

# Book Review

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**Thomas B. Pepinsky**, Cornell University

*Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism*. By Jeremy Menchik. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

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There are two features of *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism* that set it apart from nearly every contemporary social scientific treatment about Islam and politics. First, author Jeremy Menchik takes political theory seriously as a subject in comparative politics. Second, it is based on a careful study of Islamic mass organizations in Indonesia—which as scholars of Islam and politics are now tired of hearing, is the world’s largest Muslim country and a consolidated if imperfect electoral democracy.

The result is an original take on Islam and democracy in a critical case. Menchik demonstrates convincingly that Indonesian democracy is characterized by religious tolerance but in a form that differs from a secular-liberal conception of tolerance. Rather, tolerance in Indonesia—a country with over 30 million non-Muslim citizens—operates at a communal level, involving the rights of religious groups and prioritizing faith over other individual rights. Menchik builds his case through a historical analysis of debates of religion and rights through the late colonial period to the present, as well as a novel survey of religious elites from three of Indonesia’s Muslim mass organizations: Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and Persis. Menchik argues that it is important to understand the “local genealogies” of Islamic thought on pluralism, religion, and group rights, rather than starting with theoretical or conceptual ideal types and then looking to see how local practices vary.

Menchik’s account shows an excellent command of the historical literature and relies on original documentary evidence that amounts to an independent contribution on its own. But the book is particularly interesting for political scientists in the way that it marries these empirical contributions with its conceptual and theoretical arguments, drawing on concepts and debates in comparative politics, democratic the-

ory, and others. Resting on impressive field research and survey data, as well as nuanced treatment of Indonesian political history, the book is both careful and thought provoking. There are also two open questions.

The first question is how to reconcile the political theory of tolerance with the political theory of liberalism, as applied to the religious sphere. This is quite obviously a challenge, but Menchik does accept the idea that tolerance and liberalism may be separated conceptually. This being the core conceptual premise behind the argument, it warrants closer scrutiny. One may define a communal ethic of tolerance, as Menchik does, as one in which it is acceptable to hold that a Christian may live, but not where she chooses. Or that he may worship, as long as it is somewhere else. Or that she may be mayor, but just not where she is a minority. Or that he may be a Muslim, but only when following a prescribed model of Islam. One may also observe that this describes what a republican or liberal would term *domination*.

Menchik engages with different conceptualizations of tolerance and their ethical and moral philosophical foundations in an excellent chapter 6. While effectively cataloging different ethics of tolerance, the discussion addresses the ethics of liberalism, democracy, and so forth only episodically and indirectly. To clarify the stakes, ask the following question: should democrats tolerate tolerance without liberalism? Knowing the answer to this question would be useful for comparativists and democratic theorists seeking to understand whether Indonesia’s religious democracy ought to be anyone’s normative ideal for a plural society. (Or, for that matter, the value of defending this version of Indonesian democracy even if it is not anyone’s normative ideal.) The closest that Menchik gets to answering that question is in the conclusion; I would have happily read an entire substantive chapter on these issues.

The second open question is methodological. Ideas—about tolerance, about citizenship, about Islam, and so forth—are independent entities that have causal force. And yet these

ideas emerge from history as a result of concrete historical processes in which key actors—Mohammed Natsir in particular—can produce these ideas. Menchik's original surveys show conclusively that ideas about communal tolerance are widely held by many leaders of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. And yet even the most illiberal (but communally tolerant) ideas are not held unanimously: 29% (roughly 216 out of 746) Islamic elites believe, for example, that Christians in Indonesia should be allowed to protest sharia law in the province of Aceh (a famously "Islamic" region that has its own legal code); 10% (roughly 74 out of 743) of Islamic elites believe that Christians should be allowed to teach Islamic studies in public schools!

The tension that emerges is between contingency and contestation, on the one hand, and the weight of history and ideas, on the other. What do we do analytically with the observation that elites do not unanimously hold the views that are held to characterize the ethic of tolerance without liberalism? Menchik dismisses them—the important statistic be-

ing the majority of elites who do hold these views. One different possibility is to argue that contestation of communal tolerance continues, in which case it would be interesting to learn the terms upon which that contestation is happening. Another possibility is to hold that those who disagree are deviant, in which case it would be interesting to explore the consequences of normative deviance for democracy in a system of communal tolerance.

The audience for Menchik's thought-provoking and thoroughly original take on democracy, tolerance, and Islam will certainly include scholars of Southeast Asia and of political Islam. However, it should also include anyone interested in religion and politics, or in the old questions of consociational democracy, minority rights, and pluralism in comparative politics. Finally, this book also ought to be read by political theorists, both comparative political theorists and others working on classical liberalism and democratic theory, who should engage with Menchik's take on how one Muslim democracy works in practice.