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On: 23 December 2014, At: 09:48

Publisher: Routledge

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Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fdem20>

State management of religion in Indonesia, by Myengkyo Seo; The roots of terrorism in Indonesia: from Darul Islam to Jema'ah Islamiyah, by Solahudin; Contemporary developments in Indonesian Islam: explaining the "conservative turn", edited by Martin van Bruinessen

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Published online: 20 Dec 2014.

To cite this article: Michael Buehler (2014): State management of religion in Indonesia, by Myengkyo Seo; The roots of terrorism in Indonesia: from Darul Islam to Jema'ah Islamiyah, by Solahudin; Contemporary developments in Indonesian Islam: explaining the "conservative turn", edited by Martin van Bruinessen, Democratization, DOI: [10.1080/13510347.2014.952289](https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.952289)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.952289>

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BOOK REVIEW

State management of religion in Indonesia, by Myengkyo Seo, London, Routledge, 2013, 192 pp., index, £64.73 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-415-51716-4

The roots of terrorism in Indonesia: from Darul Islam to Jema'ah Islamiyah, by Solahudin (Translated by Dave McRae), Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2013, 236 pp., index, £13.57 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8014-5292-5

Contemporary developments in Indonesian Islam: explaining the “conservative turn”, edited by Martin van Bruinessen, Singapore, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 2013, 240 pp., index, £14.89 (paperback), ISBN 978-981-4414-56-2

Only a few years after Indonesia had become a democracy in 1998, scholars started to note that “a shadow” had fallen on Indonesia and wondered what had happened to “the smiling face of Indonesian Islam”. The three books under review here examine the origins, concrete manifestations and consequences of encroaching Islamist orthodoxy in the context of democratization in the world’s largest Muslim-majority country.

Solahudin shows that the origins of groups that have engaged in violent activities in the name of Islam after the collapse of the New Order date back to the very beginning of the Indonesian republic. During the Indonesian National Revolution, various Islamist groups emerged that demanded a state based on Islamic law. Loosely affiliating with one another under the name Darul Islam (Abode of Islam), this movement openly challenged the Indonesian republic in certain parts of the archipelago. Although the movement was officially terminated by Indonesian armed forces in the mid-1960s, the network of Islamists affiliated with the Darul Islam continued to exist during the Suharto dictatorship. The movement survived in boarding schools and *dakwah* organizations during these years only to resurface after 1998. In recent years, various groups affiliated with the Darul Islam have been responsible for some of the most violent attacks conducted in the name of Islam, including the bombing of a night club in Bali in 2002, which killed more than 200 people, and an attack against the Australian Embassy in Jakarta in 2004.

The volume edited by Martin van Bruinessen shows that manifestations of the Islamization of politics are not confined to terror attacks. In fact, in his introduction to the book van Bruinessen speaks of a “conservative turn” in Indonesian Islam that has taken place “in mainstream Islam” between 1998 and 2005. The other chapters

are dedicated to describing and examining the variegated patterns of this conservative turn. Moch Nur Ichwan examines the Indonesian Council of Islamic Scholars (MUI, *Majelis Ulama Indonesia*), which was founded by Suharto in 1975 to facilitate relations between the government and the Muslim community (*ummah*). Ichwan shows that the democratization of politics has allowed the MUI not only to redefine its role – it now officially serves the *ummah* rather than the government – but also to become more directly involved in politics. In past years, the MUI has become a crucial player in various discourses on public morality or religious orthodoxy, which have occasionally resulted in official government policies such as the law against pornography or the ban on the Ahmadiyah community, a heterodox Islamic group.

In another chapter, Ahmad Najib Burhani examines the discourse within Muhammadiyah, one of the oldest and largest Muslim organizations in Indonesia. Burhani shows that there has been a conservative backlash since at least 2005, when Din Syamsuddin, a slick politician who has spoken out against “the West” at politically opportune moments, was elected as the organization’s new chairman. Since then, Syamsuddin has rallied for various conservative causes. At the same time, however, Muhammadiyah has tried to purge from its ranks members of Islamist movements who began to infiltrate the organization.

Mujiburrahman examines the “politics of shariah” in his chapter on the Preparatory Committee for the Implementation of the Islamic Sharia (KPPSI, *Komite Persiapan Penegakan Syari’ah Islam*), which, based in South Sulawesi province and with direct links to the Darul Islam movement, constitutes one of the most active Islamist groups in newly democratic Indonesia. Mujiburrahman’s chapter too shows the complexity of politics conducted in the name of Islam. The political opening in 1998 has both liberated and constrained the Islamist cause in South Sulawesi. The democratization process has allowed the KPPSI to enter the political arena and to voice its agenda to establish a state based on Islamic law. At the same time, the electoral defeat of some of KPPSI’s most prominent leaders in recent years has also shown the movement that its *shari’a* agenda enjoys moderate support among the local population.

The limits of Islamist activities are also the topic of Muhammad Wildan’s chapter on radical Islam in Central Java’s Solo municipality. The town is frequented by some of the most extreme Islamist groups in Indonesia and home to the infamous *Al-Mukmin* boarding school that was founded by several figures with links to the Darul Islam and terrorist organizations such as *Jemmah Islamiyah* that emerged from it. Yet, official *shari’a* regulations that have emerged across Indonesia after 1998 are notably absent in the city. Islamist groups in the city have not demanded the adoption of Islamic law, Wildan argues, because the majority of citizens are *abangan*, nominal Muslims who adhere to more syncretist versions of Islam.

