

Islamic Politics in Southeast Asia: A Critical Reassessment

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Abstract

The article argues for the utility of infusing the literature on Islamic politics in Southeast Asia with insights that may be gained from the literature on Islamic politics in North Africa and the Middle East. It suggests that such infusion, particularly of more explicitly historical sociology and political economy concerns, could reinvigorate the study of Islamic politics in Southeast Asia, which has been mostly dominated by cultural politics approaches and a concern for issues of doctrinal interpretation. Though this sort of literature has a rich and established tradition, it has lately succumbed to a more superficial security-oriented approach that has grown in influence since the advent of the War on Terror, in which Southeast Asia supposedly acts as a second front. Ironically, security-oriented analysts draw much of the material for their observations about Islamic ‘moderation’ and ‘radicalism’ from cultural politics analyses of Southeast Asian Islamic politics. Analyses based on historical sociology and political economy may provide alternative ways of understanding the evolution of Islamic politics in Southeast Asia by integrating such matters as post-colonial state development, Cold War era conflicts and the transforming effects of capitalist development on its social bases.

KEYWORDS: Islamic Politics, Southeast Asia, North Africa, Middle East, Political Economy, Historical Sociology

ISLAM AND POLITICS

IN A BOOK ON the politics of religious violence in Indonesia, Sidel (2006: xi) lamented a literature largely devoid of a deep appreciation of the sociological and historical dimensions of the issues at hand. His complaint could be extended to the literature pertaining to religion – particularly Islam – and politics more generally and to the broader Southeast Asian region.

I would add, however, that the literature on Islam and politics in Southeast Asia has been equally bereft of potentially important political economy considerations – especially the sort that has proven very useful for analysis of North Africa and the Middle East since the 1980s (Ayubi 1995; Colas 2004; Halliday 2004; Lubeck 1998; Skocpol 1982). Whilst a voluminous literature exists, not surprisingly on Indonesia (Barton 2004; Bush 2008; Fealy 2004; Hefner 2000; Liddle 1996; amongst

others) and Malaysia (Mutalib 1990; Nagata 1984; Othman 2003; Roff 1988; amongst others), there is only scant evidence of political economy concerns depicted in the body of work at our disposal (Kessler 1978, being one major exception).

It is suggested here that infusing the literature on Islam and politics in South-east Asia with historical sociology and political economy considerations would be highly beneficial in comprehending longer-term and fundamental processes of social change that have helped to forge the character of Islamic politics in the region, including the much publicised appearance of radical or extremist tendencies. Though I base this assertion primarily on the case of Indonesia, I contend that a broadly similar kind of infusion into the analysis of other Southeast Asian cases would be highly advantageous. It could be especially useful to avoid the pitfalls of the prevalent and alarmist security-oriented literature on Islam (see the critique in Sidel 2007) and the related tendency of categorising Muslims into dichotomous 'good' (moderate) and 'bad' (radical) types (see the critique in Mamdani 2002) – largely on the basis of current Western geopolitical interests and concerns. The failure to avoid such a pitfall has allowed security-oriented analyses to lately dominate the study of Islamic politics in the region and to practically subsume it under the study of terrorism, in spite of a presence of a longer tradition of studies of religion and politics that are based on profound knowledge of the histories, cultures and societies in question.

This simple dichotomy is clearly inadequate to address the fact that Islamic politics, including its radical manifestations, is very diverse and complex in make-up and in the strategies that are employed by representative social agents. For example, Indonesia displays large mass-based organisations that traditionally have been dominated by interests of the rural and urban petty bourgeoisie and which have been historically open to accommodation with secular state authority. These have been fairly comfortable living with electoral democracy (whether in the 1950s or post-1998) as well as centralised authoritarianism. Since the downfall of Suharto, a range of new Islamic parties have emerged, including the most successful, the Justice and Prosperity Party (PKS), which is largely underpinned by sections of the educated urban middle class emerging out of the modernisation process. However, a range of organisations that combine under- and above ground activities, from new mass associations to paramilitary groups have also emerged, and some of these have been more obdurate about the desirability of an Islamic state and rule by Sharia. Such organisations have been more openly antagonistic as well, not surprisingly, toward democratic ideas and practices. In addition, a large body of evidence exists – well publicised in the works of said security experts – on the operations of small, shadowy cells of terrorists who would achieve the aim of creating an Islamic state through the outright use of violence, as suggested by intermittent but tragic episodes of bombing in Indonesia.

On the other hand, also present are small pockets of Muslim 'liberal' intellectuals who gear their activities toward demonstrating the veracity of the exact opposite notion: the fundamental suitability of Islamic precepts with modern

forms of democracy and the market economy. The main representative of this is the comparatively tiny but celebrated Liberal Islamic Network (JIL), largely comprising younger intellectuals based in Jakarta, media-savvy and able to make their views better known to the general public. To add to this melange, a smattering of student and Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) activists – mainly based in Central Java – have for some time assumed the basic compatibility of Islamic precepts and socialist ideals or even notions of Marxist-inspired class struggle (e.g. Prasetyo 2003). Their activities could be understood as representing an attempt to reassert the long-dead tradition of the Muslim-as-Communist, which was once fairly thriving (i.e. during the days of Haji Misbach in the Netherlands East Indies in the 1910 and 1920s) but which is virtually extinct today. Such a tradition, it is often forgotten – because of the obsession with all things racial in Malaysia (and Singapore) today – also existed to a more limited extent in the Malayan Peninsula when Malay Muslims contributed to the armed anti-colonial struggles of an ethnic Chinese-dominated Communist Party (Abdullah 2005; Maidin 2005). How do we force such sociological and historical diversity into a simple ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ dichotomy?

