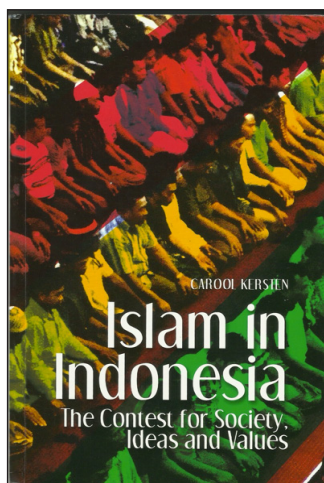


Book reviews

Carool Kersten, *Islam in Indonesia; The contest for society, ideas and values*. London: Hurst & Company, 2015, xx + 373 pp. ISBN: 9781849044370. Price: GBP 25.00 (soft cover).



C.W. Watson

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

To avoid misunderstanding it should be said straightaway that this is not a general book about the nature of Islam in Indonesia, nor about how Muslims in Indonesia practice their faith. It is a book about polemical discourse among Muslim Indonesian intellectuals about the way in which Islam in Indonesia should develop in the future, and the sharp disagreements that have arisen about the significance of key terms, in particular: pluralism, secularism, and liberalism. The chronological starting point is the *fatwa* issued in 2005 by the Majelis Ulama Islam (MUI) – the Government established forum responsible for issuing pronouncements on orthopraxy to Muslims in Indonesia – condemning all three positions as forbidden. Kersten puts the debates which followed the *fatwa* into the historical perspective of the development of Muslim thinking in Indonesia since the early 70s, and shows how pertinent they still remain today.

His method is to take some of the leading apologists in what he labels the progressive and reactionary camps and provide exhaustive summaries of their principal works indicating how the debates have unfolded among the agonists. This capacity to provide a concise abridgement of complex ideas and trace their evolution over the last 20 years or so is his forte. The reader who has watched these debates from a distance or who wants to understand the degree to which ideas in contemporary theology and social science globally current in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries have had an impact not just on Muslim thinking but on legislation and public policy in Indonesia can have no better guide.

The key figures in Kersten's account are those whom he labels the first

generation of the controversial Muslim intellectuals, men such as Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid and Dawam Raharjo whose ideas sparked heated and energetic debates at time in Indonesia's recent history, roughly 1970 -1998, when Muslim participation in the politics of the nation was more or less proscribed. Those ideas have continued to vex the minds of second and now third generation intellectuals and to generate heated exchanges, the reverberations of which have become increasingly of consequence since the outbreaks of religious intolerance which have marred Indonesia's transition to democracy in the so-called Reformasi period.

The heroes of the first generation have in some respects lost their lustre, as Kersten illustrates in, for example, his summaries of criticism of Nurcholish by men like Ahmad Baso. The inspiration for these critiques, Kersten shows, come from readings of progressive Muslim thinkers such as Hasan Hanafi and Muhammad Abid Al Jabiri and a new hermeneutical reading of classical texts which rejects any hint of essentialism. At the same time the reactionary critics, too, make use of contemporary theology to condemn the embracing of "modernist" ideas which they associate indiscriminately with the insidious penetration of Western influence. In one of his lengthy – perhaps over-lengthy summaries – Kersten shows how Adian Husaini, one of the leading opponents of the progressive stance takes issue with the espousal of pluralism, and demonstrates how Christian theologians, too, while advocating tolerance still maintain the a priori superiority of their own religion.

The detailed analysis and description of the polemics are exemplary. However, the book is not always easy reading. There is story, attributed to Keynes, that he once apologized for the length of a book he had written by saying that he was sorry that he had not had time to write a shorter one. Kersten could perhaps have learned from this. Taking a little bit more time he could have produced a much better book which would have made his points more forcefully. As it is, the summaries are far too long and unnecessarily complex and there is a lot of needless repetition, both in terms of the presentation of arguments and ideas and in the choice of phrases and descriptions of individuals. I lost count of how many times I read that Ahmad Wahib was prematurely deceased, for example. The conclusion of the book largely repeats the foregoing without adding to it, and some of it, too, could have been much better placed in the introductory chapter, for example the definitions of progressive and reactionary, terms which are central to the book but the use of which is only justified in the last few pages. Good editing seems to have been in short supply.

I also have a quarrel with Kersten's account of the politics of the nation since the fall of Suharto. He is too ready to take over the opinion of those political scientists who see the politics of the nation as being determined by the old Jakarta elite. This reading is simply slipshod and relies on the use of two or three names, Prabowo, Megawati, to demonstrate elite continuity, ignoring the hundreds of new names which have emerged from non-elite backgrounds in the last few years and pursued the politics of capitalism in

ways very different from their predecessors. Furthermore, Kersten accepts without question the notion that President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's government was unapardonably weak in its treatment of violent outbreaks of religious intolerance. There may be some justification for this verdict but a more nuanced argument needs to be made for it, taking into consideration what might have been the consequences if the response to the violence had been too heavy-handed.

But Kersten's book is not to be read for its political analysis and he makes it clear that he is relying for his overview largely on the accounts of others such as François Raillon whom he cites frequently. The strength of the book is the thorough way in which he dissects contemporary debates. It is a difficult task and Kersten has tried to be as comprehensive as possible, having to lean largely on the support, it seems, of his research assistants who guided him in his choice of reading but who occasionally seem to have nodded: they neglected to draw his attention, among other works, to the polemics in the press surrounding the book *Argumen pluralisme agama; Membangun toleransi berbasis Al-Quran* (Depok: Kata Kita, 2009) by Abd. Moqsith Ghazali.

Kersten knows well the field of contemporary Muslim theological debate and has written an informative earlier book about some of the leading figures in the Muslim world including Nurcholish. In doing the research for the present work he lists several individuals whom he interviewed, but very little use seems to have been made of the material from the interviews. I counted only three mentions of interview data among hundreds of references. This seems to me a pity, since although this is a book of textual summary and criticism, it also has pretensions to link the intellectual discourses to the future of religious tolerance in Indonesia and the role of the state. In that respect what Kersten learned from his informants about their aspirations and expectations and their evaluations of the contemporary situation would have been, at the least, an invaluable complement to the analysis of their writings. However, it remains the case that for all its faults this is an exemplary work, and anyone hoping to understand the complexity and significance of Muslim polemics in Indonesia today is well-advised to become familiar with its arguments