

Carool Kersten. *Islam in Indonesia: The Contest for Society, Ideas, and Value*. London: Hurst & Co. Publishers and Oxford University Press, 2015. 392 pp.

Chiara Formichi

For generations, scholars have hailed Indonesia as the bedrock of tolerance and diversity in the Muslim world, a trait usually connected to the archipelago's gradual Islamization and the characterization of its population's affiliation to Islam as a "thin, flaking glaze" laid over a much stronger Hindu-Buddhist substratum.¹ The national motto, *Bhinneka tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), and the Pancasila state philosophy of five principles point in this same direction. As does the recent discourse on "Islam Nusantara" (Islam of the Archipelago).

However, the violence that followed the fall of the Suharto regime and more recent political developments question this narrative of embedded tolerance. The result has been to push scholars to further investigate the origins of Indonesia's acceptance of diversity, as well as its counter discourses. Intolerance and Islamic exclusivism seem to be emerging from political and religious establishments alike, as strong statements are made against diversity and "pluralism" (to borrow from Michael Peletz),² targeting groups such as the LGBT community, Ahmadi and Shi'a Muslims, and other religious minorities.

Taking as a point of departure the 2005 MUI (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, Indonesian Ulema Council) "Fatwa 7," which condemned the rising influence of "secularism, pluralism, and liberalism" as Western and un-Islamic, *Islam in Indonesia* explores young Muslim intellectuals' engagement with these concepts and their reverberations in politics and society. From the disciplinary standpoint of religious studies, Carool Kersten illustrates current epistemological approaches to *shari'a* laws and the debate on "secularism, pluralism, and liberalism" (often treated as a connected triad), focusing on the "liberal" side of the spectrum and placing these debates within their contingent political context.

Islam in Indonesia builds on Kersten's previous book, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*.³ This connection is evident in his deployment of "cultural hybridity" as a key element in Indonesia's contemporary Muslim thought, and the intellectual genealogies that connect these twenty-first century thinkers to the previous generation. Although the theoretical contribution was stronger in the first book, Kersten's current

Chiara Formichi is Assistant Professor of Southeast Asian Studies, Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University.

¹ For "Islamization," see, for example, T. W. Arnold's 1913 theory of a *pénétration pacifique* in T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith* (London: Constable, 1913). For the quoted material, see J. C. van Leur, "The World of Southeast Asia: 1500–1650," in *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History* by J. C. van Leur, ed. W. F. Wertheim et al. (The Hague: W. van Hoeve Ltd., [1955], 1967), 169.

² M. G. Peletz, *Gender Pluralism: Southeast Asia since Early Modern Times* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 6.

³ Carool Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam* (New York and London: Columbia University Press and Hurst Publishing, 2011).

concentration on much younger—and less known—intellectuals has the added value of making accessible materials usually not available in the English language.

Kersten's stated goal, as illustrated in the introduction, is to present an intellectual history "telling the story of those conceptualizing and formulating new ways of thinking about religion and translating these into agendas for reform" (7), with a focus on the "progressive" camp. Kersten rejects the goal of pursuing "a study of Islamic political ideas," pledging instead to "look beyond events and engage with the substance of these Islamic discourses" (10). That said, Kersten eventually argues that "both progressive and reactionary Muslim thinkers do not solely deal with religious questions, they also have secular vocations in dealing with Islam and politics; the place of Islamic law in contemporary Muslim societies; and finally, what this means for the country's religious plurality and the freedom of religion" (283). Hence, whereas the first half of the book delves into "religious questions," the second half looks into each of these "secular vocations," leaving for the last chapter to show how the two approaches have met in debates related to "Fatwa 7."

Chapter one sets the stage by guiding the nonexpert reader through the politicking of the late Suharto era, the "dynastic failures" of *Reformasi* and the years of Susilo Bambang Yodhoyono (2004–14), up to the formation of the Jokowi-Kalla cabinet. This story is followed by a brief excursus on the role of Islamic parties in the 1998–2006 period and the "intellectual-historical context" for the "dramatic changes" that affected the Muslim intellectual landscape, with a partial eye to those whom Kersten refers to as "progressive Muslims," as opposed to the "conservative and reactionary" groups (5). Although Kersten admits that these terms might be less than satisfying, they remain his operative labels throughout the volume. As he disengages from political events, this taxonomy remains abstract, without connecting the labels to specific issues. An important contextual example, problematizing these binary labels, would highlight the opposition displayed by several Nahdlatul Ulama branches toward Shi'a Muslims in East Java, despite the fact that—in Kersten's evaluation—the NU is to be considered exemplary of progressive Islam (as expounded in chapter three). The last section of this first chapter draws, in broad strokes, the emergence of a progressive Muslim discourse, identifying four key moments between the 1960s and 2005. Here, Kersten's argument could have been helped with a wider spectrum of references. The relationship between the New Order and Islam, as well as the changing role of Islam in the social and public spheres in the post-1998 era, have been the subject of many studies, but here Kersten draws only from a handful of works, mostly published between 1995 and 2009, and ignores crucial publications such as Merle Ricklefs' *Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java*.⁴

