

Book Review

Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the ‘Conservative Turn’. Edited by Martin van Bruinessen. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013, xxxiv + 240 pp. ISBN: 978–981–4414–56–2 (pbk). \$34.01.

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Until fairly recently the outside world’s image of Indonesian Islam was one of openness and tolerance, epitomised by the open-minded and pluralistic discourse of figures such as Abdurrahman Wahid, the former leader of the *Nadlatul Ulama*, the nation’s largest Islamic organization. Such an image was actively promoted by the New Order regime (1966–1998) and fostered in schools, government ministries and state universities. Since the regime’s demise in 1998, this open and tolerant image has been challenged as the nation has seen religiously motivated violence, terrorist acts by small yet violent Islamist groups linked to international organizations and in particular, a marked growth in conservative Islam among new and existing groups.

Numerous books have been published on the growth of radical Islam in Indonesia but far less has been written about the growing conservatism, which has been most evident since the beginning of 2005. The radicals and conservatives share many similarities in their interpretation of the religion but the former use violence to achieve their goals while those pushing the conservative agenda generally work within a constitutional framework, although some have inspired religiously motivated violence through various public statements and *fatwa*. As opposed to the radicals, who have little appeal among the general public, the conservatives are found in many of the nation’s major Islamic organizations and associations and are consequently in positions to exert a much stronger influence on society.

This important edited volume addresses the development and impact of the ‘Conservative Turn’ in Indonesian Islam. It is edited by Martin van Bruinessen, who for many years has been one of the foremost scholars of Indonesian Islamic studies. Van Bruinessen contributes three of the chapters: the introduction, an overview of Muslim organizations, associations and movements, and a concluding postscript. Four other chapters form the book’s main body and are written by van Bruinessen’s Indonesian colleagues. Each present detailed, original and insightful accounts of Muslim organizations and movements. As a whole, the book offers an anthology of this perceived ‘Conservative Turn’.

Van Bruinessen’s introduction includes a short exploration of the possible reasons for this ‘Turn’. One is that the liberal and progressive Islam that prospered under the auspices of the New Order has not proved sufficiently popular to continue dominating debates and agendas in an era of democratization. A related possibility is that many who had been at the forefront of these debates left their organizations or institutions and went into politics thereby creating opportunities for conservatives. Van Bruinessen also discusses the increasing influence of the Arabian Peninsula in the form of returning graduates from Saudi Arabia, and Saudi and Kuwaiti funded educational institutions in Indonesia that sponsor a narrow understanding of the religion and promote Wahhabi ideology. Finally, the emergence of transnational Islamic movements in Indonesia have reduced the importance of the *Nadlatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah*, the two largest Islamic organizations.

In the second chapter, van Bruinessen sets out a detailed picture of Indonesia’s main Muslim organizations, associations and movements. He includes short historical backgrounds

as well as contemporary trends. His overview encompasses not only political and non-political national bodies but also regional, youth and student associations and some of Indonesia's numerous Sufi organizations. The chapter is deeply informative and should be of great value to students of Indonesian Islam, politics and history.

The third chapter by Moch Nur Ichwan discusses the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (Indonesian Council of Ulama, MUI). In 1975, the Suharto government created the Council whose purpose was to represent the New Order policies in a way that would make them acceptable to Muslims. Ichwan examines the MUI's attempt to redefine its role in the post-New Order period from one of government servant to a 'servant of the *ummah*' (p. 61) guided by elected leaders rather than government appointees. Ichwan considers the MUI's role in Islamic banking, religious education, morality campaigns and *halal* certification (a major sources of income), among others. The organization has become more conservative and puritanical, incorporating more hardliners while intentionally excluding liberal Muslims, Shias and others. This shift in orientation can also be seen in the various *fatwa* it has issued; some have been controversial, for example, the one against *Ahmadiyah*. Some vigilante groups have used fatwa to justify violence. Although the MUI still supports *Pancasila* (the pluralistic state ideology), they remain, according to Ichwan, a 'puritanical moderate Islamic organization' (p. 62) quick to take a liberal position in self-serving financial matters but inflexible on matters such as religious freedom.

