

Book Review: Muslim Youth in Southeast Asia

Edited by Mohd Al Adib Samuri and Peter Hopkins

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The southernmost region of Asia, Southeast Asia, has long been seen as a region of ‘peripheral’ Muslim communities in comparison to the Middle East, frequently dubbed as the ‘center’ of the Muslim world. This perception seems to neglect the fact that the region is home to Indonesia, the world’s second-largest Muslim country. One possible explanation for why Islam in the region is overlooked lies in the fact that Southeast Asia has some of the hybrid manifestations of Islamic rituals for centuries (Saravanamuttu, 2010) that may not be seen as the standard image of ‘pure’ Islam.

Meanwhile, Islam has become a pop and cool trend among many urban young Muslims in Southeast Asia. Since the 1980s, religiosity has gradually grown into a significant factor amidst overt socio-political tensions in the region. In Indonesia, since 1998, religiosity has been a strong symbol of religious identity politics since the demise of the authoritarian New Order regime. As Hoesterey and Clark (2012, p. 207) noted, popular culture has become a significant arena through which Muslims constitute and contest ideas about Islam and piety. Elsewhere, the rise of pop Islam has provided Muslim youth with traditional gender roles, building social capital, and acquiring the participatory skills necessary to bring “civil society” into their communities (Mushaben, 2008, p. 257).

Moreover, global modernization has triggered a myriad of countertrends, as evidenced by the movements of religious revival across the globe (Kitiarsa, 2008; Pohl, 2006), including Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, religiosity is often built on discontent. Rapid socio-economic transformation marked by industrialization and urbanization tends to generate feelings of insecurity among youth, who frequently experience frustration and disillusionment for social mobility (Ismail, 2006; Fauzi & Pribadi, 2024).

This edited volume focuses on chapters that investigate how Muslim youth in Southeast Asia negotiate their religion with modern life through various aspects such as music, digital technology, lifestyle, and socio-political issues. It highlights the dynamic and complex nature of the identities and lives of Muslim youth in the region, in which the diversity in ethnicity, language, and culture within this region contributes to various expressions of Islam, reflecting both traditional and modern influences. The editors of this volume argue that social, cultural, and political change is often witnessed first among the younger generations in Southeast Asia (p. 1). They suggest that Muslim youth in the region are not passive recipients of cultural or religious values; rather, they actively modify their beliefs and practices within the context of globalization, digital technology, and local traditions. In short, Southeast Asian Muslim youth have been shaping their own unique and evolving identity, grounded in Islamic principles, yet open to contemporary influences (p. 11).

Chapter 2 of Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir examines the interplay between piety and popular culture among Muslim youth in Southeast Asia, focusing on the understudied role of hip-hop music. This chapter demonstrates how Muslim youth actively participate in reinterpreting Islam, leading to its integration into popular culture. Nasir argues that rather than a loss of piety, there is a transference of piety to secular objects, challenging the notion that modernity leads to decreased religiosity.

In Chapter 3, Pam Nilan and Gregorius Ragil Wibawanto discuss Indonesian Muslim youth and their popular culture preferences, especially in the field of music, where music is a precious commodity for the affective making of youth identities. They argue that the broad category of Muslim-oriented popular music facilitates the identity of being young and Muslim in a context where Islam seems more politicized. In the country, Muslim youth can establish their piety while

engaging with the vibrant realm of secular popular music shared by their age peers.

Khairudin Aljunied explores how Muslim youth in Southeast Asia utilize blogs to express and cultivate a form of Muslim cosmopolitanism within digital spaces in Chapter 4. This chapter illustrates how bloggers integrate Islamic ethics with openness to pluralism, advocating tolerance, justice, and intercultural engagement. Aljunied asserted that blogs serve as dynamic platforms for Southeast Asian Muslim youth to navigate, articulate, and challenge dominant religious, cultural, and political narratives.

Muhammad Adlin Sila highlights young people in Indonesia, particularly the youth among the Arab community in Cikoang village, Makassar, South Sulawesi who represent their religious symbols and rituals vibrantly through social media platforms in Chapter 5. He argues that older clerics are no longer the sole specialists of rituals, and that the people in charge of the construction of meaning over rituals celebrated in today's Indonesia. Instead of claiming this phenomenon as a sign of religious resurgence, Sila concludes that the religious authority of young people has diverse sources with different trajectories.

In Chapter 6, Mohd Al Adib Samuri and Peter Hopkins investigate how Malaysian Islamist youth increasingly use social media to engage in politics, mobilize support, and share their political ideas. They argue that social media has boosted political awareness and participation among youth, but it also raises concerns about fake news, divisive content, and government restrictions on online free speech.

Chapter 7 by Amporn Marddent delineates the diversity and complexity of the veil as a visual expression of youthful Muslim femininity in Southern Thailand in the 1990s. She contends that the meanings of this garment are strongly associated with religious identity and the intersections of dress, religion, gender, politics, and culture.

Finally, Chapter 8 covers the intersection of youth religiosity and the *halal* (lawful) economy in Indonesia by focusing on young Muslims belonging to the transnational Salafi movement who are engaged in *halal* entrepreneurship. The authors, Eva F. Nisa and Farid F. Saenong, maintain that *halal* entrepreneurship is not merely a self-fashioning project, but also a form of *da'wa* (proselytization) and moral entrepreneurship. They demonstrate that *the halal* industry hype has

been fuelled by the eagerness of urban young Muslims to align their economic pursuits with what they see as the true path of their religion.

Throughout the chapters, how Muslim youth have characterized popular music and culture and interacted through and in digital technology and social media appear highly obvious, yet less emphasis is placed on issues of social and political change and transformation, despite the claim that the volume showcases religious identity construction, social engagement, and political participation. Moreover, the chapters in this book show little coherence among each other; they seem very likely to stand in their own paths. The authors fail to build arguments that may connect the chapters. All of these factors may be regarded as shortcomings.

However, these issues are the only hindrances from an otherwise alluring contributed volume. As a whole, the edited collection provides a bold scholarly update on neglected themes of Muslim youth in Southeast Asia, who are considered to be an obvious religious group, with one in three young Muslims in Southeast Asia considering themselves to be more devout than their parents. Only 21% say that they are less religious than their parents, while 45% consider themselves equally religious as their parents (p. 3). Throughout, this volume accentuates the dynamic and complex nature of the identities and lives of Muslim youth in Southeast Asia. This volume contributes to a richer scholarly understanding of Islam's role in the lives of young Muslims in the modern world. Overall, the volume is suitable for graduate students and scholars of Islamic studies, area studies, political science, sociology, and anthropology, and is a useful and felicitous addition that complements existing scholarship.

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