



## Rising Islamic conservatism in Indonesia: Islamic groups and identity politics

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**Rising Islamic conservatism in Indonesia: Islamic groups and identity politics,** edited by Leonard C. Sebastian, Syafiq Hasyim and Alexander R. Arifianto, London and New York, Routledge, 2021, xvi + 230 pp., £120.00 (cloth), ISBN: 978-0-367-81941-5

Following the fall of the New Order administration (1966–1998), Indonesia's socio-political circumstances were marked by lively and rowdy dynamics of democratization. Today, however, the country has also been severely affected by democratic regression (Aspinall et al. 2020), the shift to greater illiberalism (Bourchier 2015) and the rise of religious nationalism that predisposes the decline of the quality of democracy (Bourchier 2019).

The weakness of civil society, the frequent occurrence of ethnic and religious-nuanced violence, and the prevalence of corruption, clientelism, populism and religious conservatism are some of the crucial factors that disrupt the development of democracy in Indonesia. The large number and strong influence of the supporters of populism and religious conservatism have made some observers categorize Indonesia as a religiously conservative country (van Bruinessen 2013). One of the critical turning points that exacerbated the situation was a series of street protests by hardline Islamist groups in 2016–2017, a movement known as Aksi Bela Islam (action to defend Islam/ABI). These took place during the Jakarta gubernatorial election that resulted in the defeat of the incumbent governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (known as Ahok), who was an ethnic Chinese and a Christian. Such conditions seem to challenge the views of some earlier observers, such as Robert Hefner (2000) and Mirjam Künkler and Alfred Stepan (2013), who have praised Islam in Indonesia as a religion that contributes greatly to the development of pluralism, tolerance and religious freedom.

This edited volume presents notes from the field about the rise of Islamic conservatism in Indonesia, which is in stark contrast with the values of pluralism, tolerance and religious freedom. The main argument of this volume is that the rise of Islamic conservatism presents a strong challenge for Indonesia as a multi-religious country, and it has a negative impact on the country's social, cultural and political situation. The contributors are concerned that Islamic conservatism is alienating Indonesia from religious inclusion, and instead bringing it closer to religious exclusion. In addition, the authors emphasize that there is an ongoing movement to signify religious boundaries and reject those who do not conform to certain religious identities that have been established by supporters of Islamic conservatism. For example, there are certain Sunni Muslim groups who continue to persecute Muslim minority groups, such as the Ahmadiyah and the Shia, who are considered deviant from Islam or even infidels (2).

In Chapter 2, Burhanuddin Muhtadi and Rizka Halida show how certain socio-psychological factors support the rise of radical Islamist groups in Indonesia. They find strong evidence that social identity and political-economic grievances prompt Indonesian Muslims to identify or support conservative Islamic groups. Dadi Darmadi investigates the impact of religious orthodoxy at the local level in Chapter 3. He conducted his investigations in Jakarta, Medan, Surabaya, Mataram and Pontianak. Specifically, he discusses the rise of Islamic conservatism by looking at how mainstream Islamic groups have monopolized Islamic narratives at the regional level.

Three authors, Irman Lanti, Akim, and Windy Dermawan (Chapter 4), observe the growth of Islamic conservatism in West Java, an area where the phenomenon has steadily increased in the last three decades. Ahmad Najib Burhani (Chapter 5) describes Muhammadiyah's position on three controversial issues that emerged after ABI. He raises issues such as the prohibition of Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), the rise of the Indonesian Communist Party,

and the decision of the Constitutional Court against Believers of Faith (Penganut Kepercayaan). Burhani argues that despite accusations of conservatism, Muhammadiyah remains faithful to its goal as a social movement based on al-Ma'un (kindness) theology.

In Chapter 6, Asep Iqbal investigates the emergence of a conservative faction within the Nahdlatul Ulama (the NU) that has challenged its leadership, namely NU Garis Lurus (the Straight Path NU/NUGL). NUGL's mission is to return to what it considers the organization's original path, the 1926 Khittah. Iqbal believes that observers should pay attention to NUGL because its popularity continues to increase and its presence is very influential in society. In Chapter 7, Syafiq Hasyim analyzes the role of the discursive outputs of the Indonesian Council of Ulama in the context of ABI. Hasyim points out that Ma'ruf Amin, as chairman of Council, attempted to distance himself from ABI when it and the groups that supported it grew.