Going beyond this dichotomy, an approach informed by the insights of historical sociology and political economy would contribute especially to understanding the evolution of Islamic politics as the product of the tensions and contradictions emerging from societies firmly embedded in the modern, globalised world. These tensions and contradictions can rarely be separated from contests over such resources and power, and therefore cannot be fully understood by, for example, delving strictly into doctrinal issues.¹ Moreover, such insights could provide a basis for understanding the forging of Islamic politics as a process inextricably linked with a range of salient factors that could otherwise be relegated to the background of analysis. Among these are the outcomes of Cold War-era social conflicts on present-day constellations of power and interest, including the elimination of Leftist political tendencies (in which Islamic political forces were typically involved), the fluctuating relationship between Islam and the state over time, as well as the shifting social bases of Islamic politics resulting from socio-economic transformations related, in many cases, to the advance of market capitalism. I propose that addressing these issues would in turn better help to answer key questions such as why radically exclusivist forms of Islamic politics have become lately more noticeable in the region.

As a corollary, I would also strongly suggest that it is insufficient to dwell on external influences such as Al Qaeda interventions in Southeast Asia or Wahhabi financial support to explain the character of Islamic politics generally in the region

¹In many ways, the position is one which is similar to that elaborated by Rodinson (1966, 2007) in his classic work which argued that capitalist underdevelopment in the Muslim Arab world had little to do with Islamic doctrinal issues but could be explained by a host of historical and sociological reasons.

and the emergence of more radical or extremist tendencies. This is not to say that such interventions do not take place or that this financial support does not exist. However, given the internal diversity within Islamic communities in the Southeast Asian cases, and long histories of cross-fertilization across regions in matters of doctrine and beliefs, it is hard to sustain the idea that there is ‘something’ that is somehow ‘authentically’ Southeast Asian and which is being ‘corrupted’ by malicious ‘outside’ influences, wherever their origins ultimately lie.

It should also be obvious that in Muslim majority countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, some of the specific issues concerned have been of a qualitatively different sort than in countries like Thailand and the Philippines. In Malaysia and Indonesia one must pay closer attention to the way that religious social conflicts are often embedded in contests over the distribution of power and resources as state power has evolved over time and as national economies have become increasingly engaged with globalisation processes. It is useful, particularly in the Indonesian case, to examine the outcomes of social upheavals taking place in the Cold War context, during which Leftist distributional coalitions were crushed and therefore were largely absent from the political mainstream during subsequent periods of rapid industrialisation and new class transformations. Issues of resource distribution and Cold War-era conflicts cannot be extricated completely from the cases of the Philippines (e.g. Gutierrez 1995) and Thailand either. But struggles here which are often (problematically) understood as being separatist in nature cannot be explained by referring solely to the rise of Islamic political aspirations either. In an empirically rich recent study, McCargo (2008), for example, observes that ‘insurgents’ in Southern Thailand rarely think in terms of a real separatist project and, moreover, can hardly be considered puritanically Salafi or Wahhabi in their orientation (given their inclination toward forms of Malay mysticism). In a work on the Philippines characterised by broad historical concerns, Abinales (2010) dismisses the activities of present-day Abu Sayaff guerrillas as having more to do with ‘gangsterism’ than with religious or separatist struggle, and that of older organisations as persistently having to do with inter-elite rivalry within the putative Bangsamoro than any well-developed vision of an independent republic based on Islam.

I hope it goes without saying that all of this is put forward not to deny the presence of radical tendencies within Islamic politics in Southeast Asia today, but to emphasize how it is a phenomenon that, more than ever, requires new ‘angles’ of analysis. In the following section, an overview of the central issues that would need to be addressed through such new angles is given, though necessarily in rather broad strokes and in a non-exhaustive manner.

SOME CENTRAL ISSUES

Concerns over Islamic radicalism have featured more prominently in the study of Southeast Asian politics and societies ever since the designation of Southeast Asia

as the 'second front' in the American 'war on terror' (Gershman 2002). While a significant proportion of the works produced on Islam and politics in the region has focused on Indonesia – the world's most populous Muslim majority nation – the literature has also concerned, in different ways, with 'trouble spots' or 'flashpoints' in the Philippines, Thailand, and to a lesser extent, with Malaysia. Singapore has not seriously featured in the literature although terror suspects have also been rounded up there over the years.

Of course, Indonesia has been the site of several high-profile bombings by militants in recent years. These events quickly led to concerns being raised about how the newly democratic country might grow into a veritable breeding ground for a regionally-organised terrorist network, the *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI) – believed to be connected to Al Qaeda – which aims to establish a modern-day Islamic caliphate in Southeast Asia through violent means (e.g. B. Singh 2007). Although such concerns notably abated during the first term of the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono presidency (2004–2009) – during which scores of terror suspects were apprehended by the Indonesian security forces – they were raised once more after further bombings occurred at two luxury hotels in the Indonesian capital city of Jakarta in mid-2009, which evidently involved JI-linked individuals from Indonesia and Malaysia.

