

John T. Sidel. *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press (Cornell Paperbacks), 2006. 304 pages.

Arief Djati

A question haunts Indonesianists and others who study Southeast Asia. It concerns the recent violent ethnic and religious disturbances in various areas of Indonesia, the anti-Chinese violence, and after that, the terrorist activities that bear the label "Islamic." Is there a connection among these or are they all different from each other? Many say that they are separate phenomena, that there is no connection between them, and therefore studies have been published concerning Ambon, Poso, and Dayak-Madura in Kalimantan, each considered separately from the other. But there is, nonetheless, a recent attempt to explain the connections among these disturbances—John Sidel's *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia*. It may be the second such attempt, after Jacques Bertrand's work.¹ Using a method that is more anthropological (and sociological) than political, Sidel tries to point out that those events—the ethnic/religious violence, the anti-Chinese violence, and also the bombings in Indonesia—all have a connection with religion; in this case, Islam.

Provocatively, in the face of suspicions by many that the terrorists' actions in Bali, Jakarta, and so on were the work of a global terrorist network, Sidel shows that all of those acts were rooted in the diminished position of Islam itself, in both colonial and post-colonial Indonesia, which was always "defeated" in establishing a national identity. Thus, even though in the history of Indonesia most of the officials of the republic were Muslim, and the president and vice president, for instance, have always up till the present been Muslims, this did not mean that Islam, as an established group identity, held a central position. On the contrary, Muslims and those associated with "ummat Islam" (the Islamic community) are still marginalized as a class in Indonesia. It is this marginalization that gave rise to violence, conflict, and then terror in Indonesia over the last two decades, according to Sidel.

Sidel, whose writing is easy to follow and offers a good read, analyzes the origins of this marginalization in the Netherlands East Indies and then in Indonesia. He shows how the colonial government gave greater opportunities in higher education to those with standing in Christian networks (formed especially in schools) and gave economic privileges to those in Chinese networks, with the result that Christians and Chinese became dominant while Muslims became subordinate (from a class-based perspective). These conditions persisted in independent Indonesia with the result that jobs in the bureaucracy and the military, and other key posts, were filled by those who received a Dutch, and not Islamic, education. As a result, those from Islamic groups questioned how they, who saw themselves as being in the majority, could lack significant influence in government. What of their dreams of respect and power?

Worse yet, until today there is no group that can be considered to represent the voice of all Muslims in a coherent way. Instead there are various Muslim organizations that articulate only limited portions of such a hypothetical unified voice. Organizations

¹ Jacques Bertrand, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

such as Nahdatul Ulama (NU), for instance, only speak for Muslim villagers, while ICMI (Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia) is an Islamic organization that represents only educated city dwellers.

According to Sidel, feelings of inferiority and a sense of injustice—the sense of being in the majority but unable to command a dominant position in the Indonesian political world—are what, in the end, cause Muslims to spread the fire of violence across Indonesia. As the saying goes, “even ants when they are stepped on will bite.” So, too, the weak—that is, Muslims, or the *rakyat* (the people)—will “bite” when they are consistently cornered, the result being violence of different types. Thus, Sidel’s theory is that the various acts of violence that haunt the Indonesian political world are all, at their root, “religious.” Understanding that Islamic identity is always blurred and uncertain, still Sidel’s approach makes it appear that there is little distinction between Indonesia’s Muslims and the “*rakyat*,” “*proletar*” (proletariat), or “*Marhaen*” (the have-nots). In other words, this book can be read as a discussion of the way in which the power of the people is always defeated in the establishment of their own identity, to the point that this power does not figure in the conjuncture of recent Indonesian politics.

The argument is original and sophisticated. But rather than focusing on it as such, I want to point out certain factors that might upset it, in particular the continuation in the New Order of the class relations that were established in the colonial period. It is, indeed, true that education was one route to the reproduction of social relations. But it has to be acknowledged that through education particular groups also gained opportunities for advancement, for a certain socialization, and for common experiences shared with those from similar groups. In that framework, it is interesting to note that the “alliance till death” of Masyumi and PSI (Partai Sosialis Indonesia, Indonesian Socialist Party) was stronger than the alliance of Masyumi and NU. Among other reasons, this was because of the closeness of Mohammad Natsir and Sutan Sjahrir, judged in comparison with their rather loose ties to the leaders of the NU. This was not because Natsir and Sjahrir were both Minang but rather because they came from the same school at AMS (Algemene Middlebare School) in Bandung (1927–1930). According to George McT. Kahin, Sjahrir was a class ahead when Natsir was in the school.² By contrast, even though they were both Muslims, Natsir and Wahid Hasyim, former minister of religion from NU, to take one example, had difficulties forming a relationship because their “languages” differed so much. By “language” here I include etiquette, demeanor, viewpoint, and so on. In this light, it is understandable that Prabowo Subianto had a closer relationship with Farid Prawiranegara than with Abdurahman Wahid in the 1990s. Both of their fathers—Sumitro Djojohadikusumo from PSI and Sjafruddin Prawiranegara from Masyumi—were close allies.

