties that relied on religious ideas performed well.

This book thus dedicates a considerable amount of space to discuss the role of the Internet in the dissemination of ideas. Several chapters in this book highlight the critical role of the Internet in the dissemination of Islamic ideas, in particular the use of social media to either advance interpretations of Islamic ideas or to gain influence in the public sphere. These chapters cover topics on digital anti-Islamist activism, the online policing of the personal morality of celebrities,

the use of social media to enhance piety among urban Muslims, and its significance as a battleground for competing traditionalist ideas among Muslims.

When posed with the topic on the transmission of ideas in the contemporary world, it is natural to deal with social media, digitization, and the Internet. These issues are certainly relevant and trendy. However, a book on trends and trendsetters cannot escape discussing old ideas such as extremism and terrorism which may be deemed less fashionable to scholars. Although this is not the main focus of the book, some chapters will deal with such problems as terrorism and violence, and how and why some of them persist and take new forms. Nonetheless, the book will give more weightage to analysing extremism of the non-violent type and how progressive groups respond to it. The latter are usually ignored in contemporary scholarly work.

This book is a reflection of the authors' years of doing fieldwork and engaging with informants, activists, and ordinary people on the ground. Rather than relegating maritime Southeast Asia to the view that it is becoming a bastion of Salafism, Wahhabism, and terrorism, and is becoming more volatile and conservative, this book takes a more balanced approach. At the outset, the book argues that Southeast Asian Islamic discourse is not turning towards conservatism even though they are elements of this in some societies, like in other diverse regions. Instead, what is happening on the ground is that there is greater contestation of ideas and orientations between groups (Muslims and non-Muslims) and within groups (intra-Muslim). In the case of the latter, social, generational, and digital divides are pivotal elements driving the debates.

To extend the argument and to further showcase the complexity of Southeast Asia, chapters in this book illustrate how there are even clashes within organizations, and not just between them. This is to say that dominant organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah in Indonesia are not as homogenous as we might think. Equally so, the so-called Islamists of neighbouring Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei also manifest in different shades. Thus, one can no longer argue that competition in Southeast Asia is easily characterized as *between* progressives and conservatives, liberals and traditionalists, Wahhabis and Sufis, to name a few. Competition also exists *within* these categories. The Internet and social media

provide platforms that accentuate and amplify these contestations, as groups and individuals compete for foothold in the already saturated religious market.

Objectives of this Book

This edited volume examines the evolution and transmission of emerging ideas on Islam in maritime Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei. Chapters in this book broadly ask the following questions: What are the forces/trends driving extremism in Southeast Asia? How does the rapidly changing political situation in these countries affect social cohesion? To what extent are Muslim extremist and segregationist ideologies becoming more mainstream? How are certain groups/individuals using social media to transmit their ideas, and what impact does this have on Islamic discourse? Are there competing discourses to counter extremism? If these discourses do exist, how are they transmitted?

In addressing these questions, this book has two objectives: (1) To map out emerging ideas from these countries; to know how these ideas are acquired and then transmitted, and to analyse which ones dominate and in which spheres; (2) to examine the transmitters of new trends, which include key personalities, groups or institutions to watch. Hence, when referring to trends or trendsetters, we refer to personalities and groups, discourse, and medium.

In their attempt to meet these objectives, the chapters are organized into three parts: Part I looks at continuing and emerging trends. It focuses on two countries with the largest Muslim populations in Southeast Asia—Indonesia and Malaysia. Komaruddin Hidayat (Chapter 2) covers the development and evolution of trends and actors in Indonesian Islam from the Dutch colonial period to the New Order period under President Suharto, and the contemporary period. Unlike many discussions of contemporary Indonesian Islam, Komaruddin examines the contestations between the conservatives and liberals and why the latter's influence in shaping the community must not be ignored. Chapter 3 by Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid covers another dimension of Malaysian Islam. While it looks at how Salafi-Jihadi ideology is critical to terrorist networks such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) which did have an impact in attracting Malaysians,

he shows how physical violence has not taken root even though Salafi ideas might be dominant. In all, the two chapters in this introductory part of the volume consistently present the role of ideas and how they are transmitted, the institutions they have sustained over the years, and how certain trends began, continued, and declined over the years as social, political, and economic circumstances changed. Although the ideologies discussed in the two countries are on the extreme poles if placed on a spectrum—progressives in Indonesia and radicals in Malaysia—this is not to give the impression that all is well in the former but in trouble in the latter. To be sure, the scholarship studying radicalism through the security lens in Indonesia is more developed compared to other parts of Southeast Asia.

