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BOOK REVIEW

The State, Ulama and Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia, by Norshahril Saat. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018.

Capture or Co-optation? Making Sense of Official Ulama's Authority in Malaysia and Indonesia

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An Incisive Study of the Dialectic Relationship between Official *Ulama* and the State in Malaysia and Indonesia

Throughout the Islamic history, Muslim community (*ummah*) in general perceives the authority of ulama (religious scholars) in the context of the ulama's distance from the seat of power. In other words, an ulama's authority is highly regarded if the *ummah* deems him capable of exercising independent judgement free from the self-serving sway of the rulers. Nevertheless, beginning in the late 1800s, the expansion of modern bureaucracy provides the ulama with a new coercive and deep-reaching tool to exert their authority over the *ummah*, in return for bestowing religious imprimatur on the policies of the ruling regime of the day. Official ulama, as these religious functionaries are known, are conventionally seen as "rubber stamps" and "lackeys" of the ruling elites, who surrender their theological independent judgement in exchange for material rewards and status (p. 24).

However, Norshahril's empirically rich and theoretically informed study of official ulama in Malaysia and Indonesia illustrates that the power relations between official ulama and their state patrons is not as clear-cut and lopsided as it is conventionally believed. The book argues through the theoretical lens of Joel Migdal's "state-in-society" that official ulama in Malaysia, despite the initial co-optation, have managed to assert their independence and agency, so much so that they have successfully captured some parts of the state. This stands in contrast to the official ulama in Indonesia, who have been less successful than their Malaysian

counterparts in doing so. Simply put, official ulama are not as toothless and less influential as they are made out to be since they are able to employ the legitimised powers of the state to extract compliance and respect for their authority from the Muslim populace, albeit to varying degrees of success.

In this book, official ulama in Malaysia are represented by the National Fatwa Committee [of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Malaysia] (*Jawatankuasa Fatwa Majlis Kebangsaan Bagi Hal Ugama Islam Malaysia*, JKF-MKI), Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (*Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia*, JAKIM), and Malaysian Institute for Islamic Understanding (*Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia*, IKIM). Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the Ulama Council of Indonesia (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI) forms the collective authority of official ulama in the country. Even though the aforementioned institutions can be considered as official ulama in their respective countries, their official roles and status vary, which explain the differences in their capacities to capture the state.

The book puts forth three factors in explaining why the official ulama in Malaysia have been more successful in capturing the state than their counterparts in Indonesia: clear institutional role, coherent ideology, and organisational unity (p. 41). Firstly, the official ulama in Malaysia have been deployed by the state as agents of Islamisation since the onset of the Islamic resurgence in the late 1970s, which gives them a clear institutional role, namely to defuse the political threat posed by the Islamic opposition such as the Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (*Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*, PAS). MUI does not enjoy similar core clarity in institutional role since the threat of political Islam to the state legitimacy in Indonesia is not as dire as it is in Malaysia. Secondly, official ulama in Malaysia are institutionally stronger due to their ability to rally around a coherent ideology that propagates the interests of the regime and the sultanates, particularly the five tenets of the state philosophy *Rukun Negara* and the belief in *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy). In comparison, the religiously neutral Indonesian state philosophy *Pancasila* severely circumscribes the ability of official ulama in Indonesia to advance their religious agenda, and thus depriving them of a powerful ideology with which they can instrumentalise. Finally, by being organisationally cohesive the official ulama in Malaysia are able to confront threats to its interests and authority in more effective and forceful manner, in comparison to the MUI in Indonesia, which is riven with ideological divisions and internal rivalries that, in turn, weaken its authority.

Two pivotal events led to the increased role of official ulama in the governing affairs of Indonesia and Malaysia: the wave of Islamic resurgence in the late 1970s and the Asian financial crisis in 1997. These critical junctures opened the door to a more competitive political environment, which ramped up participation of various civil society actors, including ulama and Islamic political activists, many of whom penetrated into the inner sanctum of the state in order to

effect changes from within. Despite the empowerment of official ulama in both countries, especially after 1997, their objectives in exploiting the state apparatuses as a means to express their authority differ starkly. Official ulama in Malaysia use their state-endowed coercive powers as a way to consolidate their authority, sometimes to the point of defying the wish of the regime. Official ulama in Indonesia, by contrast, find themselves in a tenuous position to seek recognition for their authority in the post-authoritarian era, namely to break away from their "rubberstamp" (*stempel pemerintah*) label and compete with other Islamic mass organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. In short, the empowerment of official ulama in Malaysia allows them to establish their own power base that is immune to influences from the society, which is not the case for their counterparts in Indonesia.

The rise of official ulama in Indonesia and Malaysia also coincides with two inter-related socio-economic factors: the sizeable group of middle-class Muslims and the neo-liberal economic policies. The white-hot economic growth rate especially in the decades leading up to the 1997 Asian financial crisis has produced a significant population of largely conservative middle-class Muslims, who require the culture of modern consumption to accommodate their strict religious way of life. The demand, in turn, creates a niche in the economy for *syariah*-compliant consumer activities to thrive, in particular the halal-certification of food and beverages and Islamic banking and finance. The new market niche provides lucrative opportunity for the official ulama to become actors in the capitalist economy, chiefly to exploit the insecurities of conservative middle-class Muslims who are looking for the official certainty that their material consumption does not run afoul of their religious beliefs. It is within this socio-economic context that the authority of official ulama in Malaysia and Indonesia resonates the strongest.

While the book is meticulous and systematic in structuring its argument, enriched by a host of elite interviews, it under-discusses some aspects of political Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia that I believe warrant more emphasis in order to provide a holistic narrative of ulama authority in these two countries. In Malaysia, electoral calculation played a crucial role in moderating the Islamic views of the former *Barisan Nasional* (BN)-led federal government, which then constrains the authority of the official ulama. The United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), the political patron of official ulama in Malaysia, had to take into account the religious sensitivities of BN's Borneo component parties, lest it would squander the electoral vote bank it had long depended on to remain in power. The haphazard way the former BN government dealt with the Malay bible hullabaloo and its obvious foot-dragging when it came to passing the RU355 (the so-called *hudud* law) proved this point. In Indonesia, while the author does discuss the tussle between MUI and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) on the issue of halal certification, the

discussion on institutional tensions can be made more salient by adding the fact that the two institutions also diverge widely in ideological orientation, with MUI being more religiously conservative and dogmatic than MORA. Apropos to the author's argument, the institutional fragmentation divided along ideological fault line can help to explain the weakness of MUI's authority vis-à-vis other agencies of the state.

In all, this book is a welcome addition to the comparative study of political Islam in two Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia. Not many books have been written that compare these two countries in an equal, empathetic and substantive manner, and Norshahril's book is one of the very few that strive to fill this knowledge lacuna. In this regard, the author has done splendidly well in explicating the differences between the two countries despite their many shared characteristics.