The politics of Islamic instruction

The early 21st century saw a string of terrorist actions in the US, Asia and Europe. Most prominent among these were, of course, the 9/11 attacks on the WTC in New York and the Pentagon; the Bali bombs; the bomb attacks in Madrid and London; and those on the Australian Embassy and the Marriot Hotel in Jakarta. Islamic inspired violence seemed to spread like an oil stain and Islamic inspired murders and other riminal acts were feared to be spreading like wild fire. All the major attacks were considered to be inspired by organised international Islamic radical movements and the West (and others) began to seriously worry where all this radicalism stemmed from and how it is disseminated, especially among the younger generations. Attention soon focused on Islamic schools and educational politics, especially those in Southeast Asia.

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There is a large variation in Islamic schools in the region but two kinds stick out clearly. One is the Islamic boarding school, known as pesantren in Indonesia and as pondok in Malaysia and Southern Thailand, while the other is the madrasah. The first is more traditional and more or less restricted to Islamic studies whereas the second is a mixture of Islamic studies and general sciences. I hasten to add that the variety among these schools is enormous and local traditions and personal preferences of school leaders tend to colour these schools. Some pesantren are traditional to such an extent that modern sciences don't seem to exist whereas others teach in English and Arabic and pay great attention to instruction in sciences and the modern world using computer sciences and the internet on a daily basis. Madrasah also differ but not to the extent that the pesantren do.

The purpose of the book is 'to shed light on the varieties and politics of Islamic education in modern Southeast Asia' (p. 3). The combination of attention paid to the variety in combination with the politics of education is what makes this book interesting. The following countries are discussed by the following experts: Indonesia (Robert W. Hefner), Malaysia (Richard G. Kraince), Thailand (Joseph Chinyong Liow), Cambodia (Bjørn Atle Blengsli) and the Philippines (Thomas M. Mckenna & Esmael A. Abdula) whereas other countries, notably the Islamic state of Brunei Darussalam fall out of the picture, and including Singapore might also have been interesting. No reasons for the omission of these countries is provided.

Defining Islamic education

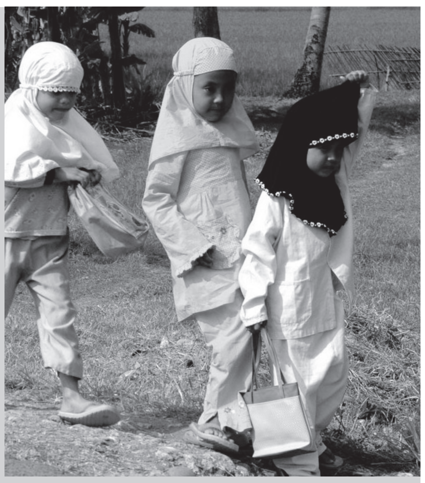
Hefner starts the book with an introduction on the politics and cultures of Islamic education in the region which is very interesting but left me with some matters to ponder about. Nowhere in the introduction – or the rest of the book for that matter – is it explained what is to be understood by 'Islamic school'. The picture is not quite as simple as a divide between pesantren and madrasah and, when the roots of the dissemination of radical ideas are to be found in schools, these need not be the two kinds of schools mentioned. If the notion of Islamic education was supplemented in more detail with other methods of Islamic instruction – such as traditional gatherings for Islamic and Quranic studies and that taking place in the host of other venues where Islamic studies are practiced – the picture might have been more complete. The term Islamic education is in itself ambiguous, because for true pious Muslims Islam is everywhere and indistinguishable from any other aspect of life on earth. What Islamic schools are or should be is, therefore, not only an issue for the authors of this fine book, but also for policy makers concerned with education and development in the region and with finding a place for Islamic instruction in a world demanding other knowledge as well in order to survive.

Traditional Islamic schools somehow seem to be out of place in the modern world. To instruct children only in Islamic knowledge does not school them in tackling practical issues in the modern world, something the governments of the countries under discussion know all too well. The various ministries of education and religious affairs in the region share a history of reconciling highly sensitive relations with powerful religious scholars and leaders with the need to ensure the presence of a generation of indigenous experts and scholars, and people endowed with skills and knowledge to enable them to find their own livelihood.