Chapter two introduces the "discourses and interlocutors" that populate the book (41). In Kersten's own words, the chapter "intend[s] to provide a setting for the confluence of various strands of progressive Muslim thinking unified by a desire to safeguard and secure secularism, liberalism, and pluralism" (41–42). The following forty pages are a whirlwind of names, organizations, and factions; their intellectual genealogies since the 1970s–80s; and their self-positioning at the beginning of the

⁴ M. C. Ricklefs, *Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java—Political, Social, Cultural, and Religious History, c. 1930 to the Present* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012).

twenty-first century. Similarly, chapter three keeps its chronological fulcrum anchored to the 1980s and '90s to illustrate Indonesia's young Muslim intellectuals' roots and their critique of their "mentors" (84), with occasional forays in the early 2000s. This illustration is seen as a necessary step to explain why, by 2005, these young Muslims had disengaged from politics to become "more interested in fundamental philosophical questions" (83). In conclusion, Kersten suggests that *reformasi*-era "progressive" Muslim intellectuals are "less [interested in] finding formal ways of accommodating Islam in the political context ... [than in] education and stimulation of critical thinking" (134–35).

Although chapters two and three are to be praised for making accessible the voices of Indonesian Muslim intellectuals to English-language readers, they offer little analysis, and don't add much to the contribution of *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*. In the book under review, the author's choice of keeping the discussion "intellectual" precludes an engagement with reality. Intellectual history is an important field, but because of Kersten's choice of anchoring his work to the Fatwa, his pointing at intellectuals' "secular vocations," and because of the dramatic consequences that the Fatwa is having on Indonesians' lives, the book would have made a far greater contribution to our understanding of pluralism and majority-minority dynamics if Kersten had dirtied his hands, so to speak, to engage with "the events" (10).

The book's final three chapters go back to the initial goal of investigating reactions to the 2005 MUI Fatwa 7, and follow a thematic subdivision: chapter four looks into the debate on secularism, chapter five covers the conversation on Islamic laws, and chapter six addresses religious pluralism as a catch-all expression for human rights and freedom of thought. The discussion on secularism (chapter four) brings into the picture the attempts at restoring the Jakarta Charter in 1999–2000, the failure to do so, and—by way of Jose Casanova and other Western scholars—Indonesian progressive intellectuals' settlement for a form of statehood that interprets the Pancasila as a manifestation of Muhammad's Medina Constitution. The debate on "formalistic" and "substantivist" approaches to *shari'a* law (chapter five) rotates around the history of Islamic law in the archipelago from independence until the year 2000 with a twofold reflection: on the one hand is the philosophical engagement with *maqasid al-shari'ah*, and on the other is the introduction of Islamically inspired legislation via decentralization policies. Here Kersten uses the case of Aceh as an example of how these mechanisms played out in practice. However, Kersten relies on older references, and the inclusion of Michael Feener's work on *shari'a* as a tool for social engineering would have deepened our understanding of the Aceh context.⁵

Chapter six, "Contentious Triangulation," is where the pieces come together—Fatwa 7, epistemological philosophy, the state, and approaches to pluralism—as Kersten illustrates how Muslim intellectuals unpack the relationship "between Islam, universal human rights standards, and the implementation of the relevant legislation" (257).

⁵ See, for example, R. Michael Feener, "Social Engineering through Shari'a: Islamic Law and State-directed Da'wa in Contemporary Aceh," *Islamic Law and Society* 19, 3 (January 1, 2012): 275–311; and R. Michael Feener, *Shari'a and Social Engineering: The Implementation of Islamic Law in Contemporary Aceh, Indonesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Only hinted at until now, it is here that he makes explicit the key analytical point of his book: despite the polarization of opinions, progressive and reactionary Muslims share much common ground. First, they agree on the taxonomy that distinguishes “between exclusivists claiming finality for their own tradition and its adherents; inclusivists who privilege their own tradition but simultaneously recognize that it can work through other faiths; and pluralists insisting that all religious traditions are equally valid” (226). Second, “both blocs draw on the same theologies of religions developed by Christian theologians,” even though they use it for different purposes (277). Third and finally, “they are united by one shared point of reference: The Islamic tradition,” even though they see it constituted by different parts (282). It is on these grounds, then, that *Islam in Indonesia* contributes to our understanding of religious freedom: the identification of a common space among apparently oppositional camps of Islamic thought in Indonesia is an important discovery, but it nonetheless warrants further investigation in the realm of inter-group (progressive-conservative-reactionary) dynamics and their social consequences.

In sum, *Islam in Indonesia* is an informative text, making accessible to English-language readers those materials and debates so far limited to the purview of Indonesianists. This makes it a potentially useful text for graduate students interested in the issues of religious pluralism, minorities, and political Islam in Southeast Asia. In a classroom context, however, it would need to be supported by up-to-date references and more concrete case-studies (e.g., newspaper articles, opinion pieces, or academic journal articles) to bridge the gap between philosophy and political debates, and their impact on the daily lives of those who do not fall into Indonesia’s mainstream society.