

Repoliticisation of Islam in Southeast Asia

Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid

Summary

In the aftermath of a series of catalytic events which pitted the West against the Muslim world as we enter the new millennium, Western-based strategists and policy-makers have rekindled arguments postulating political Islam to be a threat to Western hegemony in an increasingly divided world. Long regarded as embodiments of tolerant Islam which peacefully co-existed with modernisation and trappings of multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, Southeast Asian states unexpectedly aroused much attention as potential breeding grounds for Muslim radicals. Rising occurrences of Islamist-related terrorist violence in Southeast Asia have been cited as evidence of surging radicalism among Southeast Asian Muslims. Acknowledging the challenge of radical Islam to the generally moderate approach of Southeast Asian Muslims, analysts have been inclined to locate the origins of such an obtrusive phenomenon to transnational contacts and networks formed in an increasingly globalised world. Such an attitude is reflected in the overblown military crusade against Al Qaeda and a fervent campaign to root out its affiliates in Southeast Asia. Without discounting the significance of such transnational connections in politicising Islam in Southeast Asia in a direction away from moderation, this paper, citing examples mostly from Malaysia and Indonesia as Muslim-majority states of the region, seeks to deconstruct the phenomenon in a way that gives due recognition to local factors in re-igniting political Islam. The local factors, however, were not insular in the sense of being disconnected from the globalising process. Social and economic changes at grass-roots levels are more important in the long term than catalytic events in ensuring whether or not responses to rapid political mutations could be maintained. These changes interacted with government policies vis-à-vis Islam and Muslims – policies which were themselves influenced by globalisation, with multiple understandings attached to the notion.

Keywords: Islam, politics, Malaysia, Indonesia, terrorism

1 Introduction

As the world entered the new millennium, a series of catalytic events pitted the West against the Muslim world in what has come to be viewed as an increasingly uncomfortable relationship that augurs ill for the future of humankind. Despite past efforts by scholars such as Ayoob (1981) and Esposito (1992) to debunk exaggerated conjectures of an impending or existing global Islamic conspiracy against Western powers, the disturbing prognostication of a ‘clash of civilisations’ between Islam and the West, as introduced by Huntington (1993) and fanned by the