

## Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia

Religion and nationalism are two of the most potent and enduring forces that have shaped the modern world. Yet there has been little systematic study of how these two forces have interacted to provide powerful impetus for mobilization in Southeast Asia, a region where religious identities are as strong as nationalist impulses. At the heart of many religious conflicts in Southeast Asia lie competing conceptions of nation and nationhood, identity and belonging, loyalty and legitimacy. In this accessible and timely study, Joseph Chinyong Liow examines the ways in which religious identity nourishes collective consciousness of a people who see themselves as a nation, perhaps even as a constituent part of a nation, but anchored in shared faith. Drawing on case studies from across the region, Liow argues that this serves as both a vital element of identity and a means through which issues of rights and legitimacy are understood.

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For Keng Teck and Dorothy,  
otherwise known to me as Dad and Mum

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## Preface

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Religion has always been an important theme in Southeast Asian history and culture. It has also been a crucial feature of the region's politics and specifically, as I hope to demonstrate in this book, in the conception of nationhood and the political contestations that have defined the history of the nation in Southeast Asia. Indeed, since the emergence of anti-colonial movements in the region, religion has animated and colored nationalism in Southeast Asia. Romantic nationalists from Myanmar (Burma) to Indonesia and the Philippines, in possession of great capacities for invention and myth-making, frequently capitalized on the "immutable" religious identity of "their people" in order to construct narratives that frame conceptions of nationhood beyond the imperative of material self-interest.

Such is the currency of these narratives, it harkens to Hugh Trevor-Roper's observation, made in his illuminating tome, *The Invention of Scotland*, that "for what people believe is true is a force, even if it is not true." This conceptualization of nationhood using religious metaphors, vocabularies, and referents, I should add, was not merely confined to those anti-colonial movements that agitated successfully to liberate their nations from Western imperialism. Religion has been an equally robust, if at times overlooked, phenomenon on at least two further counts: first, as a feature in the process of post-independence nation and state building and consolidation and, second, in the articulation of resistance by groups within the territorial state but who do not share in its conception of nationhood. It is in the hope of untangling this dynamic thematic combination of religious identity, nationalism, and political contestation that *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia* has been written.

The topic of religion and conflict has fascinated many a scholar of the region. The result has been the production of several excellent studies that explore the role of religion in political conflict from a wide array of perspectives ranging from economic inequality to minority identity, political legitimacy, and integration. Of particular note are Thomas McKenna's illuminating study of local politics in Cotabato, Edward Aspinall's study

of how religious identity blended with nationalism in Aceh, Duncan McCargo's work on southern Thailand that focuses on the legitimacy-deficit of the Thai state in the Malay south, and John Sidel's masterly analysis of the kaleidoscopic violence perpetrated by religiously inspired groups in Indonesia.<sup>1</sup> This book hopes to add to this literature in at least two ways.

First, notwithstanding their high quality, much of the best scholarship in this field remains single-country studies. There is a dearth of comparative work undertaken in this area. In this regard, the aim of this book is to complement the existing corpus by locating single-country cases in a historically and culturally grounded, comparative interrogation of what religious identity entails for the politics of conflict, taking into account the remarkable depth and diversity of religious conceptions of identity and politics across Southeast Asia.

Second, although religion and nationalism are two of the most potent and enduring socio-political forces that have shaped the modern world, commanding much loyalty and for which men and women have willingly spilt blood and sacrificed lives, there has been little systematic study of how these two forces have interacted and combined to provide powerful impetus for mobilization and political contestation. This is particularly striking in the study of Southeast Asia, a region where the salience of religious identity is matched only by the strength of nationalist impulses. To that effect, the purpose of *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia* is also to foster a better understanding of the role and place of religion in a range of intrastate conflicts across Southeast Asia where religious identity has been invoked. It aims to do so by unpacking the religious metaphors and narratives associated with these conflicts and interrogating them against the cultural and historical backdrops within which they are embedded. In addressing these issues, this book hopes not only to cast light on the themes of religion, conflict, and nationalism in the region, but also to bring Southeast Asian studies to bear on current debates over the role of religion in the study of nationalism and conflict in contemporary society and politics.

