Taiwan Journal of Democracy, Volume 6, No. 2: 157-161

Book Review: Johan Saravanamuttu, ed., *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 188 pages.

Southeast East Asia

A *Sui Generis* Case on the Study of Political Islam and Democratization?

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The post-9/11 political discourses have been dominated by the topic of political Islam, especially in those regions of the world where democratization still remains an arduous task. In this context, markedly different from the Middle East where Islam is the foundational basis of politics, Southeast Asia ostensibly offers an interesting case of scholarly scrutiny, as the countries in this region exhibit majority and minority conditions of Muslims and, more importantly, there are questions about the extent of the religion's influence over the state and its socio-political interfaces. As such, recent research endeavors covering this theme are nothing new, as exemplified in the cases of a single-country study[1] or even a study involving two countries (Malaysia and Indonesia).[2] In addition, two notable volumes on political Islam in this region are comprehensive and comparative in nature, that of Nathan and Hashim (2005),[3] which paints a picture of an Islamic religion as an underdog institution in light of the post-9/11 environment, and more recently that of Mean's survey (2009)[4] of political Islam's long historical heritage and even its present-day countenance.

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[1] See Edmund Terence Gomez, ed., *Politics in Malaysia: The Malay Dimension* (London: Routledge, 2007), 176 pages; Andreas Ufen, *Ethnizität, Islam, Reformasi: Die Evolution der Konfliktlinien im Parteiensystem Malaysias* [Ethnicity, Islam and "Reformasi": The evolution of conflicts in the Malaysian party system] (Wiesbaden, Germany: VS Verlag, 2010), 304 pages; Greg Barton, "Indonesia: Legitimacy, Secular Democracy, and Islam," *Politics and Policy* 38, Special Issue (2010): 471-496; and Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 312 pages.

[2] Joseph Chinyong Liow and Rohaiza Amad Asi, "Political Islam in Southeast Asia: One Ummah, Many Narratives," *Harvard Asia Pacific Review* 9 (2008): 53-59.

[3] K. S. Nathan and Muhammad Hashim Kamali, eds., *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 362 pages.

[4] Gordon Means, *Political Islam in Southeast Asia* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009), 443 pages.

Considering such previous scholarly pursuits, Saravanamuttu's edited volume perfectly fills in the literature gap by addressing unflinchingly the contemporary socio-political dynamics of Muslim politics in the region with countries that have Muslims comprising the majority (Malaysia and Indonesia) or a minority (the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore). The key assumption posited by the volume's contributors is that the nature of political Islam—defined as the "aspiration to political power" and the reshaping of "state-society relations in accordance with Islamic precepts" (p.1)—is contingent upon the nature of the state. More specifically, arguing that Islam has transnational and local manifestations, the contributors invoke the notion of "authoritarian democracy" (conceived by Satha-Anand—one of the volume's contributors), which points to how democracy is construed as a "personality" in as much as it could also be considered as a "framework of governance." Such distinction is used by the writers as a valuable analytical tool in examining the subtleties of how the state may assume an "authoritarian personality" in its dealings with its Muslim constituents. Aside from Saravanamuttu's introductory chapter expounding the majority-minority dynamics, the edited volume is comprised of eight other substantive chapters, which consist of the following: a comparative study of Islamic movements in Malaysia and Indonesia (Nagata); the Indonesian story of political Islam and democracy (Bertrand); a macro-level examination of the Malaysian authoritarian state and political Islam (Mohamad); assessment of the "quotidian" encounters of political Islam in Malaysia (Saravanamuttu); the shift to repressive politics of the Thai state, using the case of an abducted lawyer in Thailand (Satha-Anand); narrative of the struggle of *Bangsamoro* Muslims in the southern Philippines (Abubakar); the "accommodationist" and "twin hard-soft" policy framework of Singapore (Mutalib); and the application of Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge approach in analyzing discourse on civil society in Indonesia and Malaysia (Alatas). Conspicuously, one of the strengths of this volume is its interdisciplinary approach, that is, its ability to tackle the overarching question of Islamic politics from various disciplinary perspectives, ranging from political studies, sociology, and anthropology to regional development studies.