As Hamilton-Hart (2005) suggests, much of this literature has been driven by an agenda established by security-oriented political scientists or international relations analysts with close links to intelligence organisations. Because of the kind of immediate priorities involved, complex and multifaceted social phenomena like the emergence of terrorism and religious-tinged violence have tended to be explained, rather too conveniently, by recourse to the actions of a few misguided extremists. With less than adequate consideration of socio-historical contexts, the security-oriented analysis is also characterised by attempts to offer policy solutions to safeguard regional political and economic stability (D. Singh 2009), and all too rarely accompanied by a well-developed understanding of roots of the problems needing to be resolved in the first place. Thus we know that there has been an emergence of Islamic radical movements – understood as a kind of politics that aims to establish states based on Islamic law (sometimes, but not always, with recourse to violence) – and which is generally hostile to the West and rejects democratic forms of governance. However, we do not really know why they have appeared or why in the forms that they have taken.

On the other hand, there is a long tradition of writing on Islamic politics, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia, which exhibits deep cultural knowledge and profound understanding of local contexts. Much different from the security-oriented literature, this sort of work delves deeply into the belief systems and practices of Muslims by offering richly textured descriptions of what are usually internally complex communities of believers. Unlike the security-oriented literature, the cultural politics analysis is also usually undertaken by country specialists with longer-term intellectual investment in, and not rarely, personal

attachment to, the societies on which they write. Not infrequently, the scholars are citizens of the country being analysed.

The recent encroachment of security-oriented analyses on more cultural politics types of analyses is recognised by Indonesia specialist Greg Fealy who recalls that policy-makers and security analysts used to be disinterested in Islamic politics outside of the Middle East (Fealy 2004: 136–137). The positive by-product of this past disinterest is that there is a large body of pre-existing, culturally well-informed literature on Southeast Asian politics and Islam that is relatively free of the crude *realpolitik* concerns of security studies and international relations.

However, a second central issue addressed by studying Southeast Asian Islam and politics through the novel angles suggested here would actually further ‘break’ this ‘isolation’; it would have the effect of including the region more unambiguously within broader global developments and processes that have affected the evolution of Islamic politics in other parts of the world. This connection could only be achieved now by simultaneously freeing the literature from the corrosive influence of security studies, which links Islam and politics in Southeast Asia in large part by analysing the export and import of religious zealots. It is suggested here that a more intellectually fruitful way of connecting Southeast Asian Islam and politics to the world would be to embark on comparative studies with the Middle East and North Africa in particular, utilising the insights obtained from more political economy-based or historical sociology-oriented analyses. Such comparative analyses with regions outside of Southeast Asia are likely to be most useful in studies of Islam and politics in the Muslim majority countries of Indonesia and Malaysia. Developing such comparative analyses would, at the very least, avoid the proliferation of ‘exceptionalist’ arguments that largely stand on dubious claims of cultural uniqueness.

Under pressure to utilise their expertise to grapple with issues relating to religious violence and terrorism, many scholars who are otherwise outside of the tradition of security studies have been engaged in similar, and ultimately not very meaningful, intellectual exercises to distinguish ‘moderate’ (i.e. ‘good’ or non-threatening) Muslims from radical (i.e. ‘bad’ and threatening) ones (e.g. Barton 2004). Though the distinction is frequently made as an attempt to countervail sometimes vocally expressed prejudices, especially in the West, against Muslims ‘in general’ (resulting in unflattering renderings of the psychological make-up of members of the *ummah*, or any number of allegedly inherent characteristics of the Islamic religion), the exercise has produced an unwitting convergence of emphases. In the worst of cases, expertise in the cultural politics of Southeast Asian Islam has mutated into something that lends additional credence to the world-view associated with some of the most conservative elements in policy-making circles in the West and elsewhere. A third central issue, therefore, would be to integrate the cultural knowledge residing in existing studies of Islam and politics in Southeast Asia into historical sociology and political

economy-oriented studies, rather than having it feed almost automatically into the security studies literature.

The remainder of this paper addresses some of the key features of the security oriented and cultural politics literature in relation to radical forms of Islamic politics in Southeast Asia. This is undertaken in separate, necessarily brief sections. The paper then sketches out the basics of an approach that, by design, incorporates considerations of historical sociology and political economy within analyses of the emergence and forms of Islamic politics, with the central issues described above in mind.

POLITICAL ISLAM AND THE SECURITY APPROACH

The study of radical Islamic politics has lately become increasingly the purview of security-oriented scholars, whether working broadly under the rubric of security studies in general, or what has become known in as ‘non-traditional’ security studies. The latter is, of course, concerned with actors that are not nation-states. Though non-traditional security studies, given its inter-disciplinary nature and diffuse concerns, should provide opportunities to countervail archaic hard-core realpolitik attitudes which still dominate the study of Southeast Asian international relations, such an influence has not been particularly evident insofar as the subject of radical Islamic politics is concerned. This is seen in the way that the subject has been subsumed under the study of terrorist activities (e.g. Ramakrishna and Tan 2004). Fealy, for example, comments that the study of Islamic politics has lately been inclined to view Islam “...through the prism of terrorism” (Fealy 2004: 137). There is no doubt that a strong material base for such a development exists: the study of Islam and terrorism, without much exaggeration, has become a profitable mini-industry for security-oriented scholars in the region and beyond.

Undoubtedly, there is a ‘good’ side to this development. A number of meticulously researched reports produced by the International Crisis Groups (ICG) (e.g. ICG 2002), primarily authored by former human rights campaigner Sidney Jones, have contributed much to our factual knowledge of terror networks in Indonesia and of intersections with groups in the broader region. These have been supplemented by useful reports on Thailand as well (e.g. ICG 2005).

However, the sort of virtues displayed in several ICG reports has not always been replicated elsewhere. Hence, Hamilton-Hart (2005), among many other watchers of Islamic politics in Southeast Asia, criticized the method of deriving and presenting facts with painful precision. Suspicious of the close proximity between some scholars and intelligence communities, she points out that too much of the material used in terrorism analysis derives simply from access to the intelligence material gathered by security agencies in the region and beyond. In a similar vein, Sidel (2007) reminds us that these security agencies

could only serve as a dubious source of information given their own vested interests.

The implication of these observations is that the conclusions arrived at by many security experts about Islam and politics are far from dependable. Indeed, relying on information on terrorism from intelligence agencies would be akin to studying, in a different time in world history, anti-colonial rebellions solely from the point of view of the intelligence services of colonial authorities – no matter how repugnant the terrorist activities in question are. Connors (2007), an expert on Thailand, echoes these same concerns, and derides terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna (e.g. 2002) for producing a host of factual errors in work which displays a lack of substantive knowledge of the societies being analysed.

Not surprisingly, the writings of the likes of Gunaratna (2002) and Abuza (2003a, 2003b, 2007) have been particularly influential because of the way that they fit so well with American (and in the region, Singaporean) government security concerns. Their audience is not limited to academia, for the impact of their work is considerable within the mainstream press and in policy-making circles. In the most basic sense, the analyses validate the idea of the presence of a highly organized, well developed and funded, global network of Islamist terrorists, which has Al Qaeda as its focal point and outfits such as Southeast Asia's Jemaah Islamiyah as satellites. But this simple and seductive idea has had the overall effect of supplanting deeper analysis of the historical and sociological reasons for the emergence of dissent that take up religious expressions.

Looking at Islamic politics through such a lens clearly results in a pronounced tendency to conveniently simplify the nature of Islamic politics by emphasising its supposed irrational and 'anti-modern' core. The historically specific context for the emergence of longstanding conflicts in Mindanao in the Philippines and in Southern Thailand gets brushed aside, for example, in favour of the single narrative of the rise of Islamic movements against the secular nation-state with the ultimate aim of establishing a world caliphate. Therefore, one can easily find news reports on the Abu Sayyaf that comment on its links with Jemaah Islamiyah or Al Qaeda, but it is harder to find many that present the group as being composed of ramshackle bands of extortionists and criminals rather than die-hard jihadis. There are of course exceptions to this general rule. Liow (2006), for example, offers a relatively nuanced elaboration of the origins what he considers to be separatist conflict in Mindanao and Southern Thailand, which tries to account for both historical domestic sources and external factors. But here too the analysis remains prone to reverting to such matters as the common Afghan Mujahidin experience and 9/11, and their influence on "Muslim worldviews" (Liow 2006: 2).

Moreover, many scholars have been complicit in depicting conflicts in the region which are not purely religious in nature as gaining momentum from the actions of religious zealots easily dismissed as dangerous social misfits. Since the threat is believed to emanate from the unpredictable actions of violent and

irrational fanatics, anxieties are constantly raised as well about the dire consequences of losing the war on terror (B. Singh 2007). This is because Islamic radicalism is often portrayed as an imminently overwhelming force, while the highly praised, traditional, Islamic ‘moderation’ in the region is depicted as being in retreat. It is Sidel (2007) again who is particularly critical of this sort of alarmist tone. He suggests instead that the violence committed by some of the social agents of political Islam in the region is indicative of failure and the continuing inability to mobilise broader public support behind the banner of Islam, rather than a reflection of the growing strength and confidence of those perpetrating the acts of violence.

It should be noted that underlying much of the security-oriented studies have been the assumptions of the horribly crude ‘Clash of Civilizations’ thesis (Huntington 1993). Culturally essentialist at the core, it holds that democracy is but the province of an apparently monolithic ‘Western’ culture, and that a threatening, equally monolithic ‘Islamic’ culture is among its main foes. In more sophisticated fashion, authors like Brumberg and Diamond (2003: ix) thus asked – obviously before the advent of the Arab Spring – why the Middle East has remained relatively untouched by the so-called “third wave of global democratization”, which was allegedly triggered worldwide in the 1970s and 1980s. An author contributing to their edited book answers the question by identifying a deeply-ingrained “Arab-Muslim” tradition of “oriental despotism” (Tibi 2003: 4). From here, it is but one step from generalising about the fundamental unsuitability of democracy with Islamic values (given the ‘Muslim’ component of the so-called tradition being identified). In the same book, though critical of the thesis of “Muslim exceptionalism” when it comes to democracy, Filaly-Ansari (2003: 202) remains rather patronising in his assertion that the major problem is the cultural one of getting Muslims to accept and understand the benefits of democracy.

The security-oriented literature on Islamic politics in Indonesia is especially instructive. In broad terms, the argument it makes on Indonesia goes something like this: that radical Islamic politics is the product of the *demise* of the strong, authoritarian New Order that left a vacuum well exploited by proponents of an Islamic state. These proponents are necessarily hostile toward Western culture, free markets, and democracy. Furthermore, the fear is that the proliferation of radical or violently militant versions of political Islam are being enabled by a politically fluid post-authoritarian environment, characterised by weak public institutions, problems of governmental legitimacy (Ramakrishna and Tan 2004), and persisting economic hardships. Though the argument has been mainly applied to Indonesia, it is easily extended to Thailand and the Philippines as well. Interestingly, the three countries concerned are usually considered to be the most democratic in Southeast Asia, raising the question of whether, beneath the talk of ‘democracy promotion’, a greater faith exists among security analysts in the kind of law and order created by state coercion.