This book is a result of my interest in and research on issues of identity, religion, and conflict in the southern Thailand, Mindanao, and Malaysia

<sup>1</sup> Thomas M. McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels: Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines*. Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1998; John T. Sidel, *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006; Duncan McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008; Edward Aspinall, *Islam and Nation: Separatist Rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia*. Palo Alto, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2009.



which I have cultivated over the last two decades. Having written on each individual case on numerous separate occasions earlier in my career, I decided to challenge myself to undertake a comparative investigation that would draw together all that I have observed and studied over this period of time, especially during periods of fieldwork in Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Mindanao, and almost every state in Malaysia. The one regret I have, however, even as the process of writing drew to a conclusion, is that I was never able to spend a substantial period of time undertaking fieldwork in Indonesia. This was in large part because by the time I decided to embark on this project, I was already in the dean's office and could no longer afford the luxury of long periods away in the field. Indeed, this is my biggest regret, and if it has resulted in a poorer book, *tolong ma'afkan saya*. Nevertheless, I still hope that the ideas contained in this book can provide some impetus for reconceptualizing and rethinking of the social and political undercurrents presently playing out in the region, purportedly in the name of religion. So long as this book is able to prompt further discussion, generate new scholarship, or even elicit criticism, its goals would have been achieved.

## Acknowledgments

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I have incurred many debts in the course of writing this book. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the career debt I owe to four individuals: Barry Desker, former dean of RSIS, has always been unstinting in his support throughout my entire career after my Ph.D.; S.R. Nathan first employed me as a research assistant at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, precursor of RSIS, and remains very generous with his time and advice; Yuenfoong Khong has been an academic mentor *par excellence*, whose continued keen interest in my work remains a great source of encouragement; and Eddie Teo, chairman of the Board of Governors of the School, entrusted me with the duties of the deanship of the School but was always encouraging of my efforts to continue researching and writing despite those responsibilities. Without the backing of these four people, I would never have made it as a scholar. For that, I am forever grateful.

If this book has any merit, it is only because of the kind support I have received from many people and institutions, even if I myself am responsible for any deficiencies in this book. Over the years, I have benefited greatly from numerous conversations, discussions, and debates with Greg Fealy, Ed Aspinall, Sidney Jones, Kirsten Schulze, Julie Chernov-Hwang, Bob Hefner, Greg Barton, Don Pathan, Farish Noor, Chai-wat Satha-anand, Duncan McCargo, Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat, Michael Vatikiotis, Don Horowitz, Don Emmerson, Meredith Weiss, Mohamed Nawab, Tom McKenna, Paul Hutchcroft, Renato Cruz de Castro, and Julkipli Wadi, all established scholars in their own right and who have had formative influence on my own work. Ed Aspinall and Paul Hutchcroft kindly provided valuable advice on an earlier outline of this project, while Greg Fealy, Alex Arifianto, and Duncan McCargo read and provided much-appreciated feedback for various chapters.

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sourcing for documents to translation. These friends include Yusup Abdullah, Mike Abdullah, Danial, Mustaffa Harun, Fadli Ghani, Pui Yee, Afif Pasuni, Vinay Pathak, Redzuan Salleh, Hanisah Sani, Rajni Gamage, and Mahfuh Halimi. Hunter Marston must be acknowledged for his assistance in preparing the manuscript for publication. I would also specifically like to thank Al-Haj Murad Ibrahim for sparing time to answer questions about the MILF and Tito Karnavian for generously sharing his insights on Maluku and Sulawesi from a practitioner's perspective.

Over the course of writing, I had the opportunity to present parts of this book at various seminars and conferences. Special thanks to IDEAS at the London School of Economics and the Islamic Studies Program at the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor for providing opportunities to present my chapters on the Philippines in October and December 2013, respectively. The chapter on Thailand was built on earlier work done that received support from the Lowy Institute, and that was presented in Canberra in April 2010. An earlier version of the chapter on Malaysia was also presented in Bangkok in May 2011 courtesy of a kind invitation from an old friend, Ajarn Chaiwat Satha-anand, and the support of the Toda Institute.

The first stage of writing of this book benefited from a Fulbright Fellowship which allowed me to spend three months at the Asia-Pacific Research Center at Stanford University between October and December 2011, where Don Emmerson kindly hosted me at his Southeast Asia Forum and provided his usual probing comments and suggestions. The presentation I made at the Forum's "brown bag" set me on the path to crystallizing many of the ideas that eventually found their way into this book. Between October and November 2013, I embarked on a second stage of writing which was kindly arranged for me at Exeter University by its vice chancellor and an old friend of mine, Sir Steve Smith, and Sir Paul Newton, who hosted me at Exeter's Strategy and Security Institute. The final stage of writing and revisions was undertaken while I served as the inaugural Lee Kuan Yew Chair in Southeast Asia Studies at the Brookings Institution between August 2014 and July 2016. I am indebted to Ong Keng Yong, executive deputy chairman of RSIS since November 2014, who kindly agreed to my absence from RSIS in order to accept the chair at Brookings. In Washington, D.C., Strobe Talbott, Martin Indyk, and especially Richard Bush welcomed me to "bring along" this project to Brookings in order to complete it, even though it was well within their right to insist that I prioritized other projects they may require of me as the chair. Amidst my growing administrative and managerial responsibilities, my trusty assistant, Caroline Chin, made sure to jealously protect

