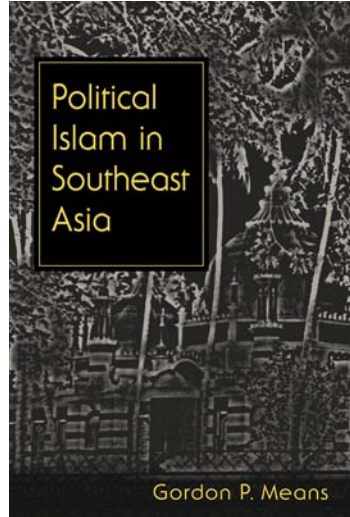


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# Political Islam in Southeast Asia

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# 1

## Introduction

To understand the political ideology of contemporary Islamic polemics, it is essential for non-Muslim readers to learn about the origins and basic doctrines of Islam. This study begins by examining the historical accounts from an Islamic perspective of how the Prophet Muhammad received “revealed truth” directly from God, and how Muhammad forged the first community of believers. For orthodox Muslims, Islam’s founding community is considered to be the ideal standard for emulation by subsequent generations of believers. The core doctrines of the faith assert that Islam is eternal, absolute, and immutable. Its principles are derived from God’s commandments that define the ultimate rules of life for individual believers and for the proper organization of society and its political order. That “revealed truth” is preserved for eternity in its holy book, the Quran, while the laws, practices, and precedents of the first community have also been preserved in oral and recorded history, as the Hadith. Islam is not only a religion of the law, it is a religion that celebrates and idealizes its origins as a utopia that, for orthodox Muslims, becomes the basis for Islamic society and governance. For Islam, revelation, law, and history are fused into a comprehensive system of beliefs and commandments that define a moral and ethical political order.

Islam is a religion. It is also a political, social, cultural, and ideological force that commands the loyalty and defines the identity of over one billion people. The combination of all these elements is infused with a sacral meaning that intensifies Islam’s impact and inhibits both analysis and public discussion of its content and its role. While Islam’s theological doctrines assert its absolute and unchanging Truth, its believers must make that Truth meaningful and adapt their faith to the changing circumstances of their daily lives. While Islam’s theological doctrines may claim absolute and eternal Truth, the practice of religion is a collaborative human endeavor—the ultimate form of the collective creation of a culture and of a civilization based on inspiration from religious ideals.

Southeast Asia is a uniquely important region for the study of the political culture of Islam. It is a region that includes a state with the largest population of Muslims in the world. It is a region having great cultural and ethnic diversity that gave to Islam adaptive mechanisms to incorporate that diversity within Muslim society. Southeast Asia is on the farthest perimeter of the Muslim world, where Islam evolved with different processes than happened at the Arab center of Islam. Even before the era of European colonialism, Arab traders developed commercial links with Southeast Asian producers to sustain the Arab economy by supplying Southeast Asian spices and Asian luxury goods to European markets. Because of these and many other factors, Southeast Asian Islam developed a relatively more cosmopolitan perspective than many other regions of the Muslim world.

After presenting an account of Islam's origins and core doctrines, this study examines the process by which Islam spread to Southeast Asia. Readers may be surprised to learn how quickly Islam spread across the southern regions of Southeast Asia and how much Islam became part of a way of life for the new converts. The account will reveal how and why local monarchs became among some of the first converts, and their subjects tended to accept Islam later from royal example and sponsorship. The Islamic principles of power derived from Allah were readily combined with the preexisting Hindu and Buddhist doctrines and rituals of divine kingship. Therefore, at the apex of the political order, Islam was a conservative and stabilizing set of principles for the existing power holders. At the peasant village level, Islam provided a link with royal authority and it also provided a basis for the ordering of peasant life and activities. At that level, Islam was combined with existing animist rites and social relations. Again, Islam was conservative and adaptable to the cycle of life events and the ideological perspectives of a localized peasant community.

In practice, as Islam gained converts, the newer converts to Islam did not always accept what had been previously deemed to be eternal, immutable, and absolute. And, if they did, the new converts created diversity through varying interpretations of the "revealed truth," and through the surviving practices of preexisting cultures and institutions. When Islam spread from its Arabic origins to new regions and to civilizations having different cultural, economic, and political systems, Islam became somewhat modified. This study explores the questions of how Islam evolved in the Southeast Asian setting to produce a pragmatic symbiosis between the stark ideals of Islam's religious doctrines and the rich cultural traditions of earlier religious beliefs and cultural practices. That adaptive process has continued throughout the history of Southeast Asian Islam and will very likely continue into the indefinite future, with increasing complexity and diversity. That process has also created fundamental divisions within Islam over theological doctrines, law, politics, and legitimacy.

