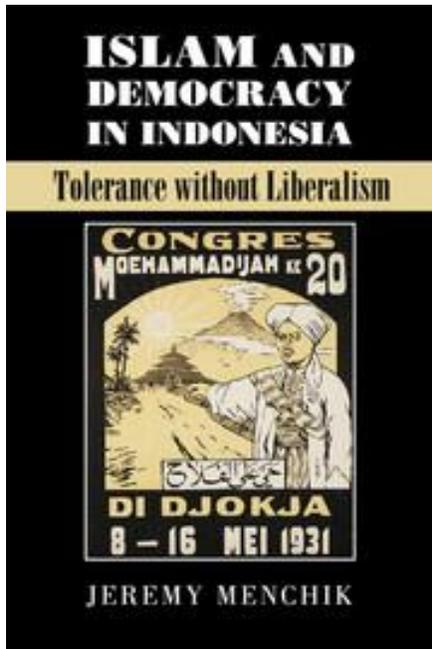


SOURCE: <https://aseasuk.org/2019/04/29/menchik-buehler-islam-democracy-indonesia/>

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## Review of: Jeremy Menchik, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism



Jeremy Menchik, 2017. *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism*, Cambridge University Press

By Michael Buehler

Stories about growing religious intolerance in Indonesia have frequently made headlines around the world in recent years. The arrest and subsequent imprisonment of the Christian governor of Jakarta for blasphemy; *Ahmadis* being assaulted and murdered; the persecution of Shia communities; or a smartphone app released by the Indonesian government through which concerned citizens can report suspected cases of religious heresy, have all reinvigorated the debate about how tolerant the Muslim majority is vis-à-vis religious minorities in the archipelago state.

Most of the scholarship that has emerged from this debate has focused on the years since the collapse of the New Order dictatorship in 1998. Arguably because of the

rather narrow timeframe of these analyses, the argument that democratization ushered in by the demise of the Suharto regime has allowed for the politicization of religion and consequently led to a decline in tolerant attitudes vis-à-vis minority groups across Indonesia, has come to feature prominently in this debate.

Jeremy Menchik's book examines social attitudes vis-à-vis religious minority groups in Indonesia over a much longer period. Such a broad focus therefore has the potential to add important new insights to the current debate.

In the first part of his book, Menchik examines how Islamic organizations in Indonesia understand tolerance. The second part of the book explores why Islamic organizations have developed their respective understanding of tolerance. The final part of the book develops a "historical constructivist" approach to the study of politics and religion, which "attempts to transcend the narrative of a teleological progression from traditional societies to a modernity organized around secular democracy and the liberal virtue of tolerance" (p. 6).

Menchik's book contributes to the scholarly debate in three important ways. The first finding is that local conditions, not ideological dogma, determine attitudes towards religious minorities. Concretely, Menchik analyzes the attitudes of religious leaders in three different organizations over a period of one hundred years. The first organization he examines is Muhammadiyah, a reformist Sunni Islam group, which was founded in Central Java in 1912. It is the second largest Islamic organization in Indonesia with 29 million members. The second organization Menchik examines with regard to the attitudes of its religious leaders vis-à-vis religious minorities is Persatuan Islam, usually referred to as Persis in Indonesia. It was founded in West Java in 1923. Finally, Menchik examines Nahdlatul Ulama, a traditionalist Sunni Islam group that was founded in East Java in 1926, and with between 40 and 90 million members, is the largest independent Islamic organization in the world.

To identify and explain the attitudes of leaders within these organizations towards religious minorities, Menchik looks at "micro practices" as expressed in "discussions about the orientation of prayer houses, funeral rituals, the classification and hierarchical ranking of sacred texts, and the appropriate behaviour for interactions with non-Muslim" (p. 38) in the decades prior to the formation of these organizations. His analysis of these micro practices between 1880 and 1930 shows that attitudes towards religious minorities developed in different directions in Central Java, West Java and East Java respectively because ethnic and religious cleavages in these regions differed considerably. In areas where Christian missionaries were vocal and

visible, the reaction of local Islamic leaders was sharp and decisively anti-Christian. In areas where Christian missionaries were less present but where new Islamic movements called for reforms, a cleavage *within* the Islamic community emerged, pitting reformers against traditionalists. In these areas, Christians were often seen as potential allies by established religious elites in their fight to preserve the status quo against calls for reform of existing ecclesiastical structures. Finally, ethnicity influenced these different dynamics to the degree that it exacerbated cleavages when ethnic identities aligned with individual Islamic organizations but contained tensions when members of different religious groups had the same ethnic background.

