

Masdar Hilmy. *Islamism and Democracy in Indonesia: Piety and Pragmatism*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010. 320 pp.

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Masdar Hilmy, a lecturer at the State Institute for Islamic Studies in Surabaya, wants to know why and on what grounds Indonesian Islamist groups reject or accept democracy. In a context in which most recent studies on Islamist groups have had a historical or sociological approach, a project that takes faith and religious beliefs seriously has value in itself. Hilmy's endeavours are also worthwhile because they focus on a country in which the steady decline of overall votes for religious parties over the last decade has lulled both foreign and domestic analysts into thinking that all is quiet on the Eastern front. The recent rise of inter- and intra-religious conflict in the archipelago—often instigated by groups that operate entirely outside the party system and whose strength or weakness can therefore not be measured by looking at election results—proves otherwise and shows the importance of the author's research enterprise.

In his first four chapters, Hilmy introduces and defines two categories of Islamists in an attempt to bring some order to the cacophony of voices speaking in the name of "Indonesian Islamism." According to the author, there are utopianists and meliorists. The former reject democracy, while the latter consider democracy to be a viable political system. Islamism in present-day Indonesia takes two other forms, according to Hilmy, namely, there are groups that want to gain power by means of electoral competition and those that operate outside official politics. Some of these groups are violent or advocate violence; others are not. Within this framework, Hilmy examines the discourse inside Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), the Indonesian Mujahideen Council (MMI, Majelis Mujahideen Indonesia), and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS, Partai Keadilan Sejahtera) on whether "democracy" is a sensible form of government for Indonesia. The first two groups are situated outside the formal political system, while PKS is a registered political party. All three organizations are non-violent.

Starting at chapter five (p. 135), Hilmy examines the democracy discourse among "utopian" Islamists using HTI and MMI as case studies. Hilmy shows in some detail that utopian Islamists often equate democracy with secularism and liberalism and, therefore, eventually reject it. In chapter six, Hilmy analyzes why and under what conditions "meliorist" Islamists accept democratic state institutions. He shows how this group justifies democratic institutions by referring to the democratic and pluralist elements of the political order at the time of the prophet Muhammad. Chapter seven offers an account of the cooperation between utopianists and meliorists in pursuing their political ends. Chapter eight provides a summary of the main findings.

Unfortunately, the book's findings are insipid. Hilmy's observation that Indonesian Islamists reject democracy not only based on normative and textual grounds, but also with reference to global events (p. 158), or that Islamists rely on extra-parliamentary struggles to achieve their ends (p. 168), are both plausible and familiar. Likewise, the fact that the PKS participates in democratic politics while party internal structures

remain highly undemocratic (p. 254), or that Islamists parties are ready and able to adapt to changing environments (p. 255), are neither new nor disputed.

Worse, many of Hilmy's conclusions are inaccurate or subject to serious doubt. For example, Hilmy claims that PKS downplayed Islamic issues in both the 1999 and 2004 general legislative elections to garner votes (p. 179). While that may be true of the 2004 election period, in fact, in the 1999 elections PKS still followed a staunchly Islamist course. In a public hearing leading up to the presidential elections in 1999, Didin Hafidhuddin, then the party's presidential candidate, categorically ruled out the possibility—in the event he won the country's top job—of a coalition between PKS and "status-quo parties."¹ At the time, the party leadership also considered the formation of an all-Islamist-party coalition as a potential venue through which PKS would participate in Indonesian politics. This coalition would have included the Community Awakening Party (PKU, Partai Kebangkitan Umat), the Islamic Community Party (PUI, Partai Umat Islam), the Masyumi Party (Partai Masyumi), and the United Development Party (PPP, Partai Persatuan Pembangunan).² Likewise, Hilmy's claim that it remains PKS's goal to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia relies mostly on PKS documents and pamphlets that were published before 2004. However, since the watershed elections in 2004, in which PKS increased its votes to 7.34 percent from 1.36 percent relative to the 1999 elections, the party has changed its behavior in profound ways. For example, the party began to reject the label "Islamic" in public, agreed to cooperate with other faiths, and officially endorsed Indonesia's ecumenical state philosophy, *pancasila*, with its commitment to religious pluralism. PKS also abandoned its initial opposition to women in leadership positions and formally amended the party's organizational statutes to allow the inclusion of Muslims from non-*tarbiyah* backgrounds. ("*Tarbiyah*" means "education" in Arabic, and is also a label used for those members of the social movement from which the PKS emerged.) The PKS even supported non-Muslim candidates for legislative and executive elections and allowed them to enter the party. Since the author failed to make clear the PKS's evolution between the elections of 1999 and 2004, his description of the discourse within the party is too static.

