

Islam in South-east Asia

The great period of Islam in South-east Asia belongs to the distant rather than the recent past and came about through commerce rather than military conquest. Long before the advent of Islam, Arab merchants were trading with India for Eastern commodities — Arab sailors were the first to exploit the seasonal monsoon winds of the Indian Ocean — and it was commerce that first brought Arab traders and Islam to South-east Asia. The financial incentive for direct exchanges with the East was immense. The long journey to the marketplace of most Oriental commodities was often hazardous and there was a considerable mark-up in prices each time goods exchanged hands. The closer to the source one got, the greater the rewards.

6.1 The Coming of Islam to South-east Asia

In as far as South-east Asia is concerned, Arab ships were sailing in Malay and Indonesian waters from the sixth century onwards. Commerce with China was one reason for their presence there, but perhaps even more of an incentive was the lucrative trade in spices — mainly pepper, cloves and nutmeg — which were obtained from Java, Sumatra and the Moluccas (Maluku) and Banda islands at the eastern end of the archipelago. No doubt the first Arab traders in the region were no more than seasonal visitors, swashbuckling merchant

adventurers who filled their holds with spices and other exotic produce before sailing back with the north-east monsoon to India and the Arabian Peninsula. In time, though, Muslim merchants began to establish permanent trading posts at various points along the maritime trade route between India and China, as well as at other strategic locations within the Malay and Indonesian Archipelago. By the fifteenth century, many of these trading posts, which initially were little more than a village at the mouth of a river, had grown into flourishing entrepôts, whose fortunes were built upon regional commerce (mainly in spices) and transshipment between East and West. City-states like Aceh in north Sumatra, Malacca on the Malay Peninsula, and Banten, Cirebon and Demak in Java, became mini-superpowers, in their own right fighting for control of the sea-lanes and waging war on their rivals. They were also cosmopolitan centres of learning and the arts, attracting writers, poets, scholars and artisans from as far away as China, Persia and the Arabian Peninsula. But diverse though they were in terms of the mingling of races and religions, by the middle of the sixteenth century the ruling elite of these entrepôt states was invariably a Muslim one and it was a Sultan who sat upon the throne (the ruler of Aceh was one of the first to convert to Islam in the thirteenth century).

In eastern Indonesia, Islamisation proceeded through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. According to the sixteenth-century Portuguese chronicler Tomé Pires, the island states of Ternate and Tidore, off the west coast of Halmahera in Maluku, had Muslim sultans, and Muslim merchants had settled in the Banda Islands. In 1605 the ruler of Gowa in southern Sulawesi (Celebes) converted to Islam and subsequently imposed Islam on neighbouring rulers. Muslim missionaries were sent from the north coast of Java to

Lombok, Sulawesi and Kalimantan until the late seventeenth century.¹¹⁶

This commonality of culture and religion was itself an active ingredient in promoting trade and commerce, in the same way that the spread of American popular culture — Hollywood, soft rock, Coca-Cola and Macdonald's — has helped American businesses to penetrate foreign markets today. As Jamil Jaroudi, head of Shamil Bank's investment banking, observes: "The Islamic economy once covered half the world," adding, "how do you think Islam reached Indonesia and Malaysia? It was through traders, not *jihad*."¹¹⁷

6.2 European Rivalries and Colonisation

This era of Islamic greatness in South-east Asia lasted only a couple of hundred years and by the beginning of the seventeenth century these maritime sultanates found themselves in serious conflict with Christian rivals competing for control of the lucrative spice trade in nutmeg, cloves and pepper. The Portuguese were the first to arrive on the scene in the early sixteenth century, followed by the Spanish, English and Dutch; by the end of the seventeenth century the great days of the Sultanates was over and the Muslim initiative in South-east Asia was arrested.

The European colonisation of sizeable chunks of South-east Asia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the concomitant subjugation of regional Muslim polities to

¹¹⁶"Indonesia: The coming of Islam", The Library of Congress under the Country Studies/Area Handbook Program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Army (<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cshome.html>), 8 June 2004.

¹¹⁷Useem, Jerry, op cit.

European rule was reflected in the eclipse of Islam as a military and political force worldwide, and the relegation of Islam to the status of just another religious belief system, alongside others. Seen from a South-east Asian perspective, the international order that had previously strengthened the position of local rulers in the region had foundered, while Islam itself had to face fierce competition from Christianity.

Western colonialism brought in new ideas, new institutions and a new world order. Secular ideals were embraced and new political frontiers were created which disregarded historical realities. Western concepts of government, justice and commerce were introduced and modern bureaucracies set up. Huge plantations were established in Java, Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula — coffee, sugar, tobacco and later rubber, were the principal crops — and immigrants were brought to the region from India and China to supply the labour. Steam navigation and the Suez Canal brought Europe that much closer, while the invention of telegraphy put South-east Asia in touch with the rest of the world. The sultans may still have sat in their palaces, but politically and economically they were on the sideline.

As a consequence, Muslims in South-east Asia retreated into their culture and their religion, this time in a very narrow sense. Religious education was emphasised, change was resisted and by and large they became immobilised. And while South-east Asian Muslims still continued to look towards the Middle East for inspiration and leadership, the Middle East at this time was also under serious threat from the West, a process that culminated, as we have seen, in the collapse and dismantling of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War.

But just as the rubble of one empire provides the building blocks for a new beginning, so too with Islam at the turn of the last century. New ideas on how Islam should grapple with

modern conditions began to evolve, giving birth to Islamic revivalism, which viewed the conventional and rigid approach to Islam as inapplicable.

From the sixteenth century onwards, Islam was in retreat, and falling under the domination of a Europe which was expanding at both ends. The process began with the reconquest of Russia and Spain. Western Europeans circumnavigated the African continent and began to establish a growing hegemony in South-east, southern and ultimately South-west Asia. Islam was, so to speak, caught in a pincers movement between Russia from the north and the Western European peoples from the south. These changes were for a while disguised or delayed by the imposing military might of the Ottoman, Persian and Mughul empires; but in time these also weakened and ceased to be able to resist the European advance.

Western domination continued until the aftermath of World War II, when the colonial empires of Britain, France, Holland and Italy were dismantled and their former territories became independent.¹¹⁸

6.3 The Road to Independence

The war in the Pacific heralded the beginning of the end of the colonial era in South-east Asia, if only because it revealed that the Caucasian man was not as overwhelmingly superior in every respect as everyone had hitherto been led to believe. Churchill described the fall of Singapore as “the worst disaster . . . in British military history,” but perhaps more significant in the long run was the huge loss of prestige on the part of the colonial rulers of Malaya and the Straits Settlements. The Dutch capitulation in the Netherlands East Indies and

¹¹⁸“The world of Islam”, edited by Bernard Lewis, http://www.islamia.com/History/history_of_islam.htm, 8 June 2004.

America's loss of the Philippines similarly dealt colonialism a fatal blow in those countries.

As it happened, the Japanese, who came as self-styled liberators, turned out to be far harsher masters than the colonial regimes they replaced, effectively turning their newly acquired territories into police states ruled by fear and suspicion. No one was sorry to see them go, but the victorious Allies, though welcomed in most of their former colonial territories — Java was a significant exception — returned to a very different world to the one they had fled back in 1942. They might have defeated Japan, but they could not escape the fact that the writing was on the wall as far as imperial possessions in South-east Asia were concerned.

The Philