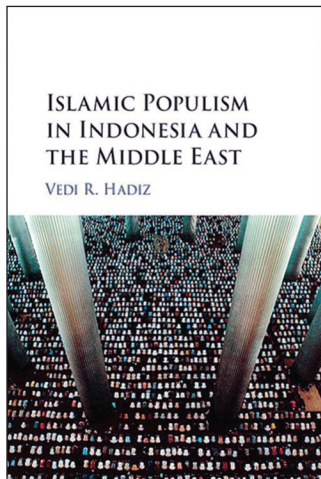


Vedi R. Hadiz, *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, x + 228 pp. ISBN: 978-1-107-12360-1. Price: USD 99.99 (hard cover).



C.W. Watson

School of Business and Management,
Institut Teknologi Bandung
bill.watson@sbm-itb.ac.id

The best sentence in this book is the last: “Insights gained from contrasting the case of Indonesia with those of Turkey and Egypt, however, have helped to develop a complex narrative that steers away from both liberal democratic triumphalism and the more Hobbesian, security-oriented, hyper-alarmism that ha[s] recently featured quite prominently in the literature on its Islamic politics” (p. 189). This is indeed the book’s achievement. Vedi Hadiz has

brought together the fruits of intensive and extensive research, based not only on a broad reading of the political science literature on Turkey, Egypt, and Indonesia, but also on systematic interviews with representative figures in all three countries. His industry and the thoroughness of his research deserve praise. The evidence that he has assembled and the arguments put forward provide strong justification for that concluding sentence. The contortions through which he has passed to arrive at that final point do, however, require some comment.

Hadiz uses the concept of Islamic populism as an analytical tool to make his points. He means by it the coming together of an imagined *ummah* to express grievances, forge alliances across different classes and interests and make common cause against despised ruling elites who control the state. Using Indonesia as his principal example, and making comparisons with other countries, he wants to show how the particular shape – the trajectory as he likes to call it – of the development of the articulation of Islamic populism is determined by the specific politico-economic circumstances and recent history of all three countries. Emphasising the advantages of such an approach, he explicitly takes a sideswipe at those who provide explanations of political movements and developments among the *ummah* in terms of cultural essentialism – the position of those who are inclined to say, à la Huntington, “it’s the religion, stupid” or “it’s Turkish or Arab or Indonesian culture”. Hadiz politely rejects these arguments, as well as the views of those security analysts, obsessed by terrorism, who fail to see that the *ummah* is not a homogeneous monolith. His methodological point is well-taken.

It is when he comes to apply the approach that I have difficulties. Because

of the inherent political science tendency to employ categories – middle-class, bourgeoisie, populus, the state – there is always a danger that unless carefully controlled the terms become “floating signifiers”. This I fear frequently happens in Hadiz’ analysis. Who the Islamic populists in Indonesia are, is never quite clear: is it the hard-liner heirs to the Darul Islam (DI) movement; is it the Muslim political parties; is it a disaffected Muslim section of the middle-class; is it those Muslim intellectual groupings who fulminate against neo-liberal capitalism; is it the vigilante groups claiming to act in the name of Islam? Perhaps it is all of them and this is Hadiz’s point: fragmented as they are, they are all oppositional, and are constantly trying to find common cause in order to unite and become a significant political force. But this account will not do: the groups above do not meld into a category of Islamic populism. This is the same kind of essentialist mistake that Hadiz has criticised.

Inevitably, given this approach and his desire to demonstrate the validity of his categories, including the difference between the old Islamic populism alleged to exist in Indonesia in the period of the 1920s and 30s, and the new populism of today, Hadiz is forced to write a very tendentious and conflated account of modern Indonesian history which omits features which should have been central to his analysis, while at the same time emphasising elements which are relatively peripheral. Let me give two examples.