Still, the question whether Islam is basically inimical with democracy, or democracy softens hard-line Islamism remains debatable. The position that Islamic radicalism in particular constitutes a fundamental threat to democracy – and markets – in the region would imply the necessity of utilising repressive policies. Hence Indonesia has been continually pressed to adopt draconian security laws which have long-existed in less democratic societies like Malaysia and Singapore. Correspondingly, the problem in the Philippines and Thailand is identified as that of weak state capacity, which should be rectified by strengthening the security apparatus of these countries (B. Singh 2007).

Given the prevalence of the ideas outlined above, one may be forgiven for thinking that all would be solved if we could just coerce some Muslims to enter the twenty-first century – stuck as they apparently are in ideas rooted in seventh century desert Arab society. However, rather than actors who are cut off from the modern world or who have developed an irrational ‘rage’ against it (Lewis 1990), proponents of Islamic radicalism have had their experiences and sensibilities profoundly shaped by life in societies that come replete with a host of social, economic, and political problems – and kinds of social conflicts – unquestionably associated with the modern globalised world.

Still, it seems easier to characterise advocates of Islamic theocracies as backward, if not pathologically irrational. Thus, Ramakrishna (2009) goes to great lengths to depict the psychological make-up of the jihadi, and attempts to explain why the route of perpetrating religious violence is ‘chosen’ by an individual. The implication, however, is to place the problem at hand outside of the domain of social analysis-proper, which necessarily focuses on the dynamics and mechanics of society, and into the realm of individual psychoses. The effect is to help reinforce the idea of an Islamic ‘Other’ – inherently different from the ‘normal’, ‘rational’ and ‘modern’. Moreover, as religion is taken as the sole defining element in the self-identities of individuals who hail from predominantly Muslim societies, certain essentialist, ‘re-orientalising’ tendencies observed by Al Azmeh (2003) emerge strongly in such analyses.

ISLAM, CULTURE, AND DEMOCRACY

Sometimes challenging, but often inadvertently reinforcing, the conclusions of security experts are a range of scholars (political scientists and sociologists, but also historians and anthropologists) of Islam who have a much greater and more sophisticated command of the history and culture of the diverse Islamic communities in the region. In the case of Indonesia, in particular, there has been a long tradition of scholarship – both Indonesian and foreign – that has at least implicitly supported the case for strengthening democratic tendencies which are accepted as being already present within the culture of Indonesia’s predominantly syncretic forms of Islam. In a recent work on Malaysia, the political

scientist Khoo (2006) has attempted to show the democratising potential of the Pan-Islamic Malaysian Party (PAS), a largely rural-based political party that is often dismissed as being archaic in its social outlook.

The anthropologist Hefner (2000), in particular, has been very influential in putting forward the idea of the possibility of a democratically-inclined Islamic civil society. A respected expert on Indonesian Islam, he has forcefully put forward the view of Islam as a potentially democratizing force, especially in the late New Order period of the dictator Suharto. However, he has had to be less sanguine more recently given the occurrence of numerous events that have been associated with the activities of Islamic political actors. Thus, Hefner has more frequently referred to violent and anti-democratic elements within Indonesian Islam in his later work (e.g. 2005). He has had to provide space to discussions of Muslim paramilitaries and other organizations of goons and thugs that are decidedly uncivil, and of course to address the terrorism issue.

Barton (2002), a long time scholar of the Nahdlatul Ulama (a major mass-based Muslim organisation in Indonesia widely championed as ‘moderate’), has been keen to highlight the politically liberalising effect of the organization’s mix of syncretism and attitude of relative political openness. Although he too has been led to engage with many of the a-historical and a-sociological pre-occupations of security analysts when he gets drawn into debates about moderates/liberals in relation to radicals/extremists within Indonesian Islam. Fealy, another well-established scholar of Indonesian Islam, looks at whether the decline of the authoritarian New Order gave impetus for the rise of Islamic radicalism Indonesia (2004), which is of course an obvious and valid question to ask. But there is a convergence here too with the agenda of debate set by security analysts when the relative decline of political violence associated with radical Islamic social agents is explained as being due simply to tougher policies pursued by the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono government. Such an explanation opens the door to those who yearn for the assurance of security through New Order-style authoritarianism. To be fair, in his work with others (Bubalo *et al.* 2008), Fealy has investigated more systematically the question of whether democracy has a moderating impact on ‘radical’ or ‘hard-line’ inclinations of elements of political Islam. The question remains, of course, as to why these radical social agents emerged in the first place.

One way of answering this question is through meticulous renderings of the battle of ideas between ‘moderates’ and ‘radicals’ in the Islamic community. However, as mentioned earlier, the sense that is frequently conveyed is that radicals are overwhelming the ‘good’ moderates in Indonesia and elsewhere (e.g. B. Singh 2007). This is because the influence of extremist or radical forms of Islamic politics is most often explained by quick reference to the importation of ideas and underground networks, whether of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, the Iranian Revolution, or of Saudi Arabian Wahhabism (where the aspect of financial aid also becomes prominent).

In a related development, there has also been a growth in studies explaining the nature of Islamic politics in relation to different interpretations of Islamic doctrine, or schools of Islamic jurisprudence, in Indonesia and Southeast Asia more broadly (e.g. Effendy 2003; see also Fealy and Hooker 2006). Means (2009: 1), for example, begins his comprehensive description of the present and historical circumstances of political Islam in the region by enjoining especially non-Muslim scholars, to “learn about the origins and basic doctrines of Islam.”

