

**MAKING MODERN MUSLIMS:
THE POLITICS OF ISLAMIC
EDUCATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

*Edited by Robert W. Hefner
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Reviewed by NASYA BAHFEN

IN NOVEMBER 2008, three Indonesian men who had been students of an Islamic boarding school were executed, having been convicted for their roles in the bombings of nightclubs in Bali in October 2002. The executions were covered extensively by domestic media—to the extent that their deaths were turned into a circus that fascinated, repulsed and polarized the country. On the role played by the media in drawing attention to the fate of the men (and possibly helping to create martyrs out of the men) Foreign Minister Hasan Wirajuda said that while having so much publicity surround three high-profile executions was undesirable, he was reluctant to clamp down on the operations of the press. “Perhaps that’s the cross we have to bear in an open and democratic Indonesia,” Mr. Wirajuda said.

The nexus of civil society, cultural influence and religious education in Indonesia provides one of the cases explored in *Making Modern Muslims*, a collection of works edited by Robert Hefner, professor of anthropology at Boston University. While the Bali bombings are the most

well known case, the book makes the point that in several countries throughout the region, former students of Muslim schools have turned to violent extremism in support of Islam. In explaining the book’s *raison d’être*, Mr. Hefner writes that in addition to Indonesia, Malaysia has also grappled with incidents of violence (an attack on its police in 2001) that were traced to suspects who had links to Islamic private schools, while three Southeast Asian countries with restive Muslim minorities (the Philippines, Thailand and Cambodia) have experienced violence in the last eight years that authorities blamed on the teachings of Muslim schools.

Given the recent time-frame in which these cases occurred, and the apparent connection between each case and Muslim educational institutions, Mr. Hefner asks whether Islam in Southeast Asia—which Western scholars have traditionally spoken of and observed to be peaceful

and inclusive—is turning to more radical teachings.

However, *Making Modern Muslims* warns against the wholesale endorsement of claims that the 50,000 *madrassas* (day schools) and *pondok pesantren* (boarding schools) found in these countries are now factories churning out militant warriors of Islam in a scary, post-9/11 world. The works in this volume suggest that the moderation and pluralization for which Islam in Southeast Asia is known have been very much present in Muslim schools, and are still present, as these schools have played an active part in the debates about where and how religion fits into the kind of modern society that most countries in the region are aspiring to be.



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Mr. Hefner is explicit about what he sees as the need to view terror-related occurrences in the region from a prism other than that of Western security. Although he acknowledges the inevitable human tendency (particularly after a bombing or an attack) to fall back on security concerns as a way of analyzing what has happened, he believes that to focus purely on security compromises other viewpoints that take into account cultural concerns surrounding Islamic schooling—many of which are brought up by Muslims. The long-running debate in Indonesia between modernist and traditional Muslims, and how the two perspectives have shaped the development of various components of the Islamic school system, is one example.

Accordingly, the essays in the book provide very detailed historical background and information on cultural and theological perspectives that may seem at first glance an unnecessary diversion to the reader who merely wants a no-holds-barred exposé of what Muslim schools are teaching their students. But this is not strictly a volume about Islamic educational institutions per se—rather, Mr. Hefner and his coresearchers and contributors attempt to map the influences that have shaped the curriculum and ethos of Is-

lamic schools in Indonesia and some of its Association of Southeast Asian Nations neighbors, in order to get a sense of the future path of these schools and their students.

The individual historical context and circumstances of each country studied in the collection are related back to the issues faced by Islamic educators in that country. Indonesia's swift and rocky path to democracy is intertwined with tension between different Muslims (and the schools they operate and run); Buddhist Thailand's struggles with its southern Malay Muslim minority over issues of national identity and culture are talked about in light of the historically tenuous relationship between the pondok and Thai authorities; a discussion on the impact of the Khmer Rouge's murderous regime on the Cham and Chvea Muslims gives insight into the main network of Islamic schools in Cambodia.

The overriding theme of the volume is that Muslim schools are part of a dynamic and evolving group of societies in a region which is hurtling toward modernity, and in the process of constructing (or reconstructing, as in the case of Cambodia) civil society. Islamic education is another building block—an area to be negotiated and, if necessary, redesigned.