Another conservative Islamic organization, HTI, is discussed at length in Chapter 8. The author, Masdar Hilmy, argues that although HTI activities are banned throughout Indonesia, the state will not be able to eradicate the organization's caliphate ideology, because the existence of any ideology is created by opportunity structures that may still be present. In Chapter 9, Iqbal S. Ahnaf traces the footsteps of the Indonesian Mujahideen Council. He maintains that the organization seeks to profit from Indonesia's decentralization policy, implemented since 2001 to support various *sharia*-nuanced regional regulations throughout Indonesia.

Yon Mahmudi in Chapter 10 reveals how the conservative Islamic party, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), attempts to create a dialogue between traditionalist and revivalist factions within it. Mahmudi points out that although the PKS is often seen by observers as a conservative party that is steadfast in its stance, in fact, there are variants within the party that show a more complex picture of where the party actually stands. Andar Nubowo examines Wahdah Islamiyah in South Sulawesi in Chapter 11. He points out that fringe Islamic movements such as Wahdah Islamiyah have played an important role in the rise of conservative Islam in Indonesia. Nubowo argues that these movements can grow rapidly because they combine the puritanical ideology of Salafism and a pragmatic approach in the socio-economic and local political fields.

Finally, Najib Kailani presents an interesting opinion in Chapter 12, which differs from those of the other contributors. He contends that Islamic conservatism, which is usually considered as an element of opposition to Western values such as the free market, is actually a complement to these foreign values, and in turn it encourages the emergence of an 'Islamic market'. Kailani emphasizes that Islamic conservatism does not always mean growing intolerance or the desire to establish an Islamic state. On the other hand, it can also be used to encourage middle-class Muslims to seek wealth and adopt a culture of materialism.

In general, the range of topics in each chapter is diverse and fascinating. However, with the exception of only a few chapters, readers may be surprised that, firstly, this book does not pay much attention to areas outside Java. Secondly, readers will also realize that none of the basic arguments are maintained coherently between the chapters. Each chapter is the result of research with its own arguments, topics and approaches, and while these provide compelling data and their discussions demonstrate a deep understanding, there are few common threads to unite the volume. Thirdly, a theoretical discussion chapter would have improved internal coherence and more importantly, contributed to the academic debate on the concepts and application of Islamic conservatism in Indonesia, which has indeed steadily strengthened in the last two decades. This might, for example, provide a different response to what Martin van Bruinessen (2013) described eight years ago about the 'conservative turn' in Indonesia.

Apart from the above weaknesses, this book overall offers important findings and brilliant analysis in describing the rise of Islamic conservatism in Indonesia. It presents the main issues that are of concern to the observers of religious political movements and Islamic identity in Indonesia. Although this book cannot be considered to be a suitable work for undergraduate students, it is, in fact, ideal for graduate students and certainly scholars of Islamic studies, politics, sociology and anthropology.

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**Uneasy military encounters: the imperial politics of counterinsurgency in southern Thailand**, by Ruth Streicher, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2020, 186 pp., \$25.95 (paperback), ISBN 9781501751332

The violence in southern Thailand's troubled border provinces has been the subject of numerous books, articles and reports by governments and NGOs, by both Thai and international researchers. In 2010–2011, Ruth Streicher spent ten months in the region (plus some later follow-up stays), studying not so much the insurgency itself, but the counter insurgency operations and the security personnel charged to carry them out. The result is a political ethnography which applies perspectives from postcolonial, Marxist, poststructuralist and feminist theory to the conflict in the deep south. This short book draws on over 100 interviews with 'security personnel, locals and experts including journalists, activists, villagers, academics, and high school students' (14). Apart from the book's theoretical aims, there is much new and interesting empirical data from the author's fieldwork in the region.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first looks at how the Thai authorities 'police' the history of the south. It includes an analysis of a military handbook about the deep south