

**Gordon P. Means, *Political Islam in Southeast Asia*. Boulder,
CO and London, UK: Lynne Rienner, 2009.**

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I can recall a time, prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall, when any attention paid to Southeast Asia by most observers in the West (outside of Australia and New Zealand, at least) was conditioned by that region's importance within the context of the Cold War. Books with titles such as *Soviet Strategies in Southeast Asia*,¹ or the preposterous assertion on the dust jacket of a volume on the *Konfrontasi* campaign that Britain's victory in Borneo was of "immense" importance in "stemming the spread of Communism,"² attest to the fact that political and military writers of that era—or at any rate their publishers—were mainly concerned with which Southeast Asian country would be the next "domino" to fall in what appeared to many to be communism's inexorable march through the region. Today, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, another simplistic, binary opposition between the West and "someone else" has been ushered in, the so-called "War on Terror," and so, like a soldier replacing the red lens of a military-issue angle flashlight with a green one, interest in Southeast Asia is now often structured around its character as an important centre of political Islam.

Despite the horrific human cost of the events of 9/11 and their ongoing aftermath, it can nevertheless be said in all truth that they have spawned numerous studies of various aspects of Islam that would otherwise never have been written, including the present volume, as the author, Gordon Means, makes clear in his preface. Means, an emeritus professor of political science at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, who passed away in August 2010,³ has distilled a lifetime of personal study in and of

the region in the making of *Political Islam in Southeast Asia*, and the result does not disappoint.

After the relatively brief introduction, the remaining thirteen chapters of this fairly lengthy book proceed chronologically, beginning with the origins of the Islamic religion in early seventh-century Arabia. The European colonial period ends with the close of chapter 3, however, and therefore the major part of the work is concerned with postwar Southeast Asia—Means was after all a political scientist, not a historian. The account proceeds up to about the middle of 2008 in some chapters, while others go no further than early 2007. Given the author's goal of narrating events up to the time of writing in the chronologically late chapters, it is not at all surprising that some chapters contain more recent material than others. Geographically, the primary emphasis is on Indonesia, which has four chapters devoted to it (including one on Aceh separatism), and Malaysia, which has three, but the affairs of Muslim minorities in the southern Philippines and southern Thailand are also examined, receiving one chapter each. Although mentioned in passing, Muslims in Cambodia, western Myanmar, and Singapore are not discussed in detail. Among the chapters dealing with the region as a whole, chapter 8, "Southeast Asia and Global Jihad," containing among other things a detailed account of the origins and growth of al-Qaida, is a particular standout.

Each chapter constitutes a largely self-contained essay, sharply delineated in terms of chronology and geography, that could bear study on its own; for example, as an assigned reading in a post-secondary course. Yet, with one authorial voice throughout, the chapters mesh well together, with none of the discordance one observes in an edited volume of contributions from different authors. The documentation is impressive, with extensive notes appearing at the end of each chapter, reinforcing their character as potential stand-alone pieces. In the case of the earlier chapters, some of the author's source material consists of some rather old books, probably drawn from his personal collection and possibly going back to his university days. Such a practice is of course perfectly legitimate, but it limits the usefulness of his notes as a bibliographic aid inasmuch as many of these books, particularly those dealing with Islam in general, have been superseded by one or more newer works since September of 2001. A somewhat different problem appears in the later chapters, where, reflecting the commendable drive to be as up-to-date as possible, the documentation is of necessity primarily web-

based. My attempts to access some of these sources revealed that, in common with a great deal of somewhat older material on the internet, not all of them remain available, again limiting the usefulness of the author's documentation to other researchers. Moreover, most of the web-based material is unaccountably excluded from the twenty-eight-page bibliography.

Consistent with the author's academic specialty, it is my impression that one gets considerably more politics than Islam in *Political Islam in Southeast Asia*; indeed, in some parts of the text, such as discussions of economic policy, Means seems to forget himself, treating the reader to a number of pages with no significant mention of Islam at all. Critical elections in Indonesia and Malaysia are narrated in almost blow-by-blow detail, out of all proportion to their relation to political Islam per se. As such, the reader primarily interested in global Islam who comes to this book with the intention of rounding out his or her knowledge with an account of its specifically Southeast Asian aspects may be put off by this imbalance. On the other hand, those mainly interested in Southeast Asia looking to examine the role of political Islam in the region should have very little to complain of.

