

Book Review

Review of Norshahril Saat, *The State, Ulama and Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018)

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Indonesia and Malaysia are the two major Southeast Asian modern nation-states with a dominant Islamic population, where Islam is the official religion. In the context of the global Islamic resurgence and the rise of so-called “political Islam,” scholars and social analysts have always been intrigued by the contrasting ways in which Islam has been mediated into the governance of both nation-states. According to the author, Norshahril Saat, during the years 1996–1998, the government of Suharto had introduced widespread Islamization policies to contain the Islamic resurgence in Indonesia, whilst for Malaysia, under the leadership of Prime Minister Mahathir, it was during the period from 1981 to 2003. Their policies included the building and strengthening of Islamic institutions and the co-opting of influential *ulama* (Islamic religious scholars) and intellectuals by state-sponsored institutions. In this context, the book presents a pioneering comparative analysis of Suharto’s and Mahathir’s policies on the authority of official *ulama* in both nation-states. The author’s core thesis is that conservative Islam has “captured” the Islamic bureaucracy in Malaysia, which stands in contrast

to the Indonesian case, where the policy under President Suharto has been one of “co-option,” that is, of curbing traditionalist influence through the appointment of modernists to lead religious institutions.

In the book, the author provides detailed first-hand empirical data to argue that Suharto’s strategy included the creation of the PPP (United Development Party), the MUI (Ulama Council Indonesia), and later the ICMI (Indonesia Association of Muslim Intellectuals). These groups were aimed at neutralising the traditionalist *ulama* in the 1970s and counterbalancing the military in the late 1980s. This strategy arguably laid the ground for a generally “weak” official *ulama*. Hence, contrary to existing writings which consider the MUI as “powerful, influential, and united,” the author argues that MUI’s role in the religious domain is marginal. He emphasizes that MUI’s *fatwas* (Islamic religious opinion) have little influence on Indonesian Muslims by highlighting the fact that mass-based Islamic organizations Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah also issue *fatwas* for their members and remain powerful at the grassroots level. Furthermore, the leadership of the MUI is divided and fragmented, comprised of conservatives, progressives, liberals, and Salafi *ulama*. It seems that whenever the MUI issues a *fatwa*, progressive groups and intellectuals are quick to scrutinize it. It appears that Suharto invested greatly in Islamic modernism, which included co-opting progressives into the religious bureaucracy to counter the traditionalists. Modernists emphasize the use of reason in approaching religious traditions, are cosmopolitan in their religious outlook, and oppose blind faith (*taqlid*). On the other hand, traditionalists such as those in the NU argue that Islamic jurisprudence must adhere as closely as possible to the rulings by four classical jurists Hanafi, Maliki, Hambali, and Shafie.

Through the political craft of Suharto, the three institutions (PPP, MUI, and ICMI) came into being under differing political circumstances, but his overall strategy sought to curb traditionalist influence, appoint modernists to lead religious institutions, and internally fragment the Muslim political leadership. Suharto considered the NU to be resistant to his Islamic and modernization ideals and took an ambivalent stance towards it. He thus allowed only state-friendly NU members to hold key

positions in the PPP and in other institutions. Since 1971, Suharto did not appoint any NU member as the Religious Minister, even though that had earlier been the practice, and most employees in the ministry were traditionalists. In the 1980s, the relationship between Suharto and the traditionalists improved after the NU accepted Pancasila as its ideology and it ceased to be a political party.

Besides restricting traditionalist influence, Suharto also developed neo-modernist thinking among young Muslim activists by encouraging them to study in Western universities. These included personalities such as Nurcholis Madjid and Amien Rais, both of whom studied under prominent Muslim thinker Fazlur Rahman, who was a professor based in Chicago. Progressive thinkers such as Dawam Raharjo, Bachtiar Effendy, Azmumardi Azra, and Abdurrahman Wahid not only developed pluralist values in Indonesia, but also spurred democratization of the country during the post-New Order period. These intellectuals continue to play important roles in contemporary Indonesia in checking conservative thinking among the ulama camp. Some served as members of MUI's advisory board.

In contrast to the Indonesian case, the author argues that in Malaysia, Mahathir empowered ulama institutions to curb challenges from movements calling for *dakwah* (spreading the message of Islam) and a resurgent PAS (Malaysian Islamic Party), which after the 1980s, became more Islamist. "Soft" Islamization strategies, such as establishing Islamic banks, Islamic universities, and strengthening Islamic bureaucracies, were undertaken and empowered official ulama institutions, such as the JAKIM (Department of Islamic Development), and the *shariah* courts, forming the powerful, conservative official *ulama* class we see in Malaysia today.

