

Robert Pringle. *Understanding Islam in Indonesia: Politics and Diversity*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2010. 220 pp.

Nancy J. Smith-Hefner

Robert Pringle's *Understanding Islam in Indonesia* is intended as a "primer on Islam in Indonesia" for non-experts (p. 7). The book is based on the author's training as a historian of Southeast Asia, his service as a diplomat in Jakarta (1970–74), and research—mainly interviews—he conducted in Indonesia and Australia in 2001 and 2007–08 (p. 9). The author also draws extensively on the work of well-known scholars and area specialists. The author's concern is neither Islamic theology nor jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Rather, he explains, his interest lies in locating the reality of Indonesian Islam between two too-simple stereotypes: (1) the view that Indonesian Islam is "moderate" in comparison to Middle Eastern Islam, and (2) the argument that, although its Muslims may be moderate, Indonesia is a "soft state" and is at risk of succumbing to an extremist Islamic minority (p. 7).

The book's first four chapters are largely historical in emphasis, reviewing what will be for specialists of Indonesia familiar but useful ground. The chapters chronicle Islam's arrival in Indonesia in the thirteenth century, the reasons for Islam's spread, and its social and political development up through the Suharto era. Pringle references the familiar argument that Islam came to Southeast Asia from South Asia and followed expanding trade routes. As Pringle writes, conversion was gradual and the intensity of Islamization varied, with port cities experiencing wider influence than that found inland. Southeast Asian rulers who embraced Islam gained prestige linked to powerful new Islamic realms in India and found the mystical content of Islam (Sufism) particularly attractive. Citing the work of historian Merle Ricklefs, Pringle refers to early Javanese Islam as a "mystical synthesis" of Javanese beliefs and Sufi-influenced religious culture:

The history of Islam has been one of fluctuation and tension between two broad religious styles: Sufi-influenced Islam, coexisting relatively easily with many older elements in local culture, and a less forgiving, more legalistic style emphasizing the requirements of doctrine as interpreted by the latest trends in global Islam [p. 35].

In what some specialists of Islam may regard as a too-stark dichotomy, the author uses the terms "Traditionalist" to indicate the Sufi-influenced style of Islam, and "Reformist" to refer to the more doctrinaire and legalist style. He, in turn, associates the two strains with the mainstream mass religious organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, respectively (p. 35).

The East Indies became an official colony of the government of the Netherlands in 1800. While initially Islam was not of particular concern to the new Dutch rulers, by the mid-nineteenth century Dutch officials realized that the religion could become a source of and motive for political resistance. Still close to mainstream historical narratives on Indonesia, Pringle emphasizes that anticolonial resistance in the nineteenth century led Dutch officials to make an important distinction between Islamic religious leaders (who were likely to resist Dutch rule) and *adat* (customary) rulers whose authority was grounded in pre-Islamic heritage (and who were supposed

to be less likely to resist Dutch rule). Building on this distinction, the Dutch hoped to extend their control by keeping the *adat* community separate and explicitly non-Muslim. The real danger was not Islam, Pringle writes, but Islamic extremism (p. 48).

The author highlights this strategic theme (Islamic versus *adat* factions), tracing its continuing influence in the postcolonial era, under both the Sukarno and Suharto regimes. Muslim factions united with nationalists to gain independence from the Dutch in 1945. But during the Sukarno presidency, the violent Darul Islam insurrection in West Java (1948–62), which aimed to create an Islamic state, left many secular-nationalist Indonesians wary of extremist Islam. The Outer Islands Rebellion of 1958 had a similar effect and gave Sukarno an excuse to ban Masyumi, a Muslim political party loosely associated with the Reformist community. A little known army general, Suharto, seized the reins of power from Sukarno in the wake of an attempted Communist coup in 1965. While Suharto saw the destruction of the Communist Party as his major concern, the destruction of “political Islam of the Reformist variety remained solidly in second place, thanks largely to memories of Darul Islam and the Outer Islands Rebellion” (p. 85).

