

Representing Islam in Southeast Asia

Review of Greg Fealy & Virginia Hooker's (compilers & editors)

Voices of Islam in Southeast Asia: A Contemporary Sourcebook

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by

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Few scholars would probably even consider putting together a "sourcebook" of Southeast Asian contemporary Islam, and even fewer would actually start discussing how such a project could be realized. Taking into consideration the huge number of Muslims living in Southeast Asia (more than 200 million people) and the fact that they are dispersed all over the ten nation states that make up the area, it is not hard to see all the difficulties such a project would pose. Adding to this the large number of "Islamic" languages spoken in the area and the diversity of the cultural settings in which Islam is practiced, most people would probably rather look for a more graspable project than continuing discussing this proposed sourcebook. Greg Fealy and Virginia Hooker opted not to look the other way, and compiled – with much help from both Asian and non-Asian scholars – an impressive sourcebook aiming at representing the diverse voices of Southeast Asian Muslims in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Indeed, it is the voices of Southeast Asian Muslims that stand in focus in this book, as it is a compilation of (mostly) translated texts written by local scholars and influential figures. As such, the book provides a rare insight into the dynamics of Southeast Asian Islam, and it does so to a wide audience as no prior knowledge of Southeast Asian languages is required.

Part I of *Voices of Islam* provides "country overviews" for all the ten nations of Southeast Asia. In this section – spanning over some 70 pages – readers are presented with compact introductions to Islam and the situation of Muslims in the various nations in the region. Though relatively short, these introductions are quite substantial and provide useful information for the upcoming reading of the texts. To complement these overviews, the book also has a "timeline" spanning from the

birth of the Prophet Muhammad until the second Bali bombing in 2005. In addition, there is also a comprehensive glossary, which might prove helpful while reading the texts. Shortly, there is enough contextualizing material in the introduction and in Part I for the texts in Part II to make sense.

Naturally, most text excerpts are from Indonesia and Malaysia. This state of affairs reflects, of course, the size of the Muslim populations in the region, but also the availability of written material. The editors regret that it was "almost impossible" for them to obtain appropriate material from Cambodia and Vietnam (p. 10), and one can imagine that it was almost impossible too, to choose what material to include from Indonesia and Malaysia. These two latter countries are virtually flooded with Islamic books and bookstores.

The text excerpts in Part II – almost 400 pages – are organized under six themes, namely:

- (1) Personal Expression of Faith
- (2) Sharia
- (3) Islam, State and Governance
- (4) Gender and the Family
- (5) Jihad
- (6) Interactions: Global and Local; Muslims and Non-Muslims

Initially, only five themes were selected (2-6), but the participants during one of the project's workshop argued for the inclusion of a section focusing on the more individual level of Islamic practices (p. 8), i.e. what we generally call 'religiosity.' The editors accepted the proposal, which was wise.

In this first section, one can thus read about how Southeast Asian Muslims understand their ritual duties and their religion's mystical side, and how all this manifest itself among contemporary Muslims. Writers as diverse as Azyumardi Azra (former head of the State Islamic University in Jakarta and a prominent historian of Islam) and Imam Samudra (one of the leaders of the Bali bombing in 2002) are represented in this section. This is symptomatic for the book, i.e. that the text excerpts represent very diverse, and sometimes opposing, voices from the region.

The section on sharia focuses, of course, on what is often referred to as 'Islamic Law.' Again we meet the diverse and contesting voices over how Islam should be formed and implemented in society, and the ideas here range from the creation of an Islamic state based on the divine law, to a total rejection of such a thing. We also find practical discussions of practical problems, such as whether or not it was legally permissible to have the corpses after the tsunami in Aceh undergo cremation or not. According to the Muslim liberal Ulil Abshar-Abdalla (p. 204-206), this may very well be permissible according to Islamic law in emergency situations. Another text in this section is

signed Ja'far Umar Thalib, and focuses on an incident that made great headlines in 2001 (p. 170-172). At this time, the *Laskar Jihad* had one of their own members stoned to death, after he had admitted that he had conducted adultery.

Sections 3-6 likewise open up small windows to the nature of Southeast Asian Islam, and let Muslims of diverging understandings of their religion air their opinions. It is often fascinating reading which encourages the reader to seek more information, or try to get hold of the original text(s) in question. The book thus functions as a fine introduction to the divergent voices of Islam in the region for students, but is also suitable for senior researchers. The best thing about this book is that these text excerpts are made available for the public. Certain texts in Southeast Asia have a tendency to be very short-lived and/or difficult to get over, but with *Voices of Islam in Southeast Asia* we have at least a few sections of these texts in safe documentation. One may sometimes ask why a certain text has been included in the compilation, or why others are missing, but that is of course inevitable. On the whole, the editors have made rather balanced choices.

I have many positive things to say about this book and I encourage anyone interested in Southeast Asian cultures and religions to read it. However, I do find that the work in some ways represent a view of Islam/religion that I do not embrace, that is the view that a religion first and foremost is made up of its texts. It has for long been common to regard Islam and other religions as consisting of a series of texts (the older the better, it often seems) that may be studied separated from the life of the adherents of the particular religion. Such is not the case. Rather, the primary voices of Islam in Southeast Asia (or any other religion elsewhere) come from ordinary people practicing their religion, and a *sourcebook* (as opposed to, say, a *textbook*) should thus make place for them. A slightly more anthropological perspective would thus be welcome.

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