The great opportunity for change in the social order came in the revolution of 1945, which, though it has great importance, unfortunately is not much discussed in this book. At the beginning of the revolution, many groups from the *rakyat*, the *ummat*, or the proletariat took power and gained authority in government. Anton Lucas’s classic study of the Three Regions Affair (Pemalang, Tegal, and Brebes) gives a nuanced picture of the situation, showing the reversal of order.³ But, once power was in the

² George McT. Kahin, “In Memoriam Mohammad Natsir (1907–1993),” *Indonesia* 56 (October 1993): 158–65.

³ Anton Lucas, “Social Revolution in Pemalang, Central Java, 1945,” *Indonesia* 24 (October 1977): 87–122.

hands of the *rakyat*, governance suffered. The inexperienced *rakyat* who took charge had limited talent, experience, and knowledge, and so were ineffective. When it was clear that “the people” were unable to run the government competently, central-government authorities stepped in and took back governing power. With that, the opportunity for reform was shattered.

The same thing happened in various Indonesian regions. The result was the shattering of the power of the *rakyat* after the 1950s. The PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia, Indonesian Communist Party) domesticated its energy through its accusations of “anarchism,” “adventurism,” and so on. The effects of the *rakyat*’s loss of power were increasingly felt after the dissolution of the PKI and the emergence of the New Order. Thus, after the 1945 revolution there was not much change in class relations. Those in power following the revolution fit in the mold shaped by the classes formed in the colonial period. They were the graduates of the HIS (Hollandsch Inlandsche School, Dutch School for Indigenous People), MULO (Meer Uitgebreid Lager Onderwijs, Further Extension of Primary Education or lower high school), KNIL (Koninklijk Nederlandsch Indisch Leger, Royal Netherlands Indies Army), and so on. The Muslims went back to the *pesantren*, while some of them tried to get government positions, particularly in the Ministry of Religious Affairs. If one reads the list of prime ministers or ministers of departments in the years following, it is clear that the majority were graduates of HIS, MULO, AMS (Algemeene Middelbare School, General Secondary School), and other secular institutions. Christians and Chinese, more likely to have been in the professions, faced few obstacles in returning to their positions as members of an influential class. Although they—particularly the Chinese—were often enough victims of the 1945 revolution, having been accused of being spies and so on, they depended on no particular group when the economy was normalized. Sidel does not go into this in detail, and it makes his explanation of the subsequent period seem to “jump” too far.

In addition, Sidel offers a loose definition of Muslim, or *ummat* Islam, which has serious implications for the rest of the book. As is well known, the Indonesian New Order Government, when developing items to be listed on citizens’ official ID cards, restricted recognized religious groups to just these five: Islam, Catholicism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hindu. Other faiths, such as Kebatinan, Confucian, Pngestu, and Subud, had to align with one of the five “recognized” religions on the ID cards. Therefore, a well-known Kebatinan figure, such as Permadi SH, now a parliament member from PDI-P (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia–Perjuangan, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle), would have “Islam” checked on his ID card during the New Order period, despite being a Kebatinan follower. Another example is the “mass murder of communist followers” in 1966–1969; these killings were partially carried out by NU followers. NU leaders always stated that this was not the mass murder of communists by Muslims, but rather was mass murder among fellow followers of Islam. Their reasoning is simple. Victims and perpetrators were all followers of Islam according to their ID cards and were members of NU in villages areas. Those examples mean that a Javanese person has a complex identity—he or she may be communist, Muslim, and, maybe, Kebatinan, all at the same time. (Consider Haji Misbach, the influential PKI leader who was also a prominent figure in Islam and among those who participated in the Hajj.) Javanese is too complex to reduce to one religion, Islam.

These are minor criticisms. At last, this book is extremely valuable for the study of contemporary Indonesia, particularly for those readers and researchers seeking to understand what changes may yet occur regarding notions of Islamic identity and class relations.

[Editor's Note: For a second review of *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad*, see page 183, this issue]