Part II serves as a bridge between ideas and the complex world wide web (www) domain, before crossing into an in-depth discussion on digital and social media. It covers the role of state and organizations. Southeast Asia has always been characterized by strong and dominant states that shaped its miraculous economic progress in the post-colonial world. Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, for example, were characterized as Tiger economies during the authoritarian phase of the 1980s and 1990s. Islam in these countries revolved around competition between state (governments) and civil society. There were periods in which states could dictate what type of Islam defined governance, but as authoritarian rule weakened, civil society began to assert its role again, though competition between state and organizations continues. The chapters in this part look at several aspects, though the list and issues are not exhaustive. In Chapter 4, Mohd Faizal Musa looks at the role of the Malaysian civil service as both a supplier and receiver of trends. With globalization, Malaysia is not shielded from exclusivist discourse, and the state is not as homogeneous in promoting progressive and secular ideas, since Malaysia is multi-religious and multicultural. Yet, when implementing government policies, the civil servants can take matters into their own hands based on their Islamic worldview. This part also reckons that organizations are not static, and they ride on new mediums to assert their ideology and gain followership. In a way, Chapters 3 and 4 complement each other in demonstrating that while extremism is prevalent in Malaysia, the focus of analysis for Islam in the region must go beyond terrorism and non-violent extremism.

Rather than focusing on grassroots activism and institutions, other chapters in this part look at the online participation of state and organizations. Yuji Mizuno (Chapter 5) examines liberal Muslim actors and how they utilize social media to counter the Islamists. He discusses some of the opportunities and challenges facing liberal Muslims under the Joko Widodo government in their battle with their conservative counterparts amidst political polarization in the country. Still, on social media and digital platforms, Faris Ridzuan and Afra Alatas (Chapter 6) examine the role of key institutions in Singapore in utilizing data as part of surveillance capitalism. The chapter focuses on the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), a state institution, and the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (PERGAS), a non-governmental organization (NGO). As two key institutions that oversee and wield significant influence on the community's religious life, the use of data does not really solve social problems or alleviate regressive orientations, but reinforces traditionalism and a neo-liberal ideology. In Chapter 7, A'an Suryana further deconstructs the perception that organizations are homogenous entities, and illustrates how within one organization, there are forces which have usurped external trends and propagated them to their respective camps and supporters. A'an divides the contestation in NU between the progressives and conservatives. The conservatives, which are represented by NU Garis Lurus camp, have already established a firm grip online, but to challenge the group, the progressives, in the form of NU Garis Lucu camp, use humour to appeal to their younger followers and are deemed as promoting "cool" Islam.

Part III covers a new dimension of trendsetters, namely individuals. Online and digital platforms have challenged the role of states and NGOs but allow individuals to act on their own accord. Individual behaviour accounts for prevailing social responses and religious orientations in society. Sharifah Nurul Huda Alkaff (Chapter 8) examines how netizens are heavily involved in moral policing online. She compares how female celebrities and influencers in Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia are subject to constant moral policing, and individuals are prepared to shame celebrities publicly, demonstrating conservative and exclusivist viewpoints. Interestingly, she shows how the Qur'anic verse "*amar maaruf nahi mungkar*" (promoting good and preventing evil) is used to legitimize actions that are against the

basic principles of human rights, privacy, and freedom of expression. In Chapter 9, Andina Dwifatma provides another angle of prevalent Indonesian netizen behaviour. She discusses web-based series on YouTube and how they are popular among Indonesians, appealing to topics that cover matchmaking, family life, and career. Analysing the *Cinta Subuh* (Love at Dawn) series, she shares new forms of mediatized piety that surface the themes of self-development, ritualism, and halal lifestyle. In Chapter 10, Norshahril Saat examines new trends of individual religious preachers in Singapore. Legitimized by the state through licensing as "official preachers", which originally was intended to tackle radicalism and terrorism, these influential preachers promote religiosity that does not contribute to critical thinking and progressive Islam. Rather, there is a constant harping on issues related to spirituality and self-help. There are also instances where these state-endorsed religious elites promote anti-intellectual ideas in the form of irrationalism and magic, which are not in sync with modern scientific inquiry.

Book's Limitations

Examining emerging and old ideas about Islam in this region is a complex endeavour. With this complexity in mind, the editors of this volume declare at the outset the limitations of compiling a book on Southeast Asian Islam and Muslim such as this one. Even though this book focuses on maritime Southeast Asia, there are countries or cases that have not been excluded. The best way to read this book is to regard the chapters as snapshots of key episodes and incidences that can provide a gateway for further introspection and study. The chapters included in this volume do not necessarily regard these issues as the most pressing in Southeast Asia, and the editors do not discount the urgency of other issues. To be sure, studying Islam in Southeast Asia in totality requires multiple volumes, as the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute has previously compiled.

Critics of this volume can easily point out the gaps and countries that have not been included in this volume. For example, Thailand, the Philippines, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos are excluded. This is not to deny developments in these countries which are related to Islam and politics, and the use of the Internet to promote piety

and religiosity. While these are important, space constraints do not permit inclusion of these perspectives. Moreover, the findings and analysis of this volume can draw comparisons with other cases in the region.

Even for the countries included in this book, not all angles have been explored, such as the role of Islamic education in influencing religious behaviour; external influencers from the Middle East, United States, Asia Pacific; and cross-state interactions in the region. These are issues that the editors plan to expand on going forward, as the topic on trendsetters is not only a developing area, but is continuously evolving. We recommend that readers read this edited volume in tandem with previous publications to reflect on continuity and changes in the region.

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