Equally problematic is Hilmy's reliance on mainstream media reports, whose arguments he adopts without any critical discussion. For example, Hilmy tells only part of the story when he claims that PKS's support for Indonesia's controversial anti-pornography law should be read as an indication of the party's problematic relationship to democratic values (p. 233). The PKS parliamentary faction, no doubt, was a vocal supporter of a controversial anti-pornography bill passed in 2008.³ However, it was, in fact, Zain Badjebel, a national legislator and member of the PPP since 1984, who introduced the discriminatory content into the anti-pornography law.⁴

¹ "Tiga Calon Presiden Tolak Koalisi dengan Pro-Status quo," *Kompas*, April 23, 1999, p. 6.

² "Koalisi untuk menghadapi musuh bersama," *Kompas*, May 24, 1999, p. 13.

³ See, for example, Pam Allen, "Women, Gendered Activism, and Indonesia's Anti-Pornography Bill," *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 19 (2009): 8; and Barbara Hatley, "Hearing Women's Voices, Contesting Women's Bodies in Post-New Order Indonesia," *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 16 (2008): 3.

⁴ See: Allen, "Women, Gendered Activism, and Indonesia's Anti-Pornography Bill," p. 7; and Stephen Sherlock, "Parties and Decision-Making in the Indonesian Parliament: A Case Study of RUU APP, the Anti-Pornography Bill," *Australian Journal of Asian Law* 10, 2 (2008): 164.

The law also received the endorsement and active support of “moderate” Muslim organizations, including Muhammadiyah and parts of Nahdlatul Ulama,⁵ as well as mainstream politicians such as Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (Indonesia’s current president and chairman of the secular-nationalist Democratic Party) and Yusuf Kalla (then the country’s vice-president, who was also the chairman of the secular-nationalist Golkar party at the time).⁶ Against this backdrop, it seems unfair to single out the PKS as a political actor that is struggling to commit to democratic norms.

Some of Hilmy’s other depictions of the discourse and practices within Islamist organizations simply do not hold up to close scrutiny. He claims, for instance, that the PKS is the main culprit behind the implementation of shari’a-inspired local regulations across Indonesia. He even sees these regulations as a “good indication” for how parties with an Islamic platform operate at the local level (p. 101). The empirical facts tell another story, however. There was not a single regency or municipality that adopted a shari’a-inspired local regulation between 1999 and 2009 in which the PKS had won a plurality or a majority of the votes in parliamentary elections. Likewise, almost 60 percent of local executive government heads who adopted shari’a-inspired local regulation during this time were Indonesian bureaucrats who had long affiliations with the secular-nationalist Golkar party.⁷ In fact, the six PKS rank-and-file members who were able to win an executive position in the last decade did not adopt any shari’a-inspired local regulation after they assumed office.⁸ Similarly, Hilmy fails to support his claim that the MMI was involved in the formulation and implementation of shari’a-inspired local regulations (p. 113) with any kind of data or personal observations.