Some eight years in the making all told—from 9/11 to its publication in 2009—the amount of information packed into this work is prodigious; therefore, the best I can do here by way of summary is simply to highlight a few points that made a particular impression. The presence of “green [i.e., Islamic] factions” in the Indonesian military that provided support to Islamist paramilitaries fighting Christian separatists in East Timor, Maluku and Sulawesi affords a disturbing parallel to the role of Pakistan's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) in supporting the Taliban. In Aceh, accounts of astonishing brutality on the part of the Indonesian Army—and particularly the National Police Mobile Brigade (Brimob)—read like something from a bad novel.⁴ At the very least, the point is driven home that the Indonesian military plays roles in Indonesian society radically at variance with those of the military in most Western countries.

Malaysia appears in the pages of this book as, on the whole, a far less volatile place than Indonesia. That being said, many Malaysian states operate “faith restoration centres,” essentially religious prisons where Muslims deemed “deviant” by Sharia

courts can be confined for up to three years to hear the preaching of approved doctrine. Offenders are released when they acknowledge the validity of “true Islam.”

The author’s narrative tone is dispassionate throughout; however, judging by the number of times he repeats the assertion, it seems clear that he is more than a little concerned by Saudi influence in Southeast Asia. Operating through various Muslim charities, Wahhabist sources are said to have deployed their vast oil wealth to fund numerous venues for the propagation of their strict, literalist version of Islam throughout the region. Since Southeast Asian Islam has not traditionally been seen as either strict or literalist, one gets the impression that Means sees the Saudi ideological effort as an affront to something in which he has a personal stake—or at least a very strong liking. He is certainly no friend of fundamentalists.

On the production side, things are generally quite good. Although there is a useful glossary of non-English terms and acronyms—indeed, political groupings in Southeast Asia constitute a veritable alphabet soup—not every term or acronym appearing in the text is listed there. Dutch spellings of Indonesian names and terms crop up here and there, despite the overall preference for post-independence spellings in the text and index. Spelling of non-English terms and place-names is often inconsistent; in at least one case, different forms of a given place-name occur within the same sentence! One somewhat grainy stock map, obviously not produced or even adapted specifically for this volume, is made to do duty for the entire book; needless to say, many places mentioned in the text do not appear on the map, but in the days of the internet, this is perhaps not the problem that it would have been in times past. The page count is somewhat high for a perfect-bound softcover; nevertheless, the glue is sturdy enough that I have no hesitation recommending the paperback version of this book.

A work of this nature cannot be said to have an overarching “theme” or thesis—in other words, it is not, on the whole, trying to “make a point”—but there is, I think, at least one lesson that can be drawn from the information presented there. Going back as far as the 1970s, if not earlier, there has been an unmistakable trend in the Muslim-majority countries of Southeast Asia—as, indeed, in the Muslim world at large—towards an increase in religiosity, and perhaps more importantly, an increase in the perceived *legitimacy* of religiosity in almost every facet of society, be it government, politics, the judiciary, education, publishing, broadcasting, the family, and probably

many others. This of course is diametrically opposed to the longstanding trend, arguably going back centuries, away from religiosity in the West. Those who presume that Western values are universal are going to have to come to terms with the disquieting fact that large swathes of humanity are not, in fact, marching to the beat of a Western drum. For unlike what happened in the case of the erstwhile Soviet Bloc, the phenomenon of political Islam is not likely to collapse anytime soon.

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¹ Charles B. McLane, *Soviet Strategies in Southeast Asia: An Exploration of Eastern Policy Under Lenin and Stalin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1966.

² Peter Dickens, *SAS: Secret War in South-East Asia; 22 Special Air Service Regiment in the Borneo Campaign, 1963-1966* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1983; London: Greenhill Books, 1991).

³ Mike Hughlett, "Gordon Means, Scholar and Student of Malaysia," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, August 15, 2010, <http://www.startribune.com/obituaries/100737349.html>.

⁴ I was immediately reminded of scenes from George Robert Elford's execrable *Devil's Guard* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1971).