

Islam and Politics in Indonesia

About: Delphine Allès, *Transnational Islamic Actors and Indonesia's Foreign Policy*, Routledge

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Indonesia is known to be the most-populated Muslim-majority country in the world. With an interdisciplinary perspective, Delphine Allès' book highlights the roots and continuities of the influence of Islam in political and foreign policy developments of contemporary Indonesia.

Based on a PhD thesis at Sciences Po Paris, Delphine Allès' book² is intended for those interested in Indonesian studies, Islamic studies, International Relations and Asian Politics. Rich in both historical account and on contemporary developments of Islam and politics in Indonesia and its region, the book, in sections or in its entirety would be an excellent resource even for novices embarking on research on this part of the world. Its interdisciplinary approach, illustrated through the application of sociological theories from founding scholars like Max Weber and Emile Durkheim on religion is dictated with the critical rigour desired of a socio-historical perspective. Allès also engaged key contemporary scholars on Indonesia with the likes of Robert Hefner and Martin van Bruinessen cited alongside experienced Indonesian practitioners straddling both academic and political spheres

² Delphine Allès is a young professor of political science specialising in International Relations at Université Paris Est Créteil (UPEC) and associate researcher with the Research Institute of Contemporary Southeast Asia (IRASEC).

in Indonesia, notably Ambassador Rizal Sukma, and Dewi Fortuna Anwar, professor and Deputy Secretary for Political Affairs to Indonesia's vice president in 2018.

The History of Islam in Indonesia

The chronological structure of how the analysis is presented in the book makes it relatively easy to follow. Dedicating ample space for a socio-historical descriptive in the earlier chapters, significant religious developments are elegantly interwoven into the archipelago's early political milestones. This historical discussion highlights the roots and continuities of the influence of Islam in political and foreign policy developments of contemporary Indonesia which are examined in the later chapters.

The first chapter begins with the spread of Islam in the 14th century and provides an informative account of the early linkages between transnational Islamic actors and the Malay archipelago's foreign relations. Already this first chapter opens a fresh window into an area which has previously received little attention especially when examining Islam in the region. It sheds light on how the religious affiliation factored into political engagements and strategic considerations of the early sultanates, moving beyond the conventional accounts revolving around missionary work, trade and business in this period. Moving onto the colonial period Allès highlights the processes of institutionalisation of religious affairs, motivated by a suspicion of the religion based on the Dutch colonial power's experience of Islam in other parts of the world, which eventually did see it as a driving force behind anti-colonial movements. In the subsequent chapter the reader is brought through two significant periods of Guided Democracy under President Sukarno and the New Order with President Suharto, two periods with contrasting outcomes on Islam in civil society.

Political and Religious Actors

The valuable contribution of the book lies mainly in Chapters 3 onwards. Within Chapter 3, Allès successfully captures the whole gamut of non-state political actors, ranging from civil society actors to Islamic political parties, right down to the jihadist organisations operating in Indonesia. For each, she provides succinct analysis of their activities in relation to Islam used either as a mobilising factor or a means of extending a justifying narrative, with due focus on the transnational dimension. Each case is lucidly assessed for implications on Indonesia's foreign policy image and formal mechanisms. For example, Allès explores the mechanisms and underlying motivations by a section of the non-state actors, notably the larger Muhammadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama (NU) as well as the newer *Jaringan Islam Liberal* (JIL, Liberal Islam Network), who actively promote this model of Islam locally and

transnationally as a means to protect against external influences, be it Westernisation or Arabisation. Here the analyses of contemporary Indonesia zero in on the promotion of *Islam Nusantara* (archipelagic Islam) or Indonesian Islam as interchangeably used in her assessment. This is despite differing sub-motivations but their transnational agenda ultimately aligns with that of the current Indonesian government. The rest of the chapter dedicates equally insightful assessments for Islamic political party actors and other non-state actors such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and jihadist groups such as Laskar Jihad and Jemaah Islamiyah.

Religion and International Relations

In Chapter 5, Allès brings together the relatively more descriptive contents in the previous chapters and incorporates them within a critical assessment of Indonesia's foreign policy strategy with a focus on a post-9/11 political environment. The chapter brings readers through the line-up of post-*Reformasi* presidents and the initiatives led by the respective foreign ministers Hassan Wirajuda and Marty Natalegawa in engaging with the Islamic non-state actors and incorporating them within foreign policy-making thus attempting to undo the effects of Suharto's political leadership on the role of Islam in Indonesian politics and foreign policy. Allès' analysis provides an informed perspective on the task at hand for Indonesia's current national authorities, with its foreign ministry now led by Retno Marsudi, in managing Indonesia's international image as a non-theocratic Muslim-majority functioning democracy and yet maintaining a religiously neutral stance. At the same time, the authorities also need to manage this image and its actions on the international stage with domestic reactions, both in terms of Indonesian public opinion and a vibrant and dynamic civil society which includes increasingly influential Islamic actors.

Aside from Indonesianists and students of international relations, this book is also particularly useful for those interested in religious studies, particularly the place of religion in politics and international relations. However, while Allès successfully presents the Indonesian case study on the role of Islamic non-state actors on official foreign policy, several points need to be noted when attempting to extend analysis beyond the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. In Southeast Asia, it is the only Muslim majority country with a vibrant functioning democracy. While neighbouring Malaysia and Brunei are both also Muslim-majority countries, the former is a federal representative democratic constitutional monarchy while Brunei is an absolute monarchy. In both countries, Islam is the official religion. Meanwhile other Muslim communities across the region are minorities. Beyond the region, the Indonesian case also cannot be said to speak for the influence of Islam in mainstream politics and foreign policy for other countries in the broader 'Muslim world', with the possible exception of Turkey. Nevertheless, it is a valuable example to illustrate one of the

many cases of the role of religion in politics and international relations, rendering it useful for comparative analyses and raises questions for further research.

Desecularisation and Modernisation

One such question is the viability of the secularism as modernisation thesis in explaining the role of religion in contemporary politics. The issue is briefly raised in the concluding chapter although the accompanying response Allès provides appears to still be trapped within the conventional grand narrative. She argues that the Indonesian case, contrary to the thesis, presents how “the de-privatisation of religion” or “desecularization” [sic] does not lead to a “de-modernisation”. She further points out that its modernisation process corresponds to the raising of barriers to politics, or democratisation, hence leading to increased pluralism of actors which includes the Islamic non-state actors. This line of argument can be read as in fact reinforcing the logic of the secularisation thesis. The case, however, could be interpreted simply, as she also points out, as two *parallel* processes of democratisation on one hand and modernisation on the other hand.

Here the Indonesian case study makes for an interesting case of how a government guided by and committed to guarding the principles of the religiously-neutral *Pancasila* is able to manage expectations of a religious population while maintaining an image of a non-theocratic state which is moderate and democratic. Indonesia, however, has never effectively secularised in order for it to ‘de-secularise’. Instead of a secularisation, the Indonesian authorities, particularly under Suharto had effectively pushed out Islamic non-state actors under an authoritarian regime. Would this then count as a conscious secularisation by the state, or otherwise? Did the level of religiosity of the Muslim population in Indonesia also undergo change since? In order to understand this, it would be useful to consider the process of secularisation of a state on two levels: the state, and that of its population. This paves the way for critical further research.

Reviewed: Delphine Allès, Transnational Islamic Actors and Indonesia's Foreign Policy, UK, Routledge, 2016, 157 pages.

Published in booksandideas.net, 8 July 2019.