The battle of ideas and over religious interpretation are no doubt important – and schisms within Islamic communities on doctrinal issues that have always been around – are of course worthy of scrutiny. However, no less important (and less studied) are the shifts in social context that make possible the emergence of new social coalitions and agendas under the banner of Islam. These shifts provide the setting for the battle of ideas that occupy so many analysts. From this point of view, it is important to ask what kinds of social transformations have helped give rise to, for example, Islamic populist ideas that are aggressively opposed to secular authority while paradoxically seeking engagement with such secular issues as social injustice, corruption or abuse of power. However, such considerations of context – essentially historical-sociological and political-economic in their nature – are largely absent in the literature on Islamic politics in Southeast Asia.

This absence is not only noticeable in the literature on the Muslim majority Southeast Asian countries of Indonesia and Malaysia, but also that on the Philippines and Thailand. Here, we also see opportunities for convergences between ideas put forward by cultural politics scholars and those embedded in the tradition of security studies. One obvious point of convergence already noted is in the sheer weight given again to external influences – Wahhabi money, Al Qaeda networking, etc. – on the militancy of social agents uncritically portrayed as being Muslim separatists.² Thus, much attention is given to such matters as joint military training between Indonesian and Southern Philippines militants. But what issues drive these struggles, and how have these evolved over time and affected the strategies employed by social actors? It is not being argued here that security-oriented concerns such as the occurrence of joint military training should be excised from the analysis of Islam and politics in Southeast Asia, but that a fixation on them may become a major distraction from the task of understanding ultimately more decisive issues.

In the next section I try to provide the reasoning for adopting an approach that more fully accommodates analysis of historical sociological and political economy orientations within the study of Islam and politics in Southeast Asia.

²Taken to its logical conclusion, such a viewpoint leads to the one often found in official circles in Singapore, where state legitimacy relies on the ability to deliver economic goods but also in the claimed role of regulator of social interactions between ethnic and religious groups. In this mini-state, the argument often heard is that home-grown ‘militants’ have emerged due to the influence of radical clerics, mainly from Indonesia. Of course the implication is that there is nothing within Singapore society that would give rise to such militants if not for such outside influences.

While this is done largely by utilizing the case of Indonesia, the reasoning can easily be extended elsewhere. It should be pointed out that I am not suggesting that this approach should displace the cultural politics approach, which at its best can provide deeply nuanced and complex renderings of the belief systems of communities of believers, and how they may affect social action. However, I do suggest that cultural politics by itself relegates analysis of some potentially critical social processes too far into the background, and that by adopting some of the concerns traditionally associated with historical sociology and political economy, these may be placed more fruitfully at the centre of analysis. Such an exercise would be particularly useful to countervail the disproportionate influence enjoyed currently by security-oriented analyses in understandings of Islam and politics in Southeast Asia.

POLITICAL ISLAM AND CLASS AND STATE TRANSFORMATIONS

As stated earlier, I propose that the study of Islam and politics in Southeast Asia should begin to more seriously adopt some of the features that have characterised some of the literature on Islam and politics in the Middle East and North Africa, especially that which has given more credence to political economy and historical sociology. Some of this may help us to understand various aspects of Islamic politics in Southeast Asia in a number of new ways.

First, they signal the possibility of understanding radical expressions of Islamic politics as representing a particular kind of sociologically and historically specific populist response to the tensions and contradictions of the march of global market capitalism and the way that these can affect domestic processes of social transformations. Writing on the Maghreb, for example, Colas (2004) treats Islamic politics as a populist response to the problems associated with the contradictions of capitalist industrialisation, but more specifically in the phase of neo-liberal economic globalisation. In doing so, he notes how “class-based political movements...[have]...with a few notable exceptions...[in the region]...fared less well...than rival organisations built around broader, and vague, conceptions of the ‘the people’” (Colas 2004: 233). The latter are described as being cross-class in nature and defined against often vague domestic and external opponents.

In Algeria, Colas notes also that the years of the economically-liberalising Chedli Benjedid government (1979–1992) was associated with the rise of a so-called ‘political-financial mafia’ and “a new capitalist *nomenklatura* made up of state officials and employees” (Colas 2004: 237). These were all prone to develop opportunities for private capital accumulation in the context of declining living standards and worsening unemployment conditions. These circumstances helped to produce “a highly alienated generation of Algerians epitomised in the figure of the *hittist* [a term denoting ‘young urban men who prop up walls’]... [while] listlessly watching life passing them by” (Colas 2004: 237–238).

Similar to Colas, Lubeck (1998) shows that hostility quickly emerged toward austerity measures undertaken by the state in a myriad of particularly Middle Eastern and North African cases as the oil boom ended in the 1980s and pressures to adhere to the dictates of economic liberalisation became stronger. These typically involved acquiescence to structural adjustment and privatisation policies promoted by international development organisations that became perceived as being hostile to the interests of the poor. Such observations are noteworthy because where the state came to be increasingly absent from providing social services, Islamist movements found ground to develop organisations that delivered the social goods required especially by those experiencing new economic hardships. According to Lubeck, therefore, the urban poor in particular often became more reliant on the provision of basic goods by religious charities and organisations as state social agencies retreated due to reduced social expenditure stemming from neo-liberal structural adjustments (Lubeck 1998: 299). To what extent similar developments occurred in Southeast countries, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, still requires deeper empirical analysis.

