

Political Islam in Southeast Asia: Moderates, Radicals and Terrorists

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The author of this brief study on the political aspects of Southeast Asian Islam is a former State and Defense Department official who originally specialized in Latin American affairs before turning his attention to Southeast Asia. Rabasa now works for the RAND Corporation, a think tank with close links to the American national security community.

The publisher's target audience is security policy makers. Therefore, the studies it commissions are part analysis and part policy recommendations, whereby the former is often reduced to the bare essentials. It must be said that, in this case, Rabasa has succeeded in presenting a reasonably balanced picture in the space of a mere 80 pages. Already in his introduction the author observes that, apart from a sharpening divide between militant Islam and the West, the antagonism between radicals and moderates within the Muslim world has increased as well, and that strengthening moderate and tolerant tendencies within Islam should be supported.

Rabasa sees both external and internal influences contributing to the rise of Islamic radicalism. In response to the intrusion of western culture, a heightened sense of Muslim self-awareness has found expression in identity-driven politics. A further polarizing element in Southeast Asian Islam is the Arabization process carried out by Wahhabi-inspired movements and with financial support from the Middle East. Other auxiliary factors to the formation of transnational networks connecting Muslim radicals are the Iranian revolution, the Afghan war, disillusion over the lack of progress in solving the Palestinian issue, and the eruption of ethnic conflicts involving Muslims in such areas as Bosnia, Chechnya, and Kashmir.

Shifting to internal factors, Rabasa identifies different sets of causes for each Muslim country and Muslim-dominated region in Southeast Asia. In the case of Indonesia, the vacuum left by an imploding state structure following Suharto's fall led to a sharpened political competition in which some saw Islam as a suitable vehicle to power. Malaysia witnessed increased rivalry between the ruling UMNO coalition and the Pan-Malay Islamic Party (PAS) for the vote of rural Malays, while in the Muslim-dominated southern regions of Thailand and the Philippines resis-

tance to the central government has manifested itself in religiously inspired militancy.

Before elaborating on these issues, the writer provides a bird's eye view of the historical diversity of Southeast Asian Islam. Touching on the multiplicity of Muslim identities in Indonesia, the fusion of ethnicity and religion in Malaysia, and the formation of Moro identity in the southern Philippines, Rabasa adds briefer impressions of the Muslim presence in such miniature states as Singapore and Brunei, and in the mainland states of Thailand, Cambodia, and Burma. The presence of Shi'ism is also noted. Although the produced images lack nuance due their brevity, they at least make the reader aware of the complex nature of Southeast Asian Islam(s).

The author's analysis of the emergence of a "Jihad Project" in Indonesia drops a bit out of the air. If Indonesian Islam was originally so tolerant, how did Muslim radicalism succeed in getting a foothold in the first place? This question is basically left unanswered. Maybe this is because Rabasa subscribes to the thesis that fundamentalism is a response to discomfort with modernity, as proposed by Bruce Lawrence in his landmark study *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).

So, without mentioning the heated debates between the Shari'ah-minded and proponents of *wahdat al-wujud* in the seventeenth-century Indo-Malay world or the impact of Dutch colonialism, Rabasa moves straight to the rebellions that raged through parts of Indonesia between 1948-65, led by Muslims who were dissatisfied with the secularist politics of the young Indonesian republic. He then continues with the repression of political Islam under General Suharto's "New Order" regime (1967-98).

Although he sees a change of attitude in the early 1990s – seen in the emergence of charitable foundations, legal equality for Islamic courts, and the formation of the Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI) – Rabasa leaves the reader guessing as to what caused some of Suharto's generals to turn "green" and establish links with increasingly active *dakwah* (propagation) organizations. The deteriorating security situation after 1998, leading to anarchy and atrocities in eastern Indonesia, before culminating in the Bali bombing of 2002, is explored in considerably more detail. The existence of a greater regional Jemaah Islamiya terrorist network, however, is only briefly touched on in a later chapter.

The author qualifies Malaysia as an Islamic country, in contrast to Indonesia, which supposedly defines its national identity in non-religious terms. This is not entirely correct, however, because Indonesia's official

Pancasila ideology – although refusing to identify with one or the other denomination or tradition – establishes the belief in a single God as one of its pillars, and is therefore decidedly religious. In analyzing the situation in Malaysia, Rabasa explores the stellar rise and equally rapid demise of Anwar Ibrahim, a former Muslim student leader turned cabinet minister. Briefly profiting from Ibrahim's ill-treatment at the hands of the UMNO leadership in 1998, the PAS lost much of its appeal again after the 9/11 attacks. Rabasa also signals that the course of political Islam in Malaysia is of great concern to neighboring Chinese-dominated Singapore, a commercial powerhouse that needs security and stability for its economic survival.

The governments of the predominantly Christian Philippines and Buddhist Thailand are each confronted with a different set of challenges in dealing with the substantial Muslim minorities in their southern regions. But what they have in common is a Gordian knot of grievances resulting from economic deprivation, political marginalization, and questions of cultural identity.

Rabasa concludes that both threat-perceptions and policy priorities have changed dramatically since 2001-02. But instead of spending a lot of time on suggesting concrete security measures, the author deserves credit for taking a more long-term perspective and focusing on the role that moderate Muslims can play in stemming the tide of radical political Islam. Rabasa has consulted leading intellectuals, among them Nurcholish Madjid (Indonesia) and Azyumardi Azra (Indonesia), as well as such promising young activists as Ulil Abshar-Abdalla (Indonesia) and Farish Noor (Malaysia). The current American foreign policy establishment would do well to follow him in this and pay more attention to the strand of Islam represented by these thinkers.

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