For Southeast Asia, after the arrival of European explorers, European trading bases and then colonies began to be established. That colonial era lasted for

almost five centuries. The Muslim regions of Southeast Asia came under the control of five different colonial powers—Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and the United States. Each colonial power devised separate policies and strategies to limit, control, or manage Islamic affairs. These colonial policies not only increased the diversity within Islam, but also generated grievances within Muslim communities that provided the motivation and popular support for some Islamic-based radical movements dedicated to challenging colonial rule. Although colonial authorities had sufficient power and resources to suppress these self-generating insurgent movements, the legacy of a radical, autonomous warrior-hero tradition became well-entrenched in popular epic accounts of Islamic history. When combined with Islamic doctrines of “jihad against the enemies of Islam,” these warrior traditions could be easily revived in the postcolonial era, when ethnic or religious conflicts became severe.

The colonial era was a period of steady and dramatic changes. All colonial powers tolerated or promoted large-scale immigration from other regions of Asia. Immigrants from China and India came to the region in vast numbers, bringing with them their own religious traditions, social organizations, and economic skills and preferences. And finally, European colonial officials and military officers, combined with European planters, traders, professionals, and missionaries, constituted a dominant European strata that sustained the colonial system.

As will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters, each colonial power devised unique policies and strategies for its relations with Muslim communities. In the chapter covering the colonial era, the study focuses on the impact of colonial policies toward Islam to explore how those policies shaped Islamic politics in the postcolonial era. After centuries of colonial rule, the politics of Islam created distinctive institutions and a long legacy of grievances that Muslims expected to be addressed when colonial rule ended. The legacy of past colonial policies continues to define many of the key issues for Islamic politics in the region. In each state, the issues generally revolve around specific policies, but patterns of conflict can become quite similar.

The colonial era was a time when colonial officialdom ruled with authoritarian powers, even when colonial authorities consulted with advisory councils and were solicitous of the views of native rulers. When decolonization finally arrived, nationalist leaders inherited the existing practices and institutions of colonial authoritarianism, along with the central legislative institutions of democracy that were rapidly established by colonial authorities just before the transfer of power to independent national states. The postcolonial era in Southeast Asia began with an extended contest between democracy and authoritarianism. The debate over these issues continued to surface within most political factions and ideological divisions. Why that contest between democracy and authoritarian rule has never been fully resolved will be explored later in this volume.



After the former colonies gained their independence, the primary political divisions tended to pit the ideologies of secular nationalism against the more radical and revolutionary ideology of communism, with Islamic-based parties forming a less formidable third faction. After communism was defeated as an ideological force in the 1960s and 1970s, what had been a three-way ideological split in the arenas of politics among nationalism, communism, and political Islam now devolved into a two-way contest between secular nationalism and political Islam. As that contest became manifest, incumbent nationalist leaders, to gain legitimacy for their rule and support from Muslim constituents, became more pious and attempted to exercise greater control over Islamic institutions. This work will explore the questions of how and why governments became pre-occupied with devising new policies and strategies to support and manage the institutions of Islam. Incumbent leaders also learned that measures to promote and control Islam by defining orthodoxy and limiting “deviant sects” produced results that intensified political conflicts. The exercise of government authority over Islam gave leaders more power and political support, but these policies also exposed leaders to intense criticism and accusations of abuse of power and raised issues of the denial of human rights. Most leaders realized that sacralized politics in a multicultural and multireligious setting could become an explosive mix that might degenerate into communal conflict.

The roles and significance of Islamic politics changed rather dramatically when Islamic resurgent movements, known as *dakwah*, became active during the late 1970s and early 1980s. This was a period when Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand all had strong semi-authoritarian leaders. Each of these leaders made concessions to the rising tide of Islamic protests and demands for increased representation of Islamic interests. This was a confusing period of turmoil during which Islamic-based parties became more active and militant. In response, incumbent leaders devised various policies and strategies to deflect, defeat, or co-opt the leadership of Islamic-based parties and radicalized Muslim youth mobilized by the *dakwah* movement. A major proportion of this study is devoted to accounts of various Islamic groups and sects that became part of the *dakwah* movement. Some of these groups were defeated and suppressed through government action. Other groups remained active in politics and by forming paramilitary forces that made their political impact through vigilante violence. Some *dakwah* supporters were co-opted into government and made their impact through their roles in administration and the policymaking processes of government. These case-study accounts trace the motives, activities, and consequences of each political group dedicated to implementing their version of an Islamic political agenda.

