

BOOK REVIEW

Islamic Education in Indonesia and Malaysia: Shaping Minds, Saving Souls by Azmil Tayeb. Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2018, 250 pp.

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There are many historical studies on Muslim connections in Southeast Asia that examine Muslim societies in the region including of both present-day Malaysia and Indonesia. Yet, many contemporary studies on Muslim societies in this region focus on a single country. Azmil Tayeb's book *Islamic Education in Indonesia and Malaysia: Shaping Minds, Saving Souls* stands out as one of the recent comparative scholarly works that bring these two neighbouring countries together. The book is theoretically engaged, empirically rich and analytically persuasive, examining the nexus of state-society relations in managing religious education. Thus, it not only benefits researchers in the studies of Muslim societies and political Islam, but also those interested in comparative politics, state-society relations and religious education.

Azmil Tayeb divides his book into key six chapters. The first two chapters provide readers with broader theoretical debates and detailed backgrounds about the development of Islamic education in both countries. He brilliantly pairs up three double case studies (Aceh in Indonesia and Kelantan in Malaysia, Nusa Tenggara Timur in Indonesia and Sarawak in Malaysia, as well as integrated Islamic schools in urban Indonesia and Malaysia) to examine the dynamics of state-society relations in managing Islamic education in three different settings. The first one is in overwhelmingly Muslim majority settings, the second one is situated in Muslim-minority regions, and the last one is mainly located in urban middle-class neighbourhoods. In the final chapter, he concludes with a statement that "Islamic education in Indonesia is more decentralized and discursively diverse, while in Malaysia it is more centralized and discursively restricted" (p. 216).

The book has convincingly argued that Malaysia has been more successful in centralising its control over Islamic education, and more concerned with promoting a restrictive orthodoxy, as compared to Indonesia. Informed by the theoretical works of state-in-society relations and historical institutionalism, it outlines three key factors: the ideological makeup of the state institutions that oversee Islamic education; patterns of societal Islamisation that have prompted different responses from the states; and control of resources by the central government that influences centre-periphery relations.

Chapter Five of this book is of particular interest to me. It examines integrated Islamic education in Indonesia and Malaysia which is popular among urban Muslim middle-classes and professionals – a topic that speaks to my own research on the cultural politics of urban Muslim place-making in both countries. The two pious suburban areas that I frequented – Depok in Indonesia and Bangi in Malaysia – are Muslim-majority townships where many integrated Islamic schools are located. This chapter suggests the rise of such schools reflects the growth of the Muslim middle classes and their aspiration to attain success in this world and the hereafter. By examining the extra-curricular activities in the schools, it analyses how Islamic activists promote their ideologies to the students. It is of my interest to explore how successful such promotion of ideologies among the students has been.

In Chapter Five too, Azmil Tayeb examines the politics behind the development of such schools and situate it within the broader *dakwah* movements or Islamic activism in Indonesia and Malaysia. While I agree with most of his analyses, I beg to differ when he uses the term “apolitical approach” (pp. 204; 206) to describe the *dakwah* movements in Malaysia, especially ABIM (Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement) and IKRAM (Malaysian IKRAM Association). Azmil is correct to point out that integrated Islamic education in Indonesia has a stronger link with the *dakwah* movement and PKS (Prosperous Justice Party), while in Malaysia, such connections between integrated Islamic schools and political parties are rather fluid, diverse and have been transformed over time. Yet, this does not mean that *dakwah* movements in Malaysia take an “apolitical approach” or are less political than its Indonesian counterpart, instead it reflects their different modes and strategies of political engagement.

The key strength of this book is its comparative perspective, yet the eagerness to compare the differences sometimes hinders it from questioning certain taken-for-granted assumptions. Agreeing that the state and the society are mutually constitutive, the book convincingly examines the diverse actors and complex processes that shape the state-society nexus in managing Islamic education. However, it gives fewer analyses of the various competitions and alignments among various state actors and societal actors in both countries. Similarly, the book emphasises the differences with an aim to “to find common thread and points of divergence that explain each country’s peculiarities” (p. 223),

yet pays less attentions to the divergences as well as their connections. Of course, these limitations reflect the focuses of the book rather than its weaknesses, thus as Azmil Tayeb hopes, this book opens up more questions for further inquiry, pointing to the need for more comparative studies and transnational research, to be done especially by scholars in this region.