The book attempts to examine several countries in the region by devising the above-mentioned notion of "authoritarian democracy." Paradoxical as it may be, such concept was, and nonetheless, is heuristically powerful in creating an image of a state that wears a cloak of democracy, albeit practicing occasionally (and selectively) its repressive apparatus over minority groups in the "interest" of the state. Nagata's chapter is significantly insightful, since it presents a nuanced view of the various differing interests of the nonmonolithic Muslim population in Indonesia, which averts the tendency for Islam to dominate the political landscape. This situation is remarkably different from the Malaysian case, wherein the state assumes virtually absolute authority over religious politics. Deviating slightly from the volume's heuristic tool of "authoritarian democracy," Nagata invokes the "relational" or the intersubjective notion of

democracy and emphasizes instead the theoretical appeal of looking into the "practices of state authority" rather than a full-blown branding of an authoritarian state wearing a deceivingly democratic cloak. With some reservations on the notion of "authoritarian democracy," I somehow agree with Nagata's analysis that the focal point of analysis must be centered upon the state in *praxis*,[5] rather than propounding a more imposing analytical construct that somehow overshadows some important nuances as to the dynamic practices of states in Southeast Asia.

Meanwhile, Bertrand's *problematique* is about political Islam's presence in Southeast Asia as a considerable impediment to democracy. As Bertrand argues that it is not an obstacle, his argumentation process appears to be parochial, that is, he invokes the case of the Aceh rebel movement as an "autonomist" separatist group, rather than as an Islamist movement, thereby hoping to have persuasively dismissed political Islam's potential to hinder the flourishing of democracy. Referring only to the Aceh case to dismiss how political Islam could be devoid of its obstructive potential to democratization in Indonesia, is indeed a *non sequitur* argument. Disregarding the self-evident fact that the Aceh case is not even an exemplary case study on examining the dynamics of a weakening democracy in the region, the author appears to have unjustly glossed over the complex dynamics of the Islamic armed movement vis-à-vis several Indonesian civil society sectors that could be responsible in pushing for an undesirable form of political Islam.

Focusing on the Malaysian context, Mohamad's contribution is perceptive to the intricacies of the practices of the Malaysian state. His notion of "ethnic democracy" to explain the state's cleverly functional and symbolic utilization of political Islam in legitimizing itself as an institution is considerably convincing. Thus, Mohamad refers us to how the Malaysian state privileges a specific ethnic community—in this case, the Malay ethnicity—in order to sustain a narrative of a Malay-based statehood, notwithstanding the presence of other races in this post-colonially-created state. What makes the argumentation more nuanced is that, according to Mohamad, Islamization policies which are carried out by the state are pursuant to the creation of a racially defined state rather than a religion-based state. Arguably, it is indeed conceivable that political Islam is being used instrumentally as a means to catapult the Malay race as the foundational basis of the Malay state, consequently sustaining the Malay-based political party's authoritarian rule. However, what the article seemingly

[5] In fact, the recent Anglo-American debate on the theories of the state shows the apparent shift toward an antifoundationalist and antiessentialist conception of the state, thus espousing the idea of the state as "cultural practice." See Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes, *The State as Cultural Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 232 pages. True enough, as Bevir and Rhodes favors ethnographic and decentered approaches, Nagata's approach to the problem through a nuanced socio-political anthropological analysis ultimately fits the need for a conception of a "state in practice."

has failed to demonstrate is how it is also equally palpable to conceive that both political Islam and the Malay race are cardinal elements that comprise the discursive foundations of Malaysian statehood. Also referring to Malaysia, Saravanamuttu's article extends the scope of the debate by looking into the state-led actions juxtaposed with the daily encounters of the citizenry with such actions in the context of a purportedly authoritarian democratic state. This second article clearly supports how the maintenance of a Muslim majority advances the claim to power of a state in an authoritarian democratic form.

