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Book Review: Miichi, Ken, and Omar Farouk (eds): Southeast Asian Muslims in the Era of Globalization

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Book Reviews

Miichi, Ken, and Omar Farouk (eds) (2015), *Southeast Asian Muslims in the Era of Globalization*

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Although academic studies purporting to investigate the appropriate position of Muslims vis-à-vis globalisation remain increasingly fraught, with discussions focusing on the absolutist visions of Islamists (who attempt to impose a singular vision of the global), popular discourse in both the West and, more importantly, Southeast Asia, tends to present globalisation as an intricately intertwined and enmeshed phenomenon. The book under review not only corrects this gap in perception but also attempts to determine whether globalisation intensifies Muslims' involvement in universal Islam (i.e. away from a particular ethnicity, race, or culture) or represents a movement towards a global civilisation (i.e. without any particular reference to Islam or the Muslim community). The volume comprises 12 chapters written by scholars who, according to the editors, "are regional specialists possessing exceptional knowledge and understanding of the complexities of the situation on the ground in Southeast Asia, and especially in the respective countries of their specialization" (Michii and Farouk, Introduction, p. 1). Several contributors to this volume, though they represent different generations, have been doing research on locating and contextualising contemporary Islam and Muslims in Southeast Asia for decades and are globally recognised for their expertise in the field. The others are equally passionate about creatively interpreting and recontextualising Islam in local settings.

The best way to view this book is to consider how several distinct factors – such as religious pluralism, harmony, and coexistence in Muslim majority/minority countries (e.g. Indonesia, where religious minorities have been acknowledged as an integral part of the country), and regional integration through ASEAN in the region – distinguish Southeast Asia from other regions (Michhi and Farouk, Introduction, p. 4). While exploring the strategic and demographic position of the region, the book addresses the jaundiced perspectives found in writings on "ummatic" pandemonium regarding Islamic educational archetypes deemed "endemic to the Islamic epistemological tradition and autochthonous to Muslims of Southeast Asia" (Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, Globalization of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia, Chapter 2, p. 12). In Chapter 2, Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid argues that despite ideologically tendentious

political designs to marginalise the more fundamental aspects of individual and moral regeneration that are at the core of Islamic education, the "ummatic" enthusiasm for preserving Islamic or Muslim identities involves a bold revamping "of the modern educational system to address its epistemological and philosophical shortcomings" (p. 33).

The book is rich in conversations that bring to the fore the expressive facet of the Islamic intelligentsia by differentiating its traditional image from the lopsidedly resourceful elites in a globalised age, who are not blindly calling for globalisation but are trying to modify it to make it accessible to them. However, according to Martin van Bruinessen, some perceive perilous trends of either Westernisation or Arabisation as alternative (or perhaps concomitant) consequences of globalisation, since both underestimate the extent to which the borrowing of foreign ideas and artefacts from the East or the West is a process of selective appropriation and adaptation. In either case, the talk "implicitly assumes an essentialized, homogenized Arab world, or an equally monolithic West," impinging upon a vulnerable and malleable Muslim *umma* (Martin van Bruinessen, Ghazwul Fikri or Arabization? Indonesian Muslim Responses to Globalization, Chapter 4, p. 80).

Not surprisingly, the theme of "globalised localism" runs throughout the volume. For some, globalisation is like a foreign occupation that homogenises local cultures, affecting the behaviour and values of communities – for example, the Moros of the Southern Philippines, who opposed "foreign occupation by arms in order to maintain their freedom and the integrity of their culture or their Islamic way of life" (Carmen Abu Bakar, Globalization: Issues, Challenges and Responses Among the Moros of the Southern Philippines, Chapter 6, and p. 123). In order to survive in a non-Muslim country, the Moros had to appropriate local ideas, activities, goods, and institutions, which enabled them to retain their identities, while also pursuing their economic, social, and cultural development by conforming to the principles of social justice and the establishment of an egalitarian society. The theme of Muslim minority cultures connects the various chapters, but the academic works explicating the role of Muslim minority communities, especially those at the margins, are dominated by studies focusing on terrorism, radical Islam, militancy, and Islamic violence. Such perspectives fall short not only in elucidating the impact of external variables (such as economic liberalisation, diversity, and constitutionalism), but also in appreciating the role of Muslims in understanding the "wider trans-religious contexts and external environmental factors that have shaped the nature of Muslim society"

(Omar Farouk, Globalization and Its Impact on the Muslim Minority in Cambodia, Chapter 8, p. 145).

A large section of this book (comprising four chapters) is devoted to discussing the overall need for sustained peace processes (to leverage incentives) in response to conflict-ridden situations and non-trivial corrective policies in the Muslim-dominated provinces of Southern Thailand, Cambodia, and Mindanao. Many of the cases and contexts analysed show that the relationship between religion and violence renders the deadly conflicts in these regions global. Additionally, because of the non-negotiable "nature of the motivations among those involved," the conflicts become more intractable. Since religion constitutes a crucial dimension of collective identity, "its symbolic dimension and consequently its mobilizing capabilities have been widely used as a means in political struggles" (Chaiwat Satha-Anand, "Red Mosques": Mitigating Violence Against Sacred Spaces in Thailand and Beyond, Chapter 10, p. 214). Thus the violence that has taken place in the aforementioned countries could certainly be seen as part of a global phenomenon. This status quo signifies a much more profound trend when the uncertainty it produces becomes crystallised by the certainty of a polarised identity that, in turn, creates the dichotomous and myopic paradigm of opposites and incompatibilities.

Perhaps the greatest strength of the book lies in its focus on the involvement of international society and supranational bodies in bringing stakeholders together (including state and non-state actors) and in accessing new voices that advocate the implementation of universal legal norms to prevent the further escalation of conflict in the region. Of greater significance is the fact that the volume takes seriously its unremitting objective of exploring the dynamics of Muslim society and politics in Southeast Asia, especially in relation to the impact of trans-regional and global changes in Islamic learning and religious practices, which "seem to encourage the personalization of religious practices and indifferent attitudes towards local popular religious traditions" (Ken Miichi and Omar Farouk, Conclusion, p. 254).

However, this strength is also a limitation, for the book leans noticeably more towards "politics" than "culture." It also leans towards a mix of empirical analysis that neglects to include the contribution(s) of credible voices condemning those moves which threaten to fray the pluralistic fabric of Southeast Asian society. The volume falls short of providing a balanced analysis of the history of Muslim rebellions in Southeast Asia (particularly in the Philippines, Thailand, and Burma), often referring to the religious identity of Muslims as a primary factor in

the political mobilisation of Muslim separatists. In contrast, numerous surveys have indicated that, since Muslims in these countries endure higher rates of poverty than the majority community and are not represented fully in the political process, one of the crucial factors behind the exacerbation of these conflicts is the socio-economic alienation of Muslims. More attention to points such as these could have proved equally useful in bringing studies based on developing new parameters for comparative conversations in order to construct typologies of various movements and political trends to the centre of current academic debates on Islam in Southeast Asia.

Despite these limitations, this volume is an important contribution to the increasing corpus of studies on the representation of, and challenges faced by, Muslims in Southeast Asia in the current phase of globalisation. By amalgamating a remarkably diverse group of contributors, the editors have provided a range of thematic and theoretical essays that not only contribute to the debate over cultural appropriation in Southeast Asia but also provide a critical platform for the development of further research in this field.

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