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Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism, written by Jeremy Menchik



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Abstract

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Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism, written by Jeremy Menchik

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Jeremy Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism*. New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2016, xv + 207 pp. [Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion and Politics]. ISBN 9781107119147. Price: USD 99.99 (hardback).

Based on his 2011 University of Wisconsin-Madison dissertation, this book studies three Islamic organizations in the Netherlands East Indies and contemporary Indonesia: the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU; between 60–84 million members), Muhammadiyah (between 24–32 million members) and Persatuan Islam (Persis; about 500,000 members). It focuses on how these organizations and Indonesian society at large have understood the concept of tolerance, how their understanding of tolerance came into existence, and how this shapes social and state practices. The book is based on an extensive literature study, two years of fieldwork, and a survey of 1000 leaders of the three mentioned Muslim organizations.

In Chapter One ('After Secularization') Menchik states that contrary to most political scientists who have neglected religion, he abandons secularization theory and aims to study and rethink the relationship between religion and politics. Chapter Two ('Explaining Tolerance and Intolerance') goes into how Islamic organizations view tolerance (such as towards Christians) and suggests that attitudes are influenced by locally generated social interactions. The next chapter ('Local Genealogies') further investigates religious actors in their local and historical context, showing that the views of Muslim organizations towards other religious groups are still very much based on past interactions. For instance, in areas where nineteenth century missionaries had elicited sharp polemical reactions from Muslims, this still forms part of the present day religious climate. Chapter Four ('Godly Nationalism') tackles the issue of the Ahmadiyah movement. According to Menchik, since the late 1930s there has been an overlapping consensus between the state and society in their dislike of Ahmadiya, which has created a 'we feeling', and this has played a role in generating contemporary nationalism. Menchik calls this type of nationalism 'godly nationalism', which the author theorizes as 'an imagined community bound by a common, orthodox theism and mobilized through the state in cooperation with religious organizations in society' (p. 67). On the basis of a number of historical case studies, the next chapter ('The Coevolution of Religion and State') shows that the state and religion are entangled: the state shapes religion and religion shapes the state. One of these case studies is the formation of a monotheistic Hinduism in Bali in a prolonged concerted effort by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Balinese elites. In Chapter Six ('Communal Tolerance') the author continues his research into tolerance, but unlike the previous chapter he does not do so on the basis of the historical context, but by using political theory and important texts on political thought produced by Indonesian Muslim leaders. The chapter concludes that NU and Muhammadiyah are tolerant of religious minorities, but not in the ideological sense of individual secular-liberal tolerance, as described by John Locke and John Rawls. Menchik characterizes this tolerance with a new term as 'communal tolerance', which is 'tolerance based on group rights, legal pluralism, and the separation of religious and social affairs' (p. 124). This is the 'Tolerance without Liberalism' mentioned in the subtitle of the book. Chapter Seven ('Religion and Democracy'), the final chapter, compares the position of religion in Indonesia with a large number of other countries. It shows that both in terms of godly nationalism and communal tolerance Indonesia is not very unique. The book ends in a plea to place religion in the heart of the analysis in future research on social movements, political theory, and modernity.

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The approach of the book is original, because it uses Indonesia as a case study to contribute to political theory. Not being a political scientist, I am not able to judge whether the conceptual vocabulary of the social sciences is inadequate to incorporate religious actors in its analysis, as the author claims, but I wonder whether his newly introduced concepts of godly nationalism and communal tolerance will prove to be a useful contribution to this vocabulary.

Sometimes the author seems overly enthusiastic, as when he claims that due to secularization theory religion in the public sphere has been understudied. For the Indonesian case, this might be true to a certain extent for the colonial era, but the discussions on the place of religion in general and Islam in particular in the new constitution of the Republic of Indonesia have been studied extensively, while also for the period hereafter, especially after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Islam has formed the central focus of a large number of publications on Indonesian politics and society in the past and in the present.

At times I feel that the book could have gained strength by including particular issues in the analysis. For instance, a thorough treatment of the Jaringan Islam Liberal and also the 2005 MUI fatwa which opposes pluralism, liberalism, and secularism as well as the societal and intellectual debates this provoked, could have enriched the discussion on the concept of liberalism, which is so central in the book. However, the book makes use of a great number of interesting and original historical examples, which makes it an attractive read.