On the other hand, Satha-Anand takes the case of an abducted politically active Muslim lawyer in Thailand—Somchai Neelapaichit—in order to demonstrate the intricate interplay of "authoritarian" practices of a "democractic" state in Thailand during the Thaksin period. The author prefers to invoke the notion of "engaged Muslims" rather than "political Islam," with the former emphasizing the notion of "goodness"—at least, based on popular perceptions, notwithstanding all the philosophical baggage carried with it—in the context of calling the societal shift to be one from "bad" politics to "good politics." Although Satha-Anand's analysis is rhetorically persuasive yet methodologically inadequate, I find this view of "engaged Muslims" inherently necessary in today's post-9/11 politics, as what we need is a civil society that is more actively vigilant than before, amid the seemingly abusive practices of the "state-in-emergency." Hence, Islamic sectors of civil society have to step up to the call of being more involved in the public sphere of deliberation, politics, and policy-making in order to advance their interests, or at the very least, to articulate their views on issues of public interest. Thus, by invoking the call for "engaged Muslims" rather than for "political Islam," one may be able to dramatically reduce the non-Muslim public's unreasonable fears of Islam taking over the entirety of the political landscape. On the same breadth, Abubakar maintains that this overt apprehension of the non-Muslim public toward political Islam is one of the key reasons—along with the democratically installed executive exhibiting manifestations of "authoritarianism"—why the conflict in the southern Philippines appears to be a never-ending struggle. With this in mind, I find Abubakar's assessment overtly pessimistic toward reconciliation with the Muslim minority in the Philippines. Apparently, the author fails to recognize how the Manila-based executive government was unable to advance the eventual resolution of the Muslims' claim to their ancestral land due to a Supreme Court ruling impeding this move. The existence of an overwhelming public majority rebuffing calls for more autonomy in Muslim Mindanao (southern Philippines) as well as the unusual silence of the Islamic civil society groups in this landmark policy issue are enough conditions why the inability to finally make a truce was somehow acceptable, based on the democratic protocols of a dissenting judiciary amid the politically willing executive. Henceforth, does this make the executive government in Manila more authoritarian than what it is broad-mindedly accused to be? Surely, there are more nuances or other more persuasive examples that would exactly address

the question of "authoritarian democracy" being imposed by the executive branch upon the Muslim minority than a finicky allusion to an obstructed peace agreement due to a judicial ruling.

Nonetheless, the Philippines could probably gain some valuable insights from the "accommodationist model" of Singapore, a policy paradigm that has been lucidly explained by Mutalib. Through the espousal of meritocracy and multiculturalism, evidently devoid of any religion-based privileges, Singaporean nation-building efforts have been relatively successful in promoting stable societal and state relations with the Muslim minority, aside from, most importantly, the state's regular and vigorous engagement with the Islamic civil society leaders in this rich city-state. This reminds us of how Abubakar highlights the existence of a vigilant civil society in the southern Philippines, yet it was virtually absent in social and political mobilization during the battle for Supreme Court recognition of the peace agreement.

The contribution from Alatas is notable for its ability to show—using Karl Mannheim's notions of ideology and utopia—how Islam as a religion is fundamentally distinct from the orientations and proclivities of its believers, who are, by the way, substantially influenced by their social conditions as well as by the socio-historical milieu in which they live. In its application to Islamic civil society discursive dynamics in Indonesia and Malaysia, such methodology was indeed useful in demonstrating how political Islam becomes possible only when Islam is conceived as an "orientation" rather than as "faith." This argumentation is somehow thought-provoking, as it attempts to debunk the widely held belief that Muslim (violent) extremist and fundamentalist movements can be considered as one legitimate strand of Islam. Simply put, Alatas intimates how the current orthodox understanding of violent Islamic extremism is indeed a legitimate form of Islam, which he attempts to somehow disprove.

Conclusively, this edited volume confirms that Southeast Asia could be considered a *sui generis* case in scrutinizing the oscillating and complex dynamics of political Islam vis-à-vis the democratization efforts of the states in the region. Moreover, the contributors were also efficacious enough in examining the various visages of the states in the region in the volume's quest to deal head-on with the Muslim populations, along with a fairly balanced analysis of the political agency of nonstate actors. Although I have serious reservations on the loose usage of "authoritarian democracy," I find this heuristic device useful in demonstrating exceptional instances in which some Southeast Asian states exercise their seemingly undemocratic authority over questions of social and political dealings with their Muslim populations.