

Islamic Politics in Southeast Asia

In the last decades the Islamic world has seen a steady rise in religious politics. From Northern Africa to the Middle East and Asia, Islam has either been employed as a tool of top-down control or as a means for social mobilization. Islam, therefore, has been used for a variety of purposes and in a variety of circumstances, resulting in a staggering range of Islamic political expression worldwide.

In Southeast Asia, an often ignored corner of the Islamic world, Islamic politics have embodied the complex interplay between cultural, ethnic, religious and political forces unique to the region. Islam, as a relative late-comer to the island world of Asia, only spread to significant parts of the local population in the 12th century.

Its character and customs were also influenced by a variety of sources, including Shi'ism, Sufism and local pagan and Hindu customs, adding unique features to the Sunni Islam that is most prevalent today. This resulted in an inherent pluralism in religious expression – a pluralism that has struggled to exist in the political realm under the pressures of colonial rule and messy postcolonial politics.

This newsletter sheds light on the characteristics of Islamic politics in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. To truly understand Islam as a political force – and perhaps release it from its Arab-centered shackles – it is vital to look at how it has featured in the lives of its 240 million Southeast Asian adherents.

1.1 'Under Control or in Control': Islam and Politics in Indonesia and Malaysia

Indonesia and Malaysia, two regional giants with majority-Muslim populations (90 and 60 percent respectively), have struggled to incorporate Islamic values and forms of political expression into their multiethnic and multicultural politics since independence. Both suffered from difficult colonial legacies – colonial policies that had favored one ethnic group over the other, for example – violent struggles for independence, and from long periods of dictatorship that severely curtailed the political expression of religious values. Under dictatorship, however, a diverse set of Islamic groups, movements and leaders also found themselves co-opted into state structures that were staunchly secular in nature. As a tactic of 'divide and rule' these leaders selectively accommodated the Islamic demands of groups that had grown increasingly restless under authoritarian rule.

Suharto – the long-running dictator that ruled Indonesia until 1998 – used Islam when his personal popularity was waning and sought to tap into the momentum of rising Islamic consciousness in the 1980s. His regime formed various, often short-lived and heavily controlled alliances with Islamic parties, thus contributing to the fragmented nature of Islamic politics in Indonesia. Democratization gave further expression and space to this diversity, resulting in the mushrooming of Islamic civic

and political organizations in the past decade, each one with a different vision of Islam as an organizing principle in state affairs. Crucially, and in contrast to many Middle Eastern states, the pluralist state philosophy promoted by Sukarno and later Suharto (known as 'Pancasila') has continued to color even Islamic politics. Few parties in Indonesia advocate outright Islamization (à la Iran), and most seek to marry religious values with the imperatives of a pluralist and multicultural democracy. A fringe element of fundamentalist groups has continued to lose ground, and since the 2002 Bali bombings by the Jemaah Islamiyah group, the threat of terrorist violence in Indonesia has been reduced through effective counterterrorist campaigns. In the current elections secular forces are expected to win once more, with a moderate showing for Islamic parties.

Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia, conversely, merged Islam with ethnic politics, incorporating these dual forces into the drive to modernize Malaysia. Mahathir was concerned with elevating the status of the socio-economically disadvantaged Malays (the largest ethnic group in Malaysia) in contrast to the traditionally more privileged and powerful Chinese and Indian groups. By equating 'Malayness' with being a Muslim (a constitutional stipulation, no less) Mahathir set in motion a self-strengthening process of Islamization that has often threatened to get out of control. The political competition between Mahathir's United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the Islamist Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) has been a driving force in this process. By investing heavily in Islamic education, for example, the state has given rise to an increasingly pious Malay population, threatening the carefully constructed political alliances and ethnic balances that have underpinned decades of economic growth. In the past these balances have fallen apart, resulting in sporadic violence between the Malays, Chinese and Indians, but on the whole the government – still under Mahathir's tutelage – has managed to contain such episodes and forge a predominantly moderate line.