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Writing a book can be an exacting, protracted, and lonely endeavor. For me, the process was made much more tolerable with the blessing from fellowship and intellectual and moral encouragement extended by fellow academic travelers from RSIS, especially Bhubhindar Singh, Ralf Emmers, Tan See Seng, Ang Cheng Guan, Kumar Ramakrishna, and Farish Noor. Most importantly, to my wife, Ai Vee, and two beautiful children, Euan and Megan, thank you for your steadfast encouragement, love, and support which puts things in perspective for me and keeps me grounded. In a sense, writing something of religion also forces me to examine my own confession, my own faith: “*The certainty which rests on God’s Word exceeds all knowledge*” – John Calvin (Colossians 3:17).

## Glossary

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<i>abangan</i>	Nominal Muslims or less observant Muslims
ABIM	<i>Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia</i> or Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia
<i>adat</i>	Customary practices or laws
<i>ad-din</i>	Comprehensive way of life
<i>aliran</i>	Streams. A term used in Indonesia to differentiate between the various currents of Islam and their representative political parties or organizations
<i>al-Kitab</i>	Malay bible
<i>Amirul Mujahidin</i>	Commander of Muslims who take part in jihad
<i>Anak Patani</i>	Children of Patani, usually used to refer to the Malay-Muslims of southern Thailand
ARMM	Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
<i>baatil</i>	Falsehood
<i>Babo</i>	Traditional Islamic teacher in southern Thailand
<i>Baitullah</i>	House of God
<i>Bhinneka Tunggal Ika</i>	Unity in Diversity
BIFF	Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters
BIFM	Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement
BNPP	<i>Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani</i> or National Liberation Front of Patani
BPUPKI	<i>Badan Penyelidik Usaha-Usaha Persiapan Kemerdekaan Indonesia</i> or Committee for the Preparatory Work for Indonesian Independence
BRN	<i>Barisan Revolusi Nasional</i> or National Revolutionary Front
BUF	Bishops-Ulama Forum
<i>Bumi Patani</i>	Land of Patani

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<i>Bumiputera</i>	Sons of the soil, indigenous groups
<i>Bunga Emas</i>	Flowers of Gold
CAB	Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro
CBCS	Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society
CCM	Council of Churches in Malaysia
CFM	Churches of Federation of Malaysia
<i>Chat</i>	Nation
<i>Dakwah</i>	Proselytization; inviting or calling people to Islam
<i>Dar-al-Harb</i>	The abode of conflict; domain of the unbelievers
<i>Dar-al-Islam</i>	Territory of Islam
<i>Darul Islam</i>	See <i>Dar-al-Islam</i>
<i>datu</i>	Clan chief
<i>da'awah</i>	See <i>dakwah</i>
<i>Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka</i>	Institute for Language and Literature
FAB	Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro
<i>fard'ayn</i>	Individual obligation
<i>fatwa</i>	Legal opinion issued by Islamic religious scholars
FES	Fellowship of Evangelical Students
FKM	<i>Fron Kedauletatan Maluku</i> or Front for Moluccan Sovereignty
FPI	<i>Fron Pembela Islam</i> or Islamic Defenders' Front
GCF	Graduate Christian Fellowship
GMIP	<i>Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Patani</i> or Mujahidin Movement of Patani
Golkar	<i>Partai Golongan Karya</i> or Party of Functional Groups
GPM	<i>Gereja Protestan Maluku</i> or Maluku Protestant Church
GRP	Government of the Republic of the Philippines
<i>hajj</i>	The annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, which is one of the five pillars of Islam
<i>halqah</i>	Islamic study circle
<i>haqq</i>	Truth
HINDRAF	Hindu Rights Action Force

