

Islam & Civil Society

in Southeast Asia

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Preface

This volume is the result of a two-day closed intensive seminar and a half-day open symposium entitled “Islam and Civil Society: Messages from Southeast Asia”, held on 5–7 November 1999 in Japan, sponsored by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. Ten paper-presenters from five countries of Southeast Asia participated in the seminar, joined by ten commentators from Japan. In the open symposium, more than one hundred individuals — scholars, graduate students, activists from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and staff of non-political organizations (NPOs), business and media people, and government officials – were present.

The Sasakawa Peace Foundation planned the conference and commissioned the project to me as general co-ordinator. The Foundation also sought the co-operation of Professor Nurcholish Madjid, Rector of Paramadina Mulya University, Indonesia, as another general co-ordinator. In preparation for the conference, I visited all ten countries in Southeast Asia for a preliminary survey and consultation.

In July 1999, I set out for the first half of my journey and made contact with the following people: Dato Michael Mastura in the Philippines; Dr Iik Arifin Mansurnoor of the Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) and a number of his colleagues at UBD in Brunei; in Singapore, Mr Zainal Abidin Rasheed (Ministry of Foreign Affairs/MENDAKI), Dr Sharon Siddique, and Dr Syed Farid Alatas and his colleagues at the National University of Singapore; and in Malaysia, Prof. Mohd. Kamal Hassan, Rector of the International Islamic University of Malaysia, Prof. Dato’ Osman Bakar, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Malaya, Dr Dato’ Ismail bin Ibrahim, Director of the Institute of Islamic Understanding of Malaysia (IKIM) and his colleagues, amongst others.

On my return, I stopped over in Jakarta and consulted with K. H. Abdurrahman Wahid (then General Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama and now fourth President of the Republic of Indonesia), Prof. Syafi’i Ma’arif (then Acting General Chairman of the Muhammadiyah), Prof. Malik Fadjar (then Minister for Religious Affairs), and some others concerning Indonesian representation to the conference. I also had a discussion with Nurcholish Madjid to finalize the list of delegates from island Southeast Asia.

In August 1999, I left Japan again for five countries in mainland Southeast Asia. In Thailand, I talked to Dr Chaiwat Satha-Anand of

Thammasat University and some others, and then visited Myanmar. In Myanmar, I met, among other people, Mr U Thein, President of the Islamic Religious Affairs Council of Myanmar, with whom I was already acquainted, and obtained follow-up information on the position of Muslim communities in the country. I then proceeded to Vietnam, where I was assisted by Mr Phu Van Han, a researcher on the Champa-Melayu culture at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Institute of Social Sciences, Ho Chi Minh City. I travelled next to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where the Foreign Ministry welcomed me (the Ambassador of Cambodia in Tokyo, His Excellency Mr Ing Kieth, had kindly notified the Ministry of my visit). Accordingly, I was able to see a number of Muslim leaders including Mr Tol Lah, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Youth and Culture, and several MPs including Mr Math Ly, President of the Cambodian Islamic Association. Through the Cambodian contact, I was able to meet Mr Keu Seu and Mr Yahya Ishak, President and Vice-President respectively, of the Lao Muslim Association in Vientiane, Laos, where I made the last stop of my journey.

On the basis of my report on the field trips, the Foundation decided to invite ten individuals from five countries as overseas participants for the conference in Japan. Although I was involved in the decision-making, I do not dare claim to be comprehensive or balanced in my choice of participants since there are many obvious gaps. It is regrettable indeed that delegations from Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam were left out this time primarily because of budgetary limitations. At the same time, I expect that readers who are familiar with Muslim Southeast Asia will agree with us that the line-up of the overseas participants for the purpose of listening to the representative voices of Muslim intellectuals from contemporary Southeast Asia was in itself no small achievement.

Ten Japanese participants were invited to respond as commentators. Some of them already had firsthand knowledge of Islam in Southeast Asia through their respective fieldwork, like Tokoro Ikuya (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies) who had worked on the Philippines, Kaneko Yoshiaki (Matsuzaka University) on Brunei, Singapore, and Malaysia, and Nakamura Hisako (Bunkyo University) as well as Miichi Ken (Kobe University) on Indonesia. Some were already familiar with Islam in other parts of the Islamic world, like Nakanishi Hisae (Nagoya University) on Iran and Nejima Susumu (National Museum of Ethnology) on Pakistan. The remaining two, Shuto Motoko (Komazawa University) and Takeda Isami (Dokkyo University), however, had no intimate knowledge of Islam but had a strong regional studies background and knowledge of Southeast

Asia. Among the participants from Japan's side, Omar Farouk Bajunid (Hiroshima City University) was in the unique position of representing both Southeast Asian Muslim intellectuals and Japanese academia.

I believe that the occasion was a significant one of fresh intellectual learning for most of the Japanese scholars and members of the audience. Many of them heard for the first time directly from responsible Islamic intellectuals that "Islam and democracy can be compatible and complementary, and Muslim civil society is enhancing the relationship". In addition, the occasion facilitated actual contact of civil society activists for future co-operation between Japan and Southeast Asia. It was also an opportunity for reciprocal learning among Muslim participants.

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July 2000*