In Chapter four Ahmad Najib Burhani discusses the *Muhammadiyah*. He mainly focuses on the contest for ascendancy between progressives and conservatives. Progressives had the upper hand in the 1995 and 2000 *Muhammadiyah* congresses, but suffered a major setback in 2005 when the organization took a more puritan and conservative stance. Burhani acknowledges that this shift was part of a general backlash against liberal Islam during the post-New Order fallout, but the puritan victory was by no means absolute. He argues that the primary cause of the ideological shift in *Muhammadiyah* was its infiltration by conservatives and radicals influenced by transnational Islamic movements. There are signs that the organizations ideology is moving back to the middle ground yet, for the time being, progressives remain on the periphery.

In the following chapter, Mujiburrahman charts the failure of a movement that has pushed for the implementation of *Shariah* law in the province of South Sulawesi. The roots of this movement lie in the South Sulawesi wing of the *Darul Islam* rebellion, led by Kahar Muzakkar, that beset the province from the 1950s and into the 60s. Today, the head of the Preparatory Committee for the Implementation of *Shariah* (KPPSI) in South Sulawesi is Kahar's son Abdul Aziz Kahar Muzakkar. He tends to portray the movement as a peaceful, lawful continuation of the *Darul Islam* struggle, although recent events implicating *Lasykar Jundullah*, KPPSI's disassociated militant wing, might belie this depiction. Nevertheless, KPPSI is made up of a broad coalition of different Islamic-orientated groups united in pursuit of *Shariah*.

Mujiburrahman does an excellent job in elucidating the movement's shifting alliances and the political manoeuvrings. He further discusses the main opposition to KPPSI, which comes from local Islamic intellectuals, such as the highly respected Qasim Mathar. Abdul Aziz's failed to attempt to be elected as governor of the province is also covered. Mujiburrahman also discusses some of the regional *Shariah* regulations introduced in *Bulukumba* by the former regent who was a KPPSI member. In the case of the *zakat* collection regulation, there was evidence that the collections 'had evaporated due to government corruption' (p. 175). Despite KPPSI's claim of majority support from people in the province, Mujiburrahman doubts *Shariah* law will be imposed.

In the penultimate chapter, Muhammad Wildan studies the 'struggle for true in Islam in Solo', a city where the *Abangan* (syncretistic Javanese Muslims) far outnumber all other

Islamic sects. Yet, the city is home to numerous radical groups, including the infamous Ngruki network which has been linked to several acts of terrorism. Wildan begins his study with an historical overview of developments that is a bit excessive. He describes the various radical and conservative groups and the development of *Salafism* among some of them. None of these groups call for *Shariah* law through legal reform because it would attract little support from the *Abangan* majority. Instead, they express themselves through vigilantism and agitation for an Islamic state. Some groups target *Abangan* for ‘conversion’ though with little success. Wildan offers two reasons for the radicalism of the Solo groups: 1) their sense of distinctness and self-importance gained through piety 2) the minor presence of mainstream moderate *Nadlatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah* in the city and surrounding area.

Van Bruinessen’s postscript highlights the ‘survival of liberal and progressive Muslim thought in Indonesia’ (p. 224). He emphasises the continuing influence and importance of Indonesia’s public Islamic universities largely guided by moderates and progressives. He highlights the role of progressive Muslim NGO’s and the continuing influence of the Liberal Islamic Network and similar organizations. According to van Bruinessen, the fall of the New Order accelerated the emergence of new Islamic NGO’s advocating policies promoting, for example, human rights and gender equality. Indeed, the fall of the New Order provided as many opportunities for progressives as it did for conservatives.

The recent elections in Indonesia suggest that the ‘Conservative Turn’ in Indonesian Islam lacks popular support to progress further. Once again nationalist parties commanded the election while political parties carrying an Islamic agenda were somewhat marginalized. In the presidential election most Islamic parties backed the nationalist candidate who lost.

Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam is an important book that addresses recent religious trends and struggles for the future of Islam in the world’s most populous Muslim country. It is essential reading for anyone interested in contemporary Indonesia and Indonesian Islam. Perhaps other scholars will augment this fine work by analysing Indonesia’s ‘Conservative Turn’ in relation to, for instance, globalization, the war on terror or even environmental degradation. Let’s hope they can replicate the high quality scholarship on display in this volume.