

Who is this 'Indonesian Muslim'?

Indonesia changes rapidly. Politically, religiously, and socially the country is in a situation of constant flux. Newspapers and other news media give an astonishing picture of a country in some respects in rapid development to progress but in other aspects retreating into backward ignorance.

Dick van der Meij



Luthfi Assyaukanie. 2009.

Islam and the Secular State in Indonesia.
Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies,
2009, xviii + 362
ISBN 978 981 230 889 4 (hardback),
ISBN 978 981 230 890 0 (PDF).

Bernard Plattdasch. 2009.

Islamism in Indonesia. Politics in the Emerging Democracy.
Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies,
2009, xxxviii + 412 pages.
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ISBN 978 981 4279 09 3 (hardback),
ISBN 978 981 4279 10 9 (PDF).

TRUE POWER RELATIONS have not changed much since the introduction of democracy, and 30 years of Soeharto rule and influence cannot be erased in a matter of years. A lot more time is needed to change the mindset of intellectually repressed Indonesians before we will see the emergence of an informed and capable intellectual discourse. Following all these developments is a superhuman endeavour and probably best attempted only after a long period of experience and exposure to Indonesian life and realities.

It would be incorrect to think that only present-day Indonesia is in a situation of flux. It has always been so. The historical lines leading up to the current situation are the subject of many books, including the two discussed here. Assyaukanie's fascinating book discusses Islam and the secular state and all the ins and outs connected to this complicated issue. The history of the ill-fitting relationship between Islam and secularism—indeed, the very possibility of such a relationship—is traced and explained and Indonesia's stance is further described using the three models of the Islamic Democratic State, the Religious Democratic State, and the Liberal Democratic State. The continuity and discontinuity of the models are elaborated as well.

Plattdasch on his part goes into great depth in explaining the multifarious roots and currents of Islamism in Indonesia and devotes much space to the history and fate of the Masyumi Party, its proponents and their follow-ups in modern times.

It is no surprise that books on modern developments in Indonesia abound. Many among them center on the economy, law, international relations and monetary affairs, while a great number also address expected facets of Indonesian Islam, ranging from *shari'ah* implementation to radicalism, fundamentalism, terrorism, Islam and the secular state or, conversely, the Islamic state in Indonesia. Books on ordinary Indonesian Muslim life are hardly ever attempted and everyday life and religiosity are usually considered of insufficient importance or interest. In short, the subject is apparently not 'sexy'. This is a major failing. In order to understand Islam and Muslims in this huge country, we are in desperate need of insights into 'ordinary Islam' and the life of 'ordinary Muslims', if only because no Muslim is born a fundamentalist, radical,

or terrorist; we all start life as innocent infants. What happens among these 'ordinary Muslims' may reveal the realities of what Muslim life in this country entails.

The books discussed here do not escape the often-committed error of lumping all Muslims, or large portions of them, together and then discussing them as a singular entity without questioning the validity of this approach. In my view, there is no such thing as 'the Indonesian Muslim' and it is certainly unrealistic to claim that this 'Indonesian Muslim' is capable of doing whatever it is he or she is claimed to do. Indeed, Indonesian Muslims may find themselves just as surprised at what is claimed about them as I am when I read these books. Moreover, usually the Muslims being discussed in support of the author's arguments live, think, work, and act in Jakarta, and this Jakarta-centric viewpoint also seriously undermines our understanding. The underlying assumption, that what Jakarta does and wants has an immediate impact on the lives of Muslims living elsewhere in the country, has not been sufficiently demonstrated and interestingly, rather than being questioned, is often seen as something so self-evident that it needs no substantiation. I have the strong impression that many Muslims living outside of Jakarta, or outside Java for that matter, cannot relate to, let alone be interested in or act upon, what Jakarta wants, especially since the introduction of regional autonomy which caused Jakarta to recede into the far recesses of people's minds. They certainly do not act upon Jakarta's desires. They have other things to do, making ends meet being first and foremost among them.

Assyaukanie says in his introduction that 'Existing studies on Islam in Indonesia are dominated by an anthropological approach...'. I have my doubts whether this is so since sound expositions on method and approach are conspicuously absent from many of these works, which seem to start up with precious little attention to method or approach. It is therefore not an easy task to form an accurate picture of what is really going on in any scholarly defensible way.

The first thing the books teach us is that Indonesian Islam is fragmented to an unbelievable degree. This is why forming an accurate picture of Islam in the country is so extremely difficult. What may be found and demonstrated in one area is contested by the opposite in another region. Interestingly, this has not led scholars to simply accept this fact and to try to deal with it, but rather to insist on finding common denominators. Of course these exist, but are often so blatantly obvious that they become meaningless at best, and obfuscating at worst. Looking at the ins and outs of Muslim politics, political parties and currents does explain important aspects of Indonesian Islam, but only within those spheres and conclusions. Such notions cannot and should not be extended to people's daily lives. As for many people all over the world, politics and daily life seem to take place on two different planets.

Rather than exposing history and its key persons for the umpteenth time, we need to discover what the underlying causes are of the multifarious ways that many Muslims in Indonesia seem to randomly hate many aspects of the West—like secularism—while accepting most other things

Sunday mentoring
under a shady tree in
Bandung, West Java.
Photo by Ikhlusal
Amal.

unquestioningly, and where the overwhelming distrust Indonesian Muslims have of each other and of non-Muslims really stems from. Seeking out the underlying ideas of power and power distribution in Indonesia and the valid ways to demonstrate, or at times rather not to demonstrate, power and authority is a requirement for understanding why Indonesian Muslim individuals in power act the way they do. Examination of the notions that underlie valid reasoning is useful if we are to explain the often alarming superficiality of argumentation.

The ordinary Indonesian Muslim is also in another way—perhaps unintentionally—dismissed. In his introduction Assyaukanie writes 'I argue that there is no better measurement to judge the religio-political attitude of Indonesian Muslims than the general elections ...'. Is he unaware that most people never even found out how to vote, and that they have no inkling whatsoever about party programmes? Does he not know that access to accurate information on politics is very limited in most places outside Java and outside the major cities elsewhere, and that people are prone to blackmail and other forms of pressures to vote for a specific party? Is not the underlying assumption that people vote consciously highly overstated everywhere in the world, and particularly so in the fledgling democracy that contemporary Indonesia still is?

Of importance are also the chapters on the implementation of the *shari'ah* in various districts in the country and the discourse, or sometimes lack thereof, surrounding this implementation. Especially with the current unclear relationships between the Central Government and the Regional Governments, a proper insight into the workings of *shari'ah* implementation is crucial.

Does my criticism above mean that the books are uninteresting? Of course not. They are welcome additions to the literature we have on the subjects they describe. They often throw new light on matters and provide more and otherwise hidden detail. One of the important things these books point out is Indonesian political and religious pragmatism (in my view often amounting to downright opportunism). Indonesian people know exactly what they want and need, and they will go to great lengths to get it. If religiously inspired politics prove useless in this regard, they have no qualms in dismissing them on the spot. This is an important element of Indonesian religious and political reality. This should also have been studied in the case of 'ordinary Muslims', who likewise have no use for excessive regulations and hollow political rhetoric. The failure of Muslim political parties in Indonesia to attract voters may simply occur because their programs and actions are too far removed from the voters who come to distrust them and thus vote for other parties. To sum up, perhaps we should be happy that most ordinary Indonesian Muslims keep cool heads and are not easily seduced by the ideas and actions of Muslim political parties, the Front Pembela Islam and the plethora of other institutions, *ulamas*, and Muslim organizations. They seem to know quite well where their priorities lie!

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