

**Anak Agung Banyu Perwita. *Indonesia and the Muslim World: Islam and Secularism in the Foreign Policy of Soeharto and Beyond*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007. 238 pages.**

Michael Laffan

We are often told that Indonesia is doubly distinct for being the largest Muslim nation on earth without being an Islamic state. Yet few Muslim countries are “Islamic states” if we take the premise that it is the implementation of Islamic law that defines the polity in such terms. I also suspect that the leaders of a bare minority of majority-Muslim nations ever base their foreign policy decisions on globalist Islamic sentiment rather than national or regional interest, unless domestic opinion is completely unbridled, which brings us to the particular book at hand.

Following Rizal Sukma, Anak Agung Banyu Perwita, a senior lecturer at Bandung’s Parahyangan Catholic University, claims that the major hypothesis of his book *Indonesia and the Muslim World* is that “foreign policies are ... influenced by the religious views and beliefs of policymakers and their constituents” (p. 2). Yet in this compact and useful set of essays, Anak Agung seems to have demonstrated the exact opposite. That is, the *bebas-aktif* (in his translation: “independent and active”) foreign policy formulated by Indonesia’s founding fathers has long trumped the religious concerns ascribed to or demonstrated by the majority of its citizens. More precisely, Anak Agung reflects on foreign policy actions taken in relation to a number of institutions and instances. These are, in order of discussion, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC, founded in September 1969), “the Middle East Conflict” (actually a series of issues and events ranging from the question of Palestine to the Gulf Wars), the Moro “problem,”<sup>1</sup> and the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Those discussions are followed by a cursory glance at the situation after Soeharto’s fall, when a wide array of voices swarmed into a Muslim chorus that threatened to take center stage. These ranged from the Islamist Laskar Jihad and Laskar Mujahidin militias, which exacerbated the intercommunal violence in the Moluccas between 1999 and 2002, to the allegedly incorruptible Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (Prosperous Justice Party), which seemed poised to take a prominent place in the parliament.

In the cases relating to New Order rule, Anak Agung shows clearly what many of us might have suspected. An Islamic position was never really mobilized in cases where doing so would detract from concerns framed with respect to the state’s leadership role in ASEAN (the Association of South East Asian Nations), its position in the Non-Aligned Movement, or in regard to specific questions of domestic sovereignty. The very fact that Soeharto, or at least certain generals in the military, and then Gus Dur were unofficially open to overtures from Israel (doubtless with the United States’s blessing) would seem proof enough of Indonesia’s political elite being interested in displaying Islamic sympathies only for selected audiences and times. Such pragmatism was perhaps seen most spectacularly with Soeharto’s Hajj of 1991 and his support for the creation of the Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI, Ikatan

---

<sup>1</sup> In essence this concerns the ongoing struggle carried out by the Muslim peoples of the Southern Philippines. Rather than being a single movement, however, the history of the Moros is one of factionalism and a search for backing from abroad to maintain an insurgency against an avowedly Christian state.

Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia) under his curious minion and ultimate successor, B. J. Habibie. Indeed, Indonesia was never a full signatory to the IOC, and only sought "Muslim" backing when it was deemed useful, for example, with respect to the annexation of East Timor.

While no other Muslim country ever formally recognized the incorporation of East Timor, some Muslims certainly did. Usama bin Ladin must have been playing to some popular perceptions given that he cast Australia's 1999 intervention as part of a global plot to detach an integral part of Islamic territory. Doubtless many others, such as Abu Bakar Ba'asyir (noted in this study as being under detention, though since released), saw the loss of Indonesia's last province as an Islamic rather than secular matter. Even so, and despite strong domestic support for the Islamization of Indonesia (and for seeing the Israel-Palestine conflict in similarly religious terms), Indonesia's leaders have generally framed the struggles of foreign peoples in terms of the right to self-determination. As Anak Agung shows, though, the commitment to such a right was just as easily abrogated in the local region when it came to the question of the territorial integrity of a fellow ASEAN member. Certainly the security of the Philippines was seen as being of greater strategic value to Indonesia than the rights of its Moro minority.

Being a historian of Islam rather than a political theorist, I shall leave it to others to treat the methodological claims of this book, and explain how those engage with studies of faith and policy more broadly. What I will suggest, however, is that more attention could perhaps have been paid to defining and contextualizing the groups discussed. While it is often invoked, we find little discussion of what Anak Agung means when he speaks of "the Muslim community" until the very end of the study, when he doffs his cap to the multiplicity of *aliran* (streams) present in Indonesia (p. 179). Prior to this point the reader must often assume that he is thinking mainly of the major platforms such as the mainstream Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah movements, and then their more recent and often outspoken competitors on the national stage, like the Majelis Mujahidin, whose sympathizers have now found space in the Indonesian Council of Ulama (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI).

Unfortunately, too, the bibliography is somewhat confusing. It is hard to see how some of the works listed had a bearing on the discussion. One looks in vain for footnote references to the studies of Bernard Lewis and Daniel Pipes, for example. Perhaps such literature informs Anak Agung's occasional presentation of Islam (or the Muslim community) as something to be differentiated from a larger population less concerned with religion and thus still to be compartmentalized (and perhaps idealized) along the lines sketched by Clifford Geertz in his influential study *The Religion of Java* (see p. 171).

Although the issues treated by Anak Agung were of interest to all segments of the Muslim community active in the public domain and so often channeled in ways to suit the New Order before its demise, one still wonders about other key aspects of the story of Islam and Indonesian foreign policy. What importance did the foreign ministry assign to the Hajj and its organization, to the status and potential influence of thousands of Indonesian students in Arabia and Egypt, or to the domestic reaction to the treatment of Indonesian domestic workers in fellow Muslim countries? After all, Indonesia's first very free and active foreign minister, Agoes Salim, had cut his official

teeth at the Jeddah consulate (though for other masters) where he served his future countrymen and women, and Gus Dur was frequently jetting off to Middle Eastern destinations to discuss matters of mutual interest.

At any rate, it would be interesting indeed to know what some of the military and diplomatic figures interviewed by Anak Agung (mostly in 2000) might have to say about other Islamic countries on an individual basis, and what a future study might make of the attitudes of key figures posted to the centers where Indonesia does have a bearing, and significant stature, as a Muslim nation among nations. At the same time, though, one need not doubt that Indonesia will continue to represent itself as something quite different to other audiences, as some of its elites seek to woo tourists back to Bali, and funds back to the military.