<i>ibadah</i>	Act of worship
ICMI	<i>Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Se-Indonesia</i> or Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals
<i>Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia</i>	Muslim Community Union of Malaysia
<i>imaan</i>	Faith
<i>Islamisasi</i>	Islamization
<i>jahiliyyah</i>	The time of ignorance before the coming of Islam
JAKIM	<i>Jabatan Agama Kemajuan Islam Malaysia</i> or Malaysian Department of Religious Development
<i>Jawi</i>	Traditional Malay script
<i>jihad</i>	Holy struggle
<i>jihad qital</i>	Armed struggle
<i>Ka'abah</i>	The cube-shaped building at the centre of the great mosque in Mecca, believed to be built by the Prophet Ibrahim. Also known as <i>Baitullah</i> or House of Allah. It is toward the Ka'abah that Muslims turn when praying.
<i>kafir</i>	Unbeliever, infidel
<i>Kalimah Allah</i>	The word "Allah"
<i>Kamus Dewan</i>	Institutional dictionary
<i>Kaum Muda</i>	New generation/Reformists/Modernists
<i>Kaum Tua</i>	Old generation/Traditionalists
<i>kecamatan</i>	Subdistrict
<i>Kesatuan Melayu Muda</i>	Young Malays Union
<i>Ketuanan Agama</i>	Dominance of religion
<i>Ketuanan Melayu</i>	Malay lordship, Malay dominance
<i>Ketuanan Rakyat</i>	Dominance of the people
<i>Khaek</i>	Guests, foreigners (sometimes with racial connotations)
<i>kibr</i>	Pride
<i>Kristenisasi</i>	Christianization
<i>kufr</i>	See <i>kafir</i>
Lumad	Non-Muslim indigenous communities of the southern Philippines
<i>Majlis Shura</i>	Consultative Council
<i>Masuk Melayu</i>	Literally means to enter into "Malayness," to become a Malay. In Malaysia, it is used to denote the embrace of Islam by a non-Muslim.

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MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MIM	Mindanao Independence Movement, Moro Independence Movement
MKI	<i>Majlis Kebangsaan Hal Ehwal Ugama Islam Malaysia</i> or the Malaysian National Association of Islamic Affairs
MMI	<i>Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia</i> or Indonesia Mujahidin Council
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
MOU-AD	Memorandum of Understanding on the Ancestral Domain
MPR	<i>Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat</i> or Peoples' Consultative Assembly
MPW	Mindanao Peace weavers
MUI	<i>Majelis Ulama Indonesia</i> or Indonesian Ulama Association
<i>Mujahid/Mujahidin or Mujahideen (plural) munafiq</i>	One who engages in holy struggle  Hypocrite, someone who pretends to be Muslim
<i>murtad</i>	Apostate
<i>Nayu</i>	<i>Melayu</i> or Malay
NECF	National Evangelical Christian Federation
PAS	<i>Parti Islam Se-Malaysia</i> or Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party
<i>pattanakarn</i>	Socioeconomic development
<i>pela-gondong</i>	Traditional Malukan oath of allegiance
<i>pemuda</i>	Youth
<i>perjuang</i>	Fighters
<i>Permesta</i>	<i>Piagam Perjuangan Semesta</i> or Charter of Universal Struggle
<i>Phramahakasat</i>	King, monarchy
<i>Piagam Jakarta</i>	Jakarta Charter
<i>Pondok</i>	Traditional Islamic boarding school
<i>Ponoh</i>	See <i>Pondok</i>
PPKI	<i>Panitia Persiapan Kemerdekaan Indonesia</i> or Preparatory Committee for Indonesian Independence
PPP	<i>Partai Persatuan Pembangunan</i> or United Development Party
PSII	<i>Partai Sarekat Islam Indonesia</i> or Sarekat Islam Party



## Glossary

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PULO	Patani United Liberation Organization
<i>rido</i>	Blood feuds, clan wars
RMS	<i>Republik Maluku Selatan</i> or Republic of South Moluccas
RSM	Raja Solaiman Movement
<i>santri</i>	Observant, practicing Muslims
<i>Sasana</i>	Religion
<i>shari'a</i>	Path, Islamic legal system
<i>Solat</i>	Prayers
<i>surau</i>	Prayer facilities, prayer room
<i>Tadika</i>	Kindergarten
<i>tanah</i>	Land
<i>Tanah Melayu</i>	Malay lands
<i>taqwaa</i>	Piety
<i>tarbiyyah</i>	Education and upbringing
<i>Tiga Wilayah</i>	Three provinces, referring to the Malay-Muslim provinces of southern Thailand
<i>Tok Guru</i>	Traditional Islamic teacher in a <i>Pondok</i>
<i>ulama</i>	Religious scholar
<i>ummah</i>	Universal brotherhood of believers in Islam
UMNO	United Malays National Organization
VOC	<i>Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie</i> or Netherlands United East India Company
<i>Wadah</i>	Gathering or congregation, referring to a Malay-Muslim faction within the Thai Rak Thai Party in Thailand
<i>Yang di-Pertuan Agong</i>	Reigning King of Malaysia