In this context, it is not hard to imagine how an environment could emerge that induces religiously-oriented social and political activism that help forge new solidarities and self-identities, particularly among large numbers of young, mainly urban or peri-urban, people facing uncertain futures (Berman and Rose 2006: 13). These conceivably contributed to the development of certain kinds of populist responses to the contradictions of capitalism as experienced by marginalised populations of the now sprawling cities and towns of a number of Muslim societies, especially in the absence of Leftist political streams due to the outcomes of prior social conflicts. Additionally, for many of these societies, an earlier oil boom had already intensified rent-seeking behaviour among state-connected elites (Lubeck 1998: 296–297), thereby prefiguring the animosity later directed more strongly against rapacious state elites and their cronies in some societies.

Why the expression of social animosities and frustrations took on more distinctly Islamic characteristics constitutes a second object of analysis that is also addressed in some of the Middle Eastern and North African literature. Writing on the Middle East, Halperin (2005), for example, emphasises the contemporary political ramifications of fluctuations in state policies toward Islamic and Leftist social forces in the context of the Cold War. She traces state policies of selectively embracing the forces of political Islam to the Cold War-era campaign against Left-wing social re-distributional forces – and identifies their longer term consequences for social conflict in the post-Cold War environment.

Significantly, Halperin (2005) also emphasises how such anti-Left campaigns typically expanded into the suppression of a range of liberal, reformist and broadly progressive elements that might have formed a social base for democratisation. As a result, she asserts that the most long-lasting historical legacy of the Cold War is the lack of sufficiently organized Left, Centre or even moderate Right forces in most Middle Eastern societies that could be expected to act as

an engine of democratic change today. She sees few present-day channels, other than associated with political Islam, through which the economically marginalised can today articulate their interests and voice their discontent.

Such an observation is clearly relevant for the case of Indonesia, where the violent eradication of the Left in 1965/66 was carried out to make way for the rise of a stringently authoritarian and 'developmentalist' regime. This involved the violent destruction of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) – then the third largest in the world – and its related organisations. Though the carnage was orchestrated by the army, an array of Islamic organisations and paramilitaries also took part in them. In Indonesia too, the representatives of social or liberal reformist streams of politics were to suffer state authoritarianism initially directed against the Left as scores of intellectuals and students found themselves behind bars throughout the New Order. This authoritarian state – which was ideologically secular-nationalist – would become the driving force of a capitalist modernising project. Supported by aid from Western powers that were relieved that Indonesia did not fall to the Communists, and then assisted by windfall oil revenue, relative economic prosperity was produced though accompanied by rising social inequalities and rampant corruption. After the oil boom ended a strategy of selective economic liberalisation, backed by international development organisations, which heavily relied on export-led industrialisation, maintained high growth rates until the advent of the Asian Economic Crisis. Here a particularly rapacious *nomenclature* found new opportunities for private capital accumulation in the context of economic liberalisation policies – suggesting further affinities with the case studies of Lubeck and Colas.

Indonesia's experience with class transformations is also especially instructive. It was during the authoritarian New Order – emerging at the height of the Cold War in Southeast Asia – that the development of classes associated with capitalist transformations took place most distinctly. Various studies have noted that the emergence of a more self-confident bourgeoisie, urban middle classes, and a proletariat grew especially during the post-oil boom period characterised by a shift to export-led industrialisation (Hadiz 1997; Robison 1993). Here, as Sidel (2006) noted, a new downtrodden urban proletariat had emerged by the 1990s that could not be mobilised on the basis of class consciousness – given the absence of Leftist or even merely social democratic streams in Indonesian politics – but which was instead ready-made for mobilisation as part of an *ummah*.

In Malaysia too, rapid industrialisation took off in the 1970s. Here the Left – decimated during the Emergency and the early post-colonial period – had been mostly associated with the ethnic-Chinese dominated Malayan Communist Party. In this case, the multitude of young Malay Muslims who entered manufacturing jobs and descended upon the town and cities from the period of rapid industrialisation, arguably, had little recourse to class-based world-views (though see Kessler 1978 on the early PAS). Thus, the path was even more open here than

in Indonesia for the development of social solidarities and worldviews based on Islamic notions of social justice among a new generation of working class youths.

However, radical forms of Islamic populism are not just a surrogate for working class struggles, rather, they are more accurately depicted as the ideological product of cross class alliances of the kind referred to by Colas (2004), which commonly emerge when working class frustrations and anger are combined with the anxieties and stifled ambitions of other elements of society. Most important among these are sections of the new urban middle class that was the product of the same intensified social and economic change. When such change produces armies of educated lower middle class youth, but plunges them into uncertain labour markets, a contradiction easily emerges between growing aspirations and ambitions of individuals, and the reality of their long-lasting relative social marginality. This was clearly a factor in the emergence of the Arab Spring in early 2011.

Importantly, such middle class elements have no real access to liberal (or social democratic) forms of politics either, as a legacy too of Cold War-era conflict outcomes, and hence the way was open again for religion to provide the basis for understanding society and developing new world-views. From this point of view, it should be of little surprise that leading Islamic militants in Indonesia or Malaysia have often emerged from middle class, relatively well-educated backgrounds, as Ayubi (1993) had also found earlier in North African and Middle Eastern cases.