Finally, Hilmy states that “[f]rom the outset, the two forms of Islamism [utopianist and meliorists] worked hand in hand to build a society based on Islamic precepts” (p. 102). Once again, the author does not provide any data to support this statement. The International Crisis Group (ICG) showed in 2004 already that puritanical movements in Indonesia understand themselves as religious, not political, actors and that they “categorically reject” the PKS’s political engagement on ideological grounds.⁹ Likewise, the PKS’s more moderate course since 2004 has greatly discredited the party among local Islamist groups that *are* politically active. Azwar Hasan, one of the main ideologues of the Preparatory Committee for the Implementation of Islamic Sharia

⁵ Allen, “Women, Gendered Activism, and Indonesia’s Anti-Pornography Bill,” p. 17. Abdurrahman Wahid, then chair of Nahdlatul Ulama, publicly condemned the anti-pornography bill, as did Fatayat, the women’s wing of Nahdlatul Ulama. See Pam Allen, “Challenging Diversity? Indonesia’s Anti-Pornography Bill,” *Asian Studies Review* 31 (2007): 104.

⁶ Allen, “Challenging Diversity? Indonesia’s Anti-Pornography Bill,” p. 104.

⁷ Michael Buehler, “Whodunit? Islamists, Secular-Nationalist Elites, and the Enactment of Shari’a-inspired Local Regulations in Indonesia,” paper presented at the conference “Indonesia, Islam, and Democracy,” Columbia University, April 3–4, 2009. Based on local election data, the paper analyzes the composition of the parliaments in all the provinces, regencies, and municipalities that adopted shari’a-inspired regulations between 1999 and 2009. It also analyzes the backgrounds of local government heads in areas that adopted shari’a-inspired local regulations based on biodata the candidates had to submit to local election commissions. The data is available from the reviewer upon request.

⁸ Michael Buehler, “Revisiting the Inclusion–Moderation Thesis in the Context of Decentralized Institutions: The Behavior of Indonesia’s Prosperous Justice Party in National and Local Politics” (forthcoming). This paper is based on the data set described in footnote 7.

⁹ International Crisis Group, “Why Salafism and Terrorism Mostly Don’t Mix,” ICG Asia Report 83 (September 13, 2004): ii.

(KPPSI, Komite Persiapan Pelaksanaan Syariat Islam), arguably the most vocal and best organized group pushing for shari'a law in present-day Indonesia, aptly expressed the feelings of such groups vis-à-vis the PKS when he ridiculed the party acronym as standing no longer for Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, but "Partai Kroni Suharto" (Suharto Crony Party).¹⁰ Rather than cooperating, utopianists and meliorists seem to have grown apart in recent years.

Besides these analytical flaws, the book suffers from some stylistic ones, too. Some core concepts remain unexplained, and key definitions appear late in the book. The definition of "Islamism," for example, does not appear until page 100. Furthermore, instead of tackling this book's fascinating questions in a straightforward manner, the author uses four entire chapters to introduce and debate his core concepts. Those first four chapters could have been condensed into one.

There are several dozen misprints scattered throughout the book, while the spelling of names of key organizations and actors is inconsistent or wrong. For example, the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera) is referred to as either the "Prosperous/Justice Party" (p. 101), the "Partai Keadilan Sejahtong" (pp. 101, 313), or the PK(S) (pp. 179, 197). As for misspellings and inconsistencies, for instance, Kartosoewirjo (p. 106) turns into *Kartosowiryjo* (p. 107), and the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI, Majelis Ulama Indonesia) is also spelled as *Majlis* Ulama Indonesia (p. 185).

Some of the information provided is incomplete. For instance, Table 1 (pp. 162–63) provides a summary of HTI's views on democracy, but nowhere does the author present similar information about the MMI and PKS viewpoints, the two other groups under scrutiny in this book. Moreover, the convoluted language throughout the book makes it difficult to think about using this study as an introductory, college-level text.

The market for studies on the links between Islam and democratization shows signs of saturation. Countless publications, reports, and briefing papers that together illuminate every aspect of the relationship have made it challenging to produce truly original insights on the topic. The volume reviewed here supports that contention.

¹⁰ Aswar Hasan, "PKS: Partai Kroni Soeharto," *Tribun Timur*, December 18, 2008, available from <http://faroukmbetta.blogspot.com/2008/12/pks-partai-kroni-soeharto.html> (accessed March 1, 2011).