In a final chapter, van Bruinessen shows that “liberal and progressive Muslim thought” continues to be alive and well in some places. For instance, the branches of the Indonesian State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN, *Institut Agama Islam*

Negeri) remain “bulwarks of intellectual freedom and tolerance” (p.225). Likewise, various progressive civil society organizations that have emerged in the 1980s and 1990s have, in the context of democratization, become even more vocal defenders of religious tolerance.

Religious tolerance is also the topic of Myengkyo Seo’s book. Examining the relation of Indonesia’s principal church, the Java Christian church, vis-à-vis the Muslim community and the state, he shows that the state has extensively regulated religious affairs, often to the detriment of the Christian community’s interests. However, the Church has found ways to adapt to these regulations in day-to-day practices. At the same time, inter-religious tolerance continues to be practiced on a daily basis by both Christian and Muslim communities, as various anecdotes throughout the book show.

The three books combined provide a broad account of the role religion has played in Indonesian politics over the past 16 years and raise interesting questions. For instance, as Martin van Bruinessen asks, does the “conservative turn” show that Indonesia’s “civil Islam” could only flourish when it was patronized by the authoritarian New Order? In fact, has the political opening in 1998 and the competitive party politics that ensued fragmented forces associated with liberal Islam?

The contributions to the volume edited by van Bruinessen suggest that these questions cannot (yet) be answered with certainty. While there has undoubtedly been a conservative turn in many aspects of Indonesian politics and daily life over the past 16 years, many of the developments in this respect seem to be of a symbolic nature rather than indicative of profound changes in Indonesian politics and society and therefore reversible. In this vein, van Bruinessen sees terrorism in the name of Islam largely as crisis driven as “communal and terrorist violence have abated and it has become clear that much of the violence was directly related to struggles for the redistribution of economic and political resources in post-Soeharto Indonesia.” Yet, van Bruinessen continues, “[i]n most of the conflict-ridden regions a new balance of power has been established . . .” (p.2) and violence in the name of religion has therefore become less frequent. Likewise, he believes that “[t]he issuance of new regional Shariah regulations has by and large stopped” (p.3). Finally, another sign for the feeble position of Islamism in Indonesia’s political ecology is the fact that the electoral support for “Muslim political parties” has been in steady decline since 1999 (p.3).

Similarly, the impression gained from reading Solahudin’s account is that the networks rooted in the Darul Islam have shaped politics for several decades and are likely to do so in the future. However, the scope and reach of these networks is also relatively confined due to their distinct sociological origins and history. Overall, the verdict on whether there has been a conservative turn in Indonesian Islam is still pending.

A more definite answer to the question whether the “conservative turn” is destined to stay and, more important, under what conditions it may be reversed, may come from a closer look at the role the state has played in the Islamization of politics and public life, which, unfortunately, none of these books provide.

While it is undoubtedly true that religious violence on a mass level has subsided¹ as has the frequency of large-scale terror attacks, the threat emanating from “moral terrorists”² against sexual and religious minorities continues unabated, and, in fact, has increased in recent years.³ Likewise, the issuance of *shari’a* regulations has not only continued over the years but, in fact, is spreading to new parts of Indonesia. While *shari’a* regulations were mainly adopted in provinces with strong Islamist movements in the year immediately after the demise of Suharto, they have since spilled over into other districts and provinces. At the time of writing, more than 420 such *shari’a* regulations had been adopted across the archipelago.⁴

The state has played an important role in these developments. Not only have elites rooted in the New Order and affiliated with secular parties adopted the overwhelming majority of *shari’a* regulations in the country since 1998⁵ but the upsurge of “moral terrorism” is also often closely linked to the electoral calculations of these elites inhabiting the state.⁶ In Indonesia, the Islamization of political and public life as well as violence instigated in the name of Islam may be cyclical, but it is by no means crisis-driven and therefore confined to the transition period from authoritarian rule to democratic politics, as van Bruinessen’s focus on societal forces suggests.

A closer look at the role the state played in the politics of Islam is also missing from Solahudin’s genealogy of the Darul Islam. While the roots of modern Indonesia’s most powerful Islamist movement and its post-1998 trajectory are relatively well-documented, relatively little is known about the Darul Islam during the New Order period. Existing works simply mention how, again, the New Order state played a crucial role in keeping the Darul Islam a viable political force. For instance, the New Order government used Islamist groups during the purges against communists or to stage attacks prior to elections in order to shore up support for strongman rule. Yet, despite a treasure of new details and anecdotes that supplement existing genealogies of the Darul Islam,⁷ Solahudin’s book has surprisingly little to say about the relationship between Darul Islam circles and the state during the New Order years and how this exchange facilitated the formation of Islamist terror groups in recent years.

Finally, Seo’s book, despite its title, actually examines not so much the inner workings and motivations of the state in managing (or instrumenting) religion but rather how various religious communities adjust to government regulations.

What seems clear from existing accounts, ranging from research on the Darul Islam to Islamist activism in contemporary Indonesian politics, is that the politicization of Islam is often defined by politics of expediency pursued by elites in control of the state who are relatively detached from society. Said differently, the motivations of figures in control of the state, most of whom do not share the ideological inclinations of Islamist groups, need to be taken into account when assessing the past and future trajectory of Indonesian Islam’s conservative turn. In short, the key to understanding the fickle nature of the politics of Islam lie within the state, not society.

Notes

1. Sidel, *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad*.
2. Boellstorff, "Lessons from the Notion."
3. Rogers, *Indonesia-Pluralism in Peril*.
4. Buehler and Muhtada, "The Diffusion of Shari'a."
5. Buehler, "Subnational Islamization through Secular Parties."
6. Mudzakkir, "Dinamika Islam Politik Pasca."
7. Temby, "Imagining an Islamic State"; van Bruinessen, "Genealogies of Islamic Radicalism."

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.952289>