Thus, a third and related issue raised by some of the literature on the Middle East and North Africa is the importance of understanding the changing social base of Islamic politics. For example, in the Middle and North Africa, as well as in Indonesia and the Malayan Peninsula, Islamic politics had emerged during the colonial period as a feature that was firmly embedded within rural and urban elements of the petty bourgeoisie. Often anti-imperialist in its outlook, this petty bourgeoisie was nevertheless also threatened by Leftist projects of radical social redistribution. Furthermore, though marginalised during periods of economic nationalism statism, which typically gave rise to a powerful *nomenclatura*, political Islam rarely threatened to take over state power and was prone to accommodation or co-optation. The outstanding exception was of course the case of the AKP in Turkey, which has been in power since 2002 (e.g. Tuğal, 2009, Eligür 2010). There have been more recent exceptions since the Arab Spring, the most important being Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, whose Freedom and Justice Party won the first free elections, held in 2011–2012, following the fall of Mubarak, though the results were subsequently annulled. Another notable case is that of An Nahda in Tunisia, which is the dominant party in government after the fall of another Cold War dictator, Ben Ali. Importantly, though, the Muslim Brotherhood has been internally transformed by the fact that its social base has expanded to include sections of the educated urban middle class, formerly peripheralised and culturally Islamic parts of the

modern bourgeoisie as well as a huge urban lumpen-proletariat which has benefited from the organisation's well-run social and charitable activities.

Another aspect of the problem at hand which is suggested by the Middle Eastern and North African literature is the evolution of state power and its relationship with Islamic politics. Although the social agents of Islamic politics had often taken part in state-led efforts at staving off radical social redistribution agendas led by Leftist political streams, there is no shortage of examples of state repression of Islamic organisations across the Muslim world. In Indonesia, the main reason for this repression has been abundantly clear: after the destruction of the PKI, political Islam was the only social force capable of autonomous self-mobilisation. In other parts of Southeast Asia, meanwhile, such as southern Thailand and the southern Philippines, states have found it convenient to label regionally-based rebellions as being Islamist in their nature and aspirations, though the underlying historical and sociological triggers have been complex.

It should be mentioned that there was a great tendency to co-opt and Islamise civil society organisations in the Middle East and North Africa, largely in the context of lingering Leftist threats and intermittent anti-Left campaigns, such as in Egypt in the 1970s (thereby resuscitating the Muslim Brotherhood) and Tunisia in the 1980s. In Indonesia this was not necessary due to the wholesale decimation of the Left in the 1960s. Nevertheless, mass-based mainstream organisations like Muhammadiyah and especially Nahdlatul Ulama became pivots within the New Order corporatist system of rule. The exponents of radical Islamic projects emerging subsequently have by and large remained on the political and societal fringe,³ and their resort to violence and intimidation, could easily be seen as a sign of desperation rather than rising self-confidence, as Sidel has argued (2004).

In Malaysia, the state was, unlike in Indonesia, from its inception tasked formally with protecting the interests of Malays, who are in part defined by their adherence to the Islamic religion. Thus, there has been much greater room for the mobilisation of Islamic self-identities on behalf of the state, undercutting to some extent the potential for anti-secular state Islamist discourses, except again at the extreme fringes of society and politics. Interestingly, a contest appears to have ensued between the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and opposition Pan-Islamic Malaysian Party (PAS) about which has been the better representative Malay-Muslim interests, with the government insisting that it has been their guardian while presiding over the country's economic transformation and engagement with the globalised world. In this way, Islamic populist critiques of perceived social injustices have been undermined

³Notwithstanding the fact the many reported links, ironically, between sections of radical Islamic politics and the security apparatus (e.g. see Hasan 2006). Indeed, many of the most intimidating of the array of Islamic paramilitary forces that have become a feature of the Indonesian political landscape were initially activated in the context of attempts to save the presidency of Suharto's immediate successor, B.J. Habibie, from attacks by pro-democracy forces.

to a considerable degree, though they are not irrelevant. Outside of the cases of Indonesia and Malaysia, a host of intermediary factors would need to be considered when discussing the relationship between the state and exponents of Islamic politics. In the Philippines, shifting alliances between representatives of the central state, from at least the martial-law period of the Marcos era to the present-day and different sections of 'Moro' elites need to be scrutinised to discover relevant patterns of political inclusion and exclusion – and to understand the strategies employed in particular by the excluded. For the case of Thailand, few scholars would profess precise knowledge of how recent anti-state violence has been organised (and by whom). But similar questions about accommodations between the central state and local elites need to be asked, and why these seemed to have collapsed during the Thaksin years, apparently in unison with increasing exploitation of the natural resources of the South by the security forces of the state.

CONCLUSION

The discussion above has not been intended to provide an exhaustive survey of the literature on Islam and politics in Southeast Asia. Rather, the aim was to identify some aspects of its recent development and the main issues of controversy, and to sketch out elements of an agenda for future research. The security approach has been criticized for its hyper-alarmist predilections. Much of the cultural politics approach has been found wanting in providing a means by which to link its detailed analysis of behaviour and belief systems with more fundamental processes of social change that have to do with contests over power and resources as well as class and state transformations. Instead, what has been suggested for future research is a reconceptualization of Islam and politics in Southeast Asia. It is envisaged that this may be accomplished by more fully and adroitly incorporating the historical-sociological and political economy observations, as have been prominent in analyses of Islam and politics in the Middle East and North Africa. Homogenizing Islamic politics in Southeast Asia, by way of emphasizing links to Jemaah Islamiyah and Al Qaeda or Wahhabi ideology is intellectually misleading at best, and at worst, dangerous in its broader political ramifications.

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