In Malaysia, Mahathir propelled the country's Islamization in response to the *dakwah* movement, or the Islamic resurgence. Islamic civil society groups such as Darul Arqam (a Malaysian religious sect – ed.) and the ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, or the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia – ed.) drew such a popular following that in 1982, Mahathir co-opted Anwar Ibrahim, the president of ABIM, into the UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), the dominant party

of the then-ruling coalition. When Ashaari, the Darul Arqam leader, had become more critical stance toward the UMNO, Mahathir banned the movement for promoting deviant Islamic teaching under a *fatwa* from the National Fatwa Committee (Jawatankuasa Fatwa Kebangsaan). In the 1980s, the most important challenge posed to the Mahathir administration came from the PAS (Malaysian Islamic Party – ed.), which had become more strongly Islamist in its orientation. Inspired by the 1979 Iranian Revolution, PAS *ulama* called for the formation of an Islamic state and the implementation of *shariah* laws in the country, challenging the secular notion of the federal constitution. The PAS also altered the party's constitution, leading to the formation of the Dewan Shura as the highest decision-making body of the party. With these changes, PAS became more successful in recruiting *ulama* into its fold.

Mahathir reacted to the Islamic resurgence and the rise of the Islamist PAS by an array of policies. He set up the Islamic Bank, upgraded the Islamic Centre, forbade importation of non-halal meat, prevented Muslims from entering the casino at Genting Highlands, and built mega-mosques. In 1988, he strengthened the *shariah* courts and introduced the dual-legal system in the country. Civil courts cannot, for example, hear cases dealing with Muslim personal laws of marriage and inheritance. The introduction of this dual-legal system created a major conundrum especially in deciding cases where there are overlaps between the *shariah* and civil courts. This has raised issues which of late have sparked controversies regarding the possibility of threats to constitutional rights of non-Muslims, the jurisdiction of civil courts vis-à-vis *shariah* courts, as well as to the debate over Malaysia's identity as an Islamic state or as a secular one.¹ The author also cites recent examples in which *fatwas* published in state (*negeri*) gazettes are legally binding and Muslims are made liable to imprisonment, fine, or both for violating them. *Fatwas* have been used by the *ulama* to declare groups promoting "liberal Islam" or religious pluralism and gender equality in Islam to be "deviant." The JAKIM has been notorious in its attempts at prohibiting certain progressive Islamic groups from holding forums or seminars by labeling them as "liberals." Hence, according to the author, the relationship between the state and *ulama* is based on both "co-option" and "capture."

The Malaysian case clearly demonstrates the “agency” exercised by the *ulama* in their “capture” of the Malaysian state via conservative Islam.

To me, what is most revealing about the author’s comparative analysis is not so much his theoretical application of concepts such as “co-optation” or “capture” to the empirical material at hand. Rather, it is the irony in which a nation under such a strong ruler under Mahathir had invested so many resources towards its religious infrastructure but yet failed to elevate Islam at the level of its ideology and intellect. Even the author himself lamented that whilst Mahathir’s writings and speeches show that he is a modernist and progressive Muslim, he did not develop an *ulama* class that could master Islamic traditions, social sciences, and modern philosophy akin to those in Indonesia. During his leadership, he was critical of Islamic conservatism and did prevent the PAS governments in Kelantan and Terengganu from implementing *hudud* laws. After he left office, Mahathir left a legacy of the JAKIM as an expanded religious bureaucracy overseeing the Islamic administration of the country, such as in matters of *halal* certification, Islamic banking and finance, the censorship of books, research, and *dakwah* programs. Yet critics see the JAKIM as overzealous and overbearing in its practice and in the behavior of its personnel. On reflection, notwithstanding Mahathir’s modernization project, the analysis of the book does conclude that Malaysia is far behind Indonesia in terms of its development of Islamic intellectualism. The *ulama* Mahathir co-opted into the religious institutions were not only conservative in their religious outlook, but they also rarely engaged with universal modern norms such as human rights, freedom of responsible expression, and the right to privacy. Malaysian Muslims shun works written by progressive scholars such as Chandra Muzaffar, Hashim Kamali, and Norani Othman because they are considered “liberals,” even though these scholars are well regarded internationally.

Norshahril Saat has delivered a piece of scholarly work that is both empirically and analytically outstanding and authoritative in its points of comparison.

Notes

¹ See, Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid and Zawawi Ibrahim “Governance of Religious Diversity in Malaysia: Islam in a Secular State or Secularism in an Islamic State,” in *More or Less Secularism? European Problems, Asian Lessons*, eds. Anna Triandafyllidou and Tariq Modood (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2017).