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Islam and politics in Southeast Asia by Johan Saravanamuttu (ed.),
London: Routledge, 2010, 188 pp.

Southeast Asia which is home to the largest community of Muslims in the world offers an interesting case study to scholars of Islamic studies and social scientists both for its own particular variety of understanding and practice of Islam as well as a contrast to other Muslim communities, especially that of the Islamic heartland. The event of September 11 has resulted in Islam being regarded as an enemy of the West and of America in particular, which is associated with violence and terrorism. Since September 11, there has been greater interest in the West on the study of the social, cultural and political life of Muslims in Southeast Asia in order to uncover what it perceives as a gentler and more moderate face of Islam in contrast to that of the radical and violent Middle East, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

This book which is funded by the TODA Institute under its PEACE programme an acronym for Peace, Education, Art, Culture, and Environment, is the product of the collaborative effort of eight social scientists of various disciplines with area expertise in Southeast Asia. It is the outcome of an earlier project Political and Civil Islam in Southeast Asia which is also sponsored by the institute.

The primary objective of *Islam and politics in Southeast Asia* as asserted by its editor, Johan Saravanamuttu, who is currently Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore and previously Professor of Political Science at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, "is to examine the ways in which Muslim politics in Southeast Asia has greatly impacted democratic practice and contributed to its practical and discursive development" by addressing "the majority and minority situations of Muslims within both democratic and authoritarian politics".

Two features distinguish it from other books dealing with the subject of Islam and politics in Southeast Asia: one, the distinction between the situation of Muslim majority and Muslim minority states, and two, the distinctions of democratic, authoritarian and "authoritarian democracy".

"Authoritarian democracy" is a particular category propounded by Chaiwat Satha-Anand, one of the contributors, and adopted by most of the writers. "Authoritarian democracy" thus functions as an overarching political construct which provides the framework within which Muslim politics in Southeast Asia is viewed and discussed.

The Muslim majority states examined are Malaysia and Indonesia, and the Muslim minority states are Singapore, Thailand and Philippines. At the outset, this book states that it intends to explore and present to the reader a nuanced and varied study of the phenomenon of Muslim politics in Southeast Asia. It neither looks at Islam in Southeast Asia as having a homogenous and monolithic manifestation, nor of a uniform and standardised understanding and practice of democracy. This orientation is made clear in the first chapter written by Judith Nagata who states "that a definition of 'democracy' is determined largely by the agenda of the definer, scholar or politician, and that many variations masquerade under the democratic model" (p. 20). Therefore, she is critical of the search of a normative model of democratic process and is well aware of the diverse brands of democracy advocated by state leaders the world over. In Southeast Asia, for example, there is President Sukarno's "guided democracy" and Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew's democracy based on "Asian values". Similarly, the discourse on democracy in Islam is also varied.

Nagata's examination of two Muslim movements, al-Arqam and Nahdatul Ulama, in the Muslim majority states of Malaysia and Indonesia respectively, reveal that "Islam is unavoidably political" in these two countries and "there are no predictable rules" which govern "political and religious formations" which "mutate rapidly as do the situations which shape them" (p. 41).

Four more chapters deal with political Islam in the Muslim majority states of Malaysia and Indonesia. They are Jacques Bertrand's *Political Islam and democracy in the majority muslim country of Indonesia*, Maznah Mohamad's *The authoritarian state and political Islam in muslim-majority Malaysia*, Johan Saravanamuttu's *Encounters of muslim politics in Malaysia* and Syed Farid Alatas' *Ideology and Utopia in the discourse on civil society in Indonesia and Malaysia*. Their individual studies reveal the particular and diverse nature of the interface

between political Islam and "authoritarian democracy" and in the case of Maznah Mohamad, the authoritarian state which practices ethnic democracy.

In a chapter entitled *Missing lawyer of Thailand: The fate of engaged Muslims in authoritarian democracy*, Chaiwat Satha-Anand examines the political engagement of committed Muslims in the Muslim minority state of Thailand and exposes the *modus operandi* of Thailand's "authoritarian democracy" under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra which uses "state terror – blacklisting, round-up, torture, extrajudicial killings of captured insurgents" and "authoritarian legislation" which result in the suspension of constitutional rights of citizens, all of which makes it almost impossible for minority Thai Muslims to exercise their rights "through the use of law and nonviolence" (p. 121–22).

The theme of a democratic state assuming "an authoritarian face" and "turning violent and brutal" when dealing with the assertion of rights by minority Muslims is further explored by Carmen Abu Bakar in *A never-ending war and the struggle for peace in southern Philippines*. Her study shows how in the Philippines, "the rule of law is subverted to serve the narrow vested interests of the majority" or that "of the state as defined by the party in power" (p. 128). She observes that democratic institutions are twisted and abandoned to take on authoritarian tendencies and military measures are adopted to solve minority aspirations of the Moros. She concludes that the long wars between the state and Muslim movements in the Philippines show the inability of the state to manage or accommodate minority demands through peaceful, democratic processes.

Husin Mutalib's *Authoritarian democracy and the minority muslim polity in Singapore* is a study of a stable minority Muslim community and its engagement with the authoritarian democracy of Singapore. He shows how the state gleaning lessons from the excesses of the other Southeast Asian experiences, cautiously manages the assertiveness of its Muslim minority through Singapore's broad governing philosophy of accommodation so as not to marginalise them.

The book concludes with Syed Farid Alatas' chapter which deals with Muslim civil society discourses in Indonesia and Malaysia. He observes

that recent years witnessed the emergence and growth of an ever increasingly vibrant civil society in both countries. The particular significance of this chapter lies in its distinction between "Islam as faith on one hand, and those orientations of Muslims that are products of particular historical periods and social conditions" (p. 166). The writer, a sociologist by training, attempts to "introduce a conceptual scheme for the study of the various orientations among Muslims that are often collectively referred to as revivalist or resurgent ideologies" (p. 166). He believes that by classifying types of orientation within Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia, the two Muslim majority countries, into ideologies which are pro-establishment and utopias that are anti-establishment, the thinking of Muslim groups in Southeast Asia as a region, such as Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Nahdatul Ulama and the Moro Liberation Front can be better understood and characterised.

Islam and politics in Southeast Asia is a well researched and documented study of Muslim politics in modern post-colonial Southeast Asia. The individual writer's astute observations and pointed conclusions offer insights how each Muslim community that is examined responds to and engages with the state which is viewed as fundamentally authoritarian. Thus, the book is of value to students and scholars of social sciences, Southeast Asian and Islamic studies because it provides a basis for an understanding of Muslim politics in individual countries of Southeast Asia, to make comparisons between Muslim communities, particularly between the situations of Muslim majority and Muslim minority, and finally to gain an overview of the region as a whole.

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