Fig. 1 (above)
Photograph by Eko Yudha.
Courtesy flickr.com

Fig. 2 (left)
While Pesantren in Indonesia keep a close eye on Islamic sciences, many open up to the modern world as well.

Fig. 3 (right)
Girls in Bekasi, West Java walk home from the local Madrasah.
Photograph by thebigdurian.
Courtesy flickr.com



Parent power

Needless to say, parents also have a say in the matter. Many parents do wish their children to be thoroughly versed in Islam but also want them to finish modern education. Interestingly, the reactions to these desires of people in the various countries seem to differ. In Indonesia, pesantren thrive as never before and many, while keeping a close eye on Islamic sciences, open up to the modern world. They grow and prosper and their role in rural development and in the making and breaking of national and sub-national politics increases as we speak. They are in no way threatened by the modern world but consider their place in the modern world a challenge they are willing – and increasingly able – to face. This is a far cry from the situation in Malaysia where the pondok has lost the battle with the madrasah because parents are acutely aware that Islamic knowledge alone does not provide for a family and that the modern world has other requirements. The role of governments in providing for, or withholding, financial support for Islamic schools is crucial. No educational system can survive without governmental support and the withholding of this support is an important tool in influencing the educational situation.

Instruction in important aspects of traditional Islamic knowledge continues to be facilitated by the use of so-called kitab kuning, loose-leafed books printed on yellow paper, usually in Arabic (with or without translation/interpretation in the local vernacular) and in Arabic script. These used to be, and still are to a large extent, the binding links of Islamic knowledge in the entire region and because of their specific role it is a pity that the valuable list of these kitab kuning compiled by Nicholas Heer from Seattle, Washington, USA has not been mentioned in the book.

The links Islamic schools entertain with the Middle East and the flow of students from Southeast Asia to the Middle East is an important issue in the way Islam is taught and in the kind of Islam studied. The scope of the book has not allowed for an in-depth study of this but hopefully it will be an area explored in the future. Clearly explored in the book are the historical links between Southeast Asia and sufficient background information is provided for a general picture of the international dynamics of Islamic knowledge and instruction in the region and, in particular, on the pivotal role of Malay Islam and Islamic education in mainland Southeast Asia.

The second thread of the book deals with the different kinds of Islam: radical, fundamentalist, moderate and such. It is a pity that a kind of consensus among the readership is presupposed as to what these terms mean. Apparently, however, a term like 'moderate' is open to different interpretations. For example, I was surprised to read that the Indonesian political party Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (Prosperous Justice Party) is considered to be moderately Islamist. Many people I talk to in Indonesia think they are anything but moderately Islamist!

Three major conclusions

The introduction ends with three major conclusions: The first is that Islamic education in the countries covered is neither unchanging nor backward looking. The second is that 'in addition to showing the effects of pietistic reform, Islamic education in the 20th century showed the imprint of three uniquely modern influences: the developmentalist state (in both its colonial and postcolonial forms); the capitalist marketplace; and mass education' (p. 42). The final conclusion is that 'the dynamism that Muslim educators have shown should dispel once and for all the illusion that the educational mainstream in this region is narrow-minded or absolutist' (p. 45).

The book provides a wealth of necessary information about the present and near-past situation of Islamic education in Southeast Asia. The chapters on the various countries covered are all well-informed and finely carved, and the dynamics of the individual countries and the relationships between the countries and the Middle East boosts the appetite to know more. The idea behind the book – that a link between Islamic schools and terrorism/radicalism really exists – has to be tempered, however. Of the tens of thousands of Islamic schools in the area, only a tiny number can clearly be said to provide this link. The overwhelming majority does not. Perhaps a future programme could pay attention to other means of Islamic instruction where these links may be more apparent and, because of their fluidity and mobility, are much more difficult to understand and monitor, especially in far-off places such as the many islands in insular Southeast Asia. Future study on the role of Islam in Islamic and general universities would also be very welcome in order to complement the picture.

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