These different local conditions during the formative years of Muhammadiyah, Persis, and Nahdlatul Ulama explain why their leaders developed attitudes towards Christians that are semi-tolerant, intolerant and tolerant respectively.

These different attitudes were then locked-in in the 1930s (p. 23) and remained stable for the next few decades. Surveys Menchik conducted with leaders of these groups in 2010 showed that levels of tolerance vis-à-vis religious minorities were very similar to those in place in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The second contribution of Menchik's book is a critique of current scholarship on religion in Indonesia that talks about a rise of intolerance vis-à-vis religious minorities as a result of democratization. Menchik's comparative historical analysis shows how intolerance towards certain religious groups is not a product of the political opening that ensued after the collapse of the New Order regime in 1998. Rather, the othering of certain religious minorities has been at the core of what Menchik calls "godly nationalism" on which the Indonesian nation state is built. The discrimination of religious minorities, in other words, not only has a long tradition in Indonesia, but was, if perhaps not a necessity, an inevitable part of nation-state building as the archipelago transitioned from an artificial colonial construct called the Dutch East Indies to an independent Indonesia. "[F]ocusing on the ideological origins of intolerance overlooks the productive, community-forming practices that acts of exclusion make possible," Menchik shows (68).

The third contribution is an invitation to understand "tolerance" in ways that differ from how Western liberalism has conceptualized (and propagated) it. Menchik shows that in Indonesia, the largest Muslim-majority democracy and third largest democracy in the world, a form of "communal tolerance" has developed among majority Muslim organizations. This form of tolerance differs from secular-liberal concepts of tolerance inasmuch as it prioritizes communal rights over individual rights; propagates

communal self-governance based on legal pluralism; insists on a separation of religious and social affairs, and places faith above other values (p. 146).

While the historical comparative focus of the book allows Menchik to make important contributions to the scholarly literature on the role of religion in politics in general and the role of Islam in democratizing Indonesia in particular, several aspects of his argument will have to be examined in more detail in future research. For instance, Menchik could have said more about how the attitudes of Muhammadiyah, Persis and NU leaders towards religious minorities that formed before 1930 were then preserved and transmitted over more than 80 years to eventually shape the views of religious leaders in the post-New Order period. While the book makes references to “Islamic jurisprudence,” “patterns of political alliance” and “state institutions,” it never really explains why and how attitudes of leaders in these organizations remained so stable. Not only would it have been important to trace these processes in more detail to live up to the author’s promise to provide a “comparative historical analysis of three Islamic organizations over a period of one hundred years” (p. 24), but also to gain an understanding of how and why the attitudes towards non-Muslim communities stayed stable for several decades despite a rapidly changing socio-economic and political environment during this period.

Furthermore, and related to the point above, Menchik’s argument is based on the assumption that attitudes towards religious minorities are stable *within* Islamic organizations across the archipelago. Existing works on these organizations suggests that this is not the case, however. As scholars such as Greg Fealy and others have shown, boarding schools in West Java affiliated with traditionalist organizations such as NU were noted for their conservatism and intolerant attitudes towards religious minorities. Even if one were to subscribe to the argument that growing intolerance within NU ranks is a recent phenomenon,<sup>[1]</sup> one would still have to explain how the NU or Muhammadiyah leadership imposed discipline with regard to tolerance towards minorities on such vast organizations until recently.

Finally, Menchik’s critique of scholarship that has associated the persecution of religious minorities with the democratic opening since 1998 feels forced. His argument that intolerance towards certain religious minorities has been present since Indonesia became independent in 1949 because the othering of religious minorities is at the heart of the country’s “godly nationalism,” does not refute research findings that have seen an uptick of intolerant attitudes since the country became a democracy once more in 1998. While intolerance vis-à-vis groups such as the Ahmadi may always have been present in Indonesia, is it possible that the political opening after 1998 has allowed such sentiments to be expressed more visibly and vocally?

Overall, Jeremy Menchik has delivered a study that is rich in empirical detail and makes important theoretical contributions to both Indonesian studies and comparative politics more broadly. Especially his call to employ less of a Eurocentric view when conducting research on the role of religion in politics should be taken to heart by both area specialists and scholars working within mainstream political science.

[1] See, for instance, Alex Arifianto. 2018. Nahdlatul Ulama is home to its own hardliners, *New Mandala* (8 August).