One section of this study is devoted to the massive campaign mounted by Saudi Arabia to propagate and promote the religious and doctrinal principles of Sunni Islam as practiced in Arabia. With billions of dollars of oil money, Saudi Arabia funded Islamic schools and universities and sponsored major programs

of religious conversion to make new converts among Southeast Asian Muslims for a conservative and orthodox Arabic form of Islam. But what was conservative for Saudi Arabia became a radical message for Southeast Asian's moderate and eclectic Muslim communities. Segments of this study explore how the politics of the Middle East impacted the politics of Southeast Asia's Muslim communities. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and the United States joined together to sponsor the anti-Soviet Afghan mujahideen, composed of volunteers recruited from across the Muslim world. Saudi money, combined with US money and weapons, armed these volunteers, who were trained and indoctrinated by Osama bin Laden and his associates. This segment of the work explains how Al Qaeda was formed, how its ideology developed, and how a much more radical and militant form of Islam emerged in the aftermath of the Afghan war.

The next significant cycle of politics in Southeast Asia was triggered by the Asian financial crisis that began in 1988 and continued for a period of about five years. During that cycle, the quasi-dictatorship of Suharto in Indonesia collapsed. The semi-authoritarian leadership of Malaysia ended with the resignation of Mahathir, and all the countries in Southeast Asia struggled to recover from the economic disaster created by inappropriate management of their economies. During the period of greatest distress caused by the financial crisis, a nearly spontaneous movement arose in both Indonesia and Malaysia that adopted the slogan Reformasi. Mobilized for mass public protests, this movement demanded democratic reforms. In Indonesia, those demands eventually resulted in constitutional changes that established for the first time genuine elections and effective limitations on unbridled executive power. In Malaysia, this movement elicited promises of democratic reforms that proved to be much less significant.

This period of recovery from the Asian financial crisis was also a time when those Southeast Asian Muslims who had volunteered for the Afghan mujahideen returned home with military training and heightened indoctrination to utilize jihadi tactics to "protect Islam" against real and imagined enemies. It was during this period that radical Islamist conspirators met secretly in Malaysia to plan the terrorist attacks in Aden and the 9/11 attacks in the United States. It was also a period when deadly terrorist bombings took place in Indonesia and the Philippines, and national police throughout the region uncovered the existence of various terrorist networks. With Al Qaeda becoming an active participant in the region, the politics of Islam in Southeast Asia had become much more volatile and threatening, producing a loss of foreign investment and a decrease in foreign tourism. Those events of conflict and militancy are too complicated to summarize here, but will be described in significant detail in later chapters.

The final era covered by this study (approximately 2005 to 2008) is a period when more pragmatic leaders acquired the reins of power in Indonesia,

Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Some of the most difficult policy issues remain to be resolved. These leaders are confronting the issues of Islamic militancy while also meeting demands and expectations for greater democracy. Many of the most critical issues can be posed as questions. The study identifies some of the most difficult and sensitive issues of politics, and raises the questions of how and when they may be resolved.

Will Islamic-based parties participate freely and openly in secular democratic institutions? Can human rights and individual freedoms coexist harmoniously with political Islam? Will the Islamic separatist movements in the southern Philippines and in southern Thailand be resolved through peace negotiations? Will globalization provide sufficient economic incentives for Muslim leaders to support reforms granting greater equality and tolerance for non-Muslim minorities? Will Islam as a political force become more pluralized and more willing to accept doctrinal diversity within its own ranks, including individual freedoms for nonconformist Muslims? Will democratic processes generate leaders committed to the politics of tolerance and pragmatic accommodations for cultural and religious diversity?

This study will not answer all these questions conclusively. The book will meet its purpose if it promotes an understanding of the complexities of the region and leads to open and civil dialogue concerning critical public policy issues. The work is based on an implicit faith that, over a longer time span, democracy, human rights, tolerance, and mutual respect across cultural and religious divides will gradually become established as the accepted consensus within the region. The future rests not with prediction but with the actions and commitments of Southeast Asian leaders and their constituent citizens. Even so, countries beyond the region, combined with international aid and humanitarian nongovernmental agencies, can accelerate and assist that process. When expatriate staff, visiting professionals, and casual visitors gain an empathetic understanding of the complexities of the cultural, religious, and political environments within the region, that partnership will become much more productive.