As president, Pringle argues, Suharto was largely successful in maintaining order, albeit with a firm hand; he was also successful in promoting Indonesia’s economic development. During most of his presidency (1966–98), Pringle observes, Suharto attempted to keep Reformist Islam at arm’s length. However, the president’s economic programs not only supported the growth of a modest middle class, but also the growth of Islam. By the late 1970s, an Islamic resurgence was evident, especially in Indonesia’s urban areas. An important campus-based education (*tarbiyah*) movement developed, influenced by Egypt’s Muslim brotherhood and linked to what has become the Prosperous Justice Party, or PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera).

It is in his analysis of contemporary Muslim politics that Pringle’s arguments take on a somewhat more controversial tone. Of the PKS, for example, Pringle writes that the party “is today widely regarded as Indonesia’s most sophisticated and potentially dangerous radical Islamic political organization” (p. 96). Some readers may wonder whether this is indeed a “widely” held view, and whether the conservative and sometimes exclusive politics to which the PKS has committed actually makes PKS the most potentially dangerous and “radical” of Muslim organizations.

Pringle also observes that, in part as a result of Saudi and other foreign funding, Salafism of the puritanical, fundamentalist sort was also represented in the expansion of the educational system under Suharto, and thrived in a context of repression. “Radical Islam was greatly aided by the new connections to the Middle East established by the politically frustrated Reformists” (p. 98). Notwithstanding this rather broad-stroke characterization of “radical Islam,” Pringle’s basic observation is correct: that from the late Suharto period on, Reformist Islam was becoming increasingly diverse, and some among its membership joined with Traditionalist groups to challenge the Suharto government.

The end of the Suharto government meant the further pluralization of Islamic groups and included the rise of Islamist militias, some of which were extremist (p. 158). Pringle notes that the militias greatly aggravated sectarian unrest in Kalimantan, Maluku, and Poso. He also points out that adherents of the Jemaah Islamiyah had links

to al-Qaeda (without delving too far into the factionalism that has plagued it), and were responsible for a series of bombings carried out in the 2000s. Pringle observes, however, that these violent actions have been deeply unpopular among the Indonesian public, and he gives the government credit for containing the most violent forms of extremism.

According to Pringle, what has enabled terrorists to operate in Indonesia despite their unpopularity, and what has allowed for continued pluralism and the possibility of democracy, are all linked. The phenomena reflect the fact that Indonesia has lost none of its diversity (pp. 164, 183). "In other words," he writes, "diversity acts as a brake, however imperfect, on ideological, religious, or political extremism" (p. 192). Some readers may worry that this generalization overlooks certain cultural and structural weaknesses in the contemporary structures of Indonesian religious pluralism, not least of all with regards to non-Muslims and non-conforming Muslims. In a final chapter of the book, the author explores how Indonesian diversity has been expressed, celebrated, and strengthened by a many-faceted national mythology. He finds the great majority of Indonesians are aware that, despite its theoretical unity, Islam as practiced is diverse and that they respect each others' religious styles without losing their own convictions. As important to Indonesia's stability is the fact that, while Islam in Indonesia remains a majority religion, it is a minority political philosophy. The dualism of Traditionalist and Reformist groups is an important part of this reality.

Pringle's book is not meant for area specialists, and scholars of Indonesian Islam might well feel uneasy at the now-dated equation of "Traditionalist" and "Reformist" with Geertz' terms "*abangan*" and "*santri*" (p. 194). Similarly, the bipolar association of Traditionalists and Nahdlatul Ulama with Sufism, and Reformists and Muhammadiyah with the PKS and religious "fundamentalism," will strike many specialists of Indonesian Islam as overdrawn. The dichotomous categorization obscures some of the messier and more important dynamics of religious pluralism and contestation underway in contemporary Indonesia. Pringle's broad-stroke dichotomies aside, his book is clear, concise, and engagingly well-written. The author offers a balanced and synthetic analysis, drawing on important works from the field and presenting their arguments in a clear and accessible manner. For these reasons, the book could be usefully adopted in undergraduate courses in political science or Southeast Asian studies. As an introduction rather than a final word, Pringle's book is a welcome contribution to Indonesian studies and to the study of political Islam.