Indonesia

Islamism in Indonesia: Politics in the emerging democracy
By BERNHARD PLATZDASCH
Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009. Pp. xxxvii, 411. Appendices, Bibliography, Index.
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This is a fine study of Islamic and Islamist politics in recent Indonesia, based on a Ph.D. thesis at the Australian National University that the author has updated. Bernhard Platzdasch's work rests upon an extensive range of sources in Indonesian and English as well as multiple interviews.

This is an informative and insightful account of national-level politics in Indonesia combined with a grasp of the wider Islamic and Islamist discourses. It provides details and intelligent analysis of the parties, leaders and ideologies found amongst the political organisations of the post-Soeharto era that may be seen as the legatees of the Masyumi Islamist party of the 1950s. These are mainly the Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, Partai Bulan Bintang and Partai Keadilan (Sejahtera), whose political literature Platzdasch has studied and many of whose national-level leaders he has interviewed. With its updating, the study extends to about 2005.

Platzdasch is appropriately critical of some previous scholarship on this area, which he believes has been influenced by 'liberal bias and binary conceptions'. The work of Robert Hefner, Greg Barton, William Liddle and Saiful Mujani in particular comes under criticism for having 'deemed Islamic politics as basically illegitimate' (p. 4). Platzdasch instead observes the political phenomena as they are – or, at least, as he sees them – and tries to make sense of what has been going on for the last several years.

The book reflects an understanding of the psychologies – and delusions – that operate on the Islamist side of Indonesian politics. He writes of the 'bitter history' of Islamist politics in Indonesia, the belief that, among others, the former colonial power, more recent secularists, Western-educated intellectuals, and all those under the power of an American–Christian–Zionist international conspiracy have stood in the way of Indonesians accepting their fundamentally Muslim identity and wish for an Islamic state. 'A recurrent pattern of Masyumi legatees was thus the exaggerated depiction of their potency and support in society, with the claim that the aspiration of the majority of Muslims was for the state to become active in enforcing *shari'ah*', he writes (p. 116).

Platzdasch's general argument is that, despite such ideas among the Masyumi legatees, 'expedient behaviour' and 'practical considerations' have in fact prevailed over doctrinaire ideologies. He argues that '*shari'ah* politics in early democratic Indonesia have been rather desultory and paradoxical' (p. 174) and that 'accommodation and compromise were central characteristics of Islamic politics in democratic Indonesia despite the large amount of anti-Christian and anti-Semitic rhetoric' (p. 295).

This is thus a significant, well-researched and intelligently argued contribution to the literature on Islam in recent Indonesia — a literature that has had more than its fair share of writing by poorly qualified 'experts'. There is, however, a limitation to

Platzdasch's work deriving from the political science paradigms within which he has researched, thought and written. His focus on national-level politics, parliamentary activities and electoral outcomes betrays wide knowledge but is also limiting. Despite the compromises, the modest electoral outcomes and the other general shortcomings of Islamist politics at national level, the evidence is overwhelming that Indonesian society has been undergoing a process of deepening Islamisation for nearly half a century. As a result, some of the categories used in political science – notably the distinction between Islamist and non-Islamist, secular or nationalist parties – have lost much of their meaning. In his 'postscript', Platzdasch recognises this (belatedly, one might suggest) and writes of a movement 'towards a pro-Islamic ideological centre', commenting that 'parties that were previously seen as "secular nationalist" could no longer be labelled as fully secular' (p. 332). Indeed so, but that means that the previous discussion in the book – for all of its indisputable merits – suffers from what seems to me to be a reductionist tendency in political science.

The author of this book and its publisher are to be congratulated on this fine contribution. But there is still more to be told of the story of Islam and Islamic politics in Indonesia.

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Islam and nation separatist rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia
By EDWARD ASPINALL
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It is difficult to write about this book without sounding over-enthusiastic. It is fluently and lucidly written, penetrating and sensitive in its analyses, having a lightness of touch which belies the closeness and care of its organisation. The occasional throwaway line 'But we are running ahead of ourselves' (pp. 107, 207) is delightfully disarming. It is about an important topic — the place of Islam in the self-identification of an Indonesian ethnic community which almost became a breakaway nation state. It presents the role of a charismatic personality in creating and marketing the myth of this state, and supplying it with a justifying narrative. Finally, it gives an account of the struggle against the Indonesian central government that ensued, and ultimately its failure. All in all it is a valuable case study for social scientists concerned with the tensions in ethnically plural states between individual self-identifying communities, and the central government of the state of which they are part.

Aceh is strategically situated at the northern tip of Sumatra. Historically it represented the gateway between the island world of Southeast Asia and the India Ocean and beyond. It has a single land border. It had a significant trading base, with natural resources for export, such as minerals, spices and even fauna, at one