1.2 'Us Versus Them': Islam and Separatism in the Philippines and Thailand

In the Philippines and Thailand, Islamic politics are inseparable from age-old ethnic divisions and old separatist struggles. Both countries have only small Muslim minorities, representing about five percent of the population, and are concentrated in the southernmost provinces and regions of each country. Geographically isolated and historically marginalized, these groups have engaged in protracted struggles against central control and for their ethnic, religious and sociopolitical rights.

The Muslims of southern Thailand – many of them ethnically Malay and inhabiting the regions bordering Malaysia – have only recently risen to notoriety as a separatist force fighting central control and what they perceive to be Thai Buddhist chauvinism. An implicit agreement between government forces and Muslims contained this conflict until Thaksin Shinawatra's reign but has not been revitalized since the 2006 coup. A sense of 'not belonging' mixed with old political grievances have contributed to an Islamic politics in southern Thailand that is more about identity than Islam, more about opposing central rule than imposing anything Islamic.

The struggle for a Muslim homeland in the southern islands of the Philippines has proven even more intractable and violent. With centuries-old roots, the conflict has pitted the predominantly Christian establishment in Manila against the socioeconomically marginalized southern 'Moro'. The Moro are

a diverse group of Muslim inhabitants of the Mindanao islands with roots dating back nearly seven centuries. Colonial-era struggles against the Spanish and Americans translated into armed opposition to central control in the independence period - a struggle articulated in the language of Islam and born out of a gradual process of isolation. At once a struggle for independence as well as inclusion, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and its predecessors have spent decades fighting on their own land against the military. Although some progress has been made in the past decades – an autonomous region consisting of parts of the Moro lands was set up in 1990 – key grievances have not been addressed, leaving Islam and Islamic politics entangled with separatist violence for the foreseeable future.

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1.3 Resources

1.3.1 Intergovernmental Organizations

ASEAN's stance on terrorism

ASEAN is the key regional intergovernmental actor that groups the countries discussed in this newsletter with six other countries in the region. Although ASEAN is known for its reluctance to interfere in the internal matters of member states (including separatist conflicts), it has fostered cooperation on counterterrorism, for example. This website provides comprehensive information on ASEAN, its members and its mandate.

1.3.2 Nongovernmental Organizations

Southeast Asia, by the International Crisis Group

The Crisis Group covers Southeast Asia extensively, with an excellent collection of detailed reports and briefings on Indonesian politics, regional terrorist groups, and the separatist conflicts in Thailand and the Philippines.

Islam in Southeast Asia, by the Asia Society

The Asia Society is a US-based, pan-Asian nongovernmental organization with an excellent resource base on Islam in Southeast Asia. The site includes introductory essays, maps, timelines and other educational resources that chart the spread and influence of Islam in the region.

1.3.3 Research and Academia

The Politics of Indonesia's Islamic Identification, by the School of Political Science and International Studies, The University of Queensland

This article by Paul J Carnegie analyzes Islam's importance and impact on Indonesian politics. The author argues that Islamic plurality and competition between a variety of Islamic actors has given Indonesian democratization a distinctive character.

Islam in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Recent Developments, by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)

This collection of articles by Harold Crouch, Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, Carmen A Abubakar and Yang Razali Kassim discusses Islamic issues in the region, including Islamic politics in Indonesia, the conflict in the Philippines and Islamic politics in Singapore. The articles date from 2002 but are still highly relevant.

Civil Society, Moderate Islam and Politics in Indonesia and Malaysia

This paper by Amy L Freedman expands on the focus of this newsletter, addressing the relationships between moderate/liberal Islamic groups, orthodox and fundamentalist groups and the process of democratization in Indonesia and Malaysia.

1.3.4 Media

Beyond the crossroads, by the Economist

This briefing from the Economist provides an excellent analysis of politics and the current elections in Indonesia, as well as an overview of the democratization process.

What the doctor ordered, by the Economist

This Economist article examines the continued influence of Mahathir Mohamad on Malaysian politics.

De-demonizing Southeast Asian Islam, by Asia Times Online

This article by Michael Vatikiotis focuses on recent scholarship on Islamic politics in Southeast Asia and the need to correctly assess its impact on local and regional politics and security policies.