In the book a long chapter is devoted to a discussion of the DI and its latter day followers. But in terms of representing a large and significant political component of Islamic populism, this is surely wrong. This group, even if one includes the fellow-travellers, is minor and insignificant – not in terms of the occasional terrorist acts they perpetrate of course, but in terms of their representative status. As Hadiz himself concludes in the chapter referred to: “[...] with no clear route to state power, and also isolated from the broader *ummah* that they make claims of representing, many have stagnated in activities involving intimidation that regularly make newspaper headlines but hardly overcome the barriers that halt their political progression” (p. 135). Quite so, and since they are so insignificant why waste so much space on them to the exclusion of more influential components of the *ummah*? Part of the answer must be because Hadiz wants to make comparisons with groups in other countries - he specifies the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. But by doing this he gives a wholly misleading impression to the reader who knows little about Indonesia: the comparison is totally inappropriate.

There are times when Muslim groups, certainly as represented in political parties and para-political organizations in Indonesia have been threatened and intimidated, but Hadiz’s descriptions do not do justice to the complexity of what was happening. In the period of Guided Democracy after the disbanding of the Masjumi party, the imprisonment of leading Masjumi figures and the seemingly unstoppable rise of the PKI, there was an overwhelming feeling of being excluded from the machinery of the state, but note two things: it was a feeling shared by the secular liberals – the PSI and the Christian parties – and little use was made of Islamic symbols in the articulation of underground

opposition even by the HMI; second, a section of the *ummah*, the political representatives of the NU, even though the grassroots in the countryside of east and central Java were thoroughly intimidated by the PKI, were prepared to work alongside with the regime.

The same qualifications need to be made about New Order suppression of Islamic interests which Hadiz deals with in some detail (pp. 103-110). The fear and the exclusion which former Masyumi-inclined individuals and their followers experienced in the years from 1968-1990 were palpable, and it would have been useful for Hadiz to have spent some time describing what went on in this period. For example, the reader might have been informed about the Petisi 50 and the common cause again being made by secular liberals and Muslim political figures. Mention could also have been made of how from the mid-seventies onwards, several former HMI figures recognising there was nothing to be gained by opposition chose to promote their political and economic agendas by joining Golkar. At the same time the Tarbiyah movement in the universities was gaining momentum, something which Hadiz mentions but which he never deals with in sufficient depth. Nor is sufficient attention paid to the significance of the PKS. It is also discussed (see pp. 146-149), but much more needed to be said about how it positioned itself in relation to other Muslim political parties, where it drew its support from, and how it sought to emulate the Muslim Brotherhood in some respects – welfare activities among the urban poor – while capitalising on the tarbiyah movement, but at the same time was very much in favour, despite the occasional rhetoric to the contrary, of neoliberal capitalist opportunities party members could avail themselves of.

And the list could continue. Hadiz might want to argue that in the kind of book he wanted to write there was not enough space to delve into details. I can understand that, but then perhaps he should have thought further about the value of the generalisations he was able to make. As he is at pains to remark, the point of the comparisons was to refute the gross characterizations and caricatures of others who have written about political Islam, and insist on the specific historical sociology of each country and how it has influenced their separate political evolutions. To do this he should perhaps have looked in depth at perhaps two countries at the most and done it by detailing the history and politics in separate parts of the book, leaving comparison to the end. Hadiz has chosen instead to make the comparisons and contrasts thematically within each chapter. This does not make for an easy read as the narrative jumps rapidly back and forth from one country to another.

It would have helped if Cambridge University Press had provided more substantial editing assistance. The text is full of linking conjunctions and phrases designed to facilitate the reading, but which end up confusing and irritating the reader. “Howevers”, “neverthelesses”, “yets”, “therefores”, “in spite ofs”, abound, as do the expressions “navigating through existing constellations of power”, “ensconced on the outer fringes of politics and society”. Good editing would greatly have enhanced the readability of the book.

Still – as Hadiz would have it – these criticisms should not detract from the accomplishment of the book as mentioned at the beginning of the review. Where Hadiz is at his best, that is, unravelling the complexity of the situation in contemporary Indonesia, even though one may quarrel with some of his assertions and omissions, he provides a good, balanced, all-round evaluation of the contemporary *ummah* in Indonesia.