

Southeast Asia



Robert W. Hefner, *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia*

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THIS BOOK analyses the origins and the development of Islamic educational institutions in Southeast Asia. The volume's opening essay is an approach to these matters in Indonesia. The division of Islamic society into a number of groups, notably traditionalist and modernist, along with their roles in the evolution of society, are looked at in depth in this first chapter.

The second chapter is concerned with the origins of Indonesian Islamic educational institutions, which are assumed to have their roots in the Islamic/Qur'anic learning circles run at the village level. Hefner perceives that shifts in the Indonesian political landscape have led to the reconstruction and reformation of Indonesian Islamic school curriculums and instructional processes. Some Islamic schools have attempted to integrate their curriculums through a combination of general and Islamic knowledge, which has in turn forced the *pesantren* (religious schools) to transform their instructional processes, their mission, and their educational facilities. These transformations and reconstructions

allow graduates of the *pesantren* to further their career possibilities through access to universities. However, not all *pesantren* have experienced these changes, and some prefer to stick to their original mission. In fact, these institutions are more financially and academically independent compared to their counterparts. In this chapter, Hefner further analyzes the involvement of graduates of Islamic schools in Indonesian social movements and their participation in politics through the establishment of political parties such as the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), which, according to Hefner, is attempting to implement *shari'a* law in Indonesia “from within.” In the final analysis of this chapter, Hefner provides striking evidence regarding the Indonesian view of democracy and *shari'a* Islamism. In what may be a surprising result for many, the Islamic school educators who participated in his research perceive democracy as compatible with Islamic *shari'a*. It is for this reason that support for democracy equals support for the implementation of *shari'a* in Indonesia.

Richard G. Kraince provides an overview of Malaysian education in chapter 3. Kraince suggests that the transformation of Malaysian Islamic education is linked to the political landscape of the country. The chapter considers the information on the historical backgrounds of Malaysian Islamic schools since the 1800s, most of which was obtained from interviews with educators and Malaysian ministers during 2005–2006. Kraince notes that the development of Islamic schools in Malaysia is closely connected to local and global political issues, and also discusses the accusations that they have contributed to the emergence of fundamentalist Muslims, an accusation based on the fact that a number of suspected terrorists are graduates of Islamic schools. For this reason, debates have arisen amongst policymakers on the existence of Islamic schools and how they are to be managed. To manage Islamic schools in Malaysia with the goal of “combating terrorism,” the government withdraws financial support unless Islamic schools are willing to be controlled by the government. This control is exerted through the implementation of a standard curriculum. Another critical issue raised by Kraince is gender bias in Islamic schools: curricular materials often do not provide a balanced account of the roles of female and male Muslims, with female Muslims being frequently disadvantaged in these materials. To address the issue of biased teaching materials, civil movements such as “Sisters in Islam” have emerged in Malaysia, with the goal of combating this so-called “unjust” treatment.

Chapter 4 discusses the emergence and development of Islamic schools in Thailand. In this chapter, Liow suggests that the Islamic schools in Thailand were mainly established by Malay Muslims residing in areas of Southern Thailand such as Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. These schools have also been accused of having strong links to various crimes such as bombings and other violence occurring in Thailand and beyond. Islamic schools were initially known as *pondok*, and these constitute the traditional type of Islamic school. The structure of the Islamic school in Thailand starts from *ibtidai* (elementary), then proceeds to *mutawassit* (middle), then *tsanawi* (secondary), and further on to the *Institute Pengajian Tinggi* (institutions for higher Islamic education). These schools must register with the government or they will receive no financial support. In this way, the government has full control

of the curriculum of Islamic schools. Liow suggests that Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar also play a significant role in funding the Islamic schools, which have been criticized for the incompatibility of their materials with the sociopolitical issues confronting Muslims living in Thailand. Intending to reform Islamic schools, reformist thinkers such as Ahmad Wahab established Ansorisunnah, the first reformist organization in Thailand, which observes the *Salafiyah* ideology, which is a puritanical strain of Islamic reformism. Soon after, Bangkok became a center for reformist thinkers. The reformist agenda targeted society at large, translating the Qur'an into the languages spoken in Thai society and also conducting the *khutbah* (Friday sermon) in Thai to help people gain a better understanding. In spite of challenges from the *kaum tua* (traditionalist Muslims), the reformist ideas have prevailed, and Islamic education generally observes reformist concepts of Islam. The most prominent and profound Islamic reformist in Thailand in recent times is the rector of Yala Islamic College, Ismail Luthfi, who injected reformist ideas into his college and beyond through expanding the college's curriculum. Lutfi has responded to the need to insert general subjects into the Yala curriculum as a way to modernize the college.

In chapter 5, Blengsli comprehensively analyzes the Muslim minority community in Cambodia and the various types of Islamic schools found there. Cambodian Muslims are mostly found in two ethnic groups, the Cham and Chvea. The majority of Muslims hold to the Shafi'i Sunni ideology, that is, they are followers of the Shafi'i school of thought, but other groups such as the Salafiyah and the Tablighi Jamaat (Muslim missionary organizations) have also established their presence in Cambodian Muslim society. The earliest Islamic school in Cambodia was built in 1948 and has played a significant role in educating Muslims through the use of traditional texts (*kitab kuning*) as the basic curriculum, with pedagogical methods following the more traditional ways of teaching. Early attempts to reform Cambodian Islamic schools came from Malaysia and Thailand in 1950. The introduction of novel approaches by the *kaum muda*, a term used to describe reformist thinkers, created hostilities within the Muslim community, since the *kaum muda* was accused of corrupting the "true" teaching of Islam. Under the banner of the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS), the *kaum muda* established schools catering for both religious and secular subjects. The Shafi'i Sunni Muslim majority in Cambodia established the Sjl Meunaga Ugama Annikmah Al Islamia (SMU). The school prepares students to pass standardized tests and continue their studies in the Middle East. In addition, Tablighi Jamaat has also set foot in Cambodia. This group organizes a series of circles to preach the "true message of Islam," and they emphasize the need to strengthen the Muslim brotherhood and selflessness as a means to become a true believer. The Jamaat also established schools, having close ties to Pakistan and India. Islamic schools in Cambodia are affiliated with one of these three groups: the Shafi'i Sunnis, the Salafi (reformist thinkers), and the Tablighi Jamaat, but there are some schools that maintain independence from these three ideologies. In contemporary Cambodia, donors from Kuwait, Libya, and London-based aid groups have made Islamic schools flourish. However, the teaching of pluralism is lacking in these schools, and most students hold strongly to their exclusive interpretation

of Islam. Another noteworthy issue in Cambodian Islamic schools is the complete segregation between female and male Muslim students.

The last chapter looks at Islamic schools in the Philippines. The majority of Muslims in the Philippines reside in the southern part of the country, within the boundaries of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). McKenna and Abdula suggest that the mainstream of Philippine society holds some prejudices about the emergence of the Islamic schools. Some argue that Islamic schools have the goal of radicalizing Muslim youth, while others take a contrary view. The first form of Islamic school was known as the *pandita*, an informally run, home-based education. The *pandita* mainly teaches how to read and memorize verses of the Qur'an, and does not extend to comprehension of those verses. Another form of Islamic school, the *madrasah*, emerged post-1950s. However, the armed conflict that has continued since the 1970s has retarded the development of Islamic schools. Despite facing oppressive conditions in the form of an ongoing conflict, the Muslims of the Philippines have managed to revive their community through the establishment of Islamic schools. McKenna and Abdula note the gloomy fact that the ARMM area, in which most Muslims reside, is the poorest region in the country, and thus offers very low quality education to its residents. This chapter discusses four categories of Islamic schools that exist in the contemporary Philippines: community *madrasah*, traditional postwar *madrasah*, Quranic reading schools, and comprehensive Islamic academies. Two other schools also exist which do not fit into these categories. The enrolment ratio in the Philippines shows the opposite trend to Cambodia. Female students outnumber male students in the various schools studied by McKenna and Abdula. This chapter argues that the Islamic schools of the Philippines do not intend to radicalize Muslim youth, but instead attempt to train Muslims to stick to Islamic moral values.

The book is of great value in that it widens our perspectives on Islamic teaching. It provides a clear analysis on the politics of Islamic education in Southeast Asia, and disproves the myth that Islamic schools are linked to the emergence of extremism, although it cannot be doubted that a number of suspected terrorist actors are graduates of Islamic schools. Islamic schools in the countries studied share similarities in terms of the materials used and pedagogical methods. The schools also show similar origins amongst the diverse Islamic ideologies that have figured in the development of Southeast Asian Islam, such as the Shafi'i Sunis, the Salafiyah movement, and the Tablighi Jamaat. A further interesting commonality is that Islamic schools in Southeast Asia have attempted to integrate their curricula by inserting general and so-called secular subjects. For all this invaluable information and analysis, the book is worthwhile reading for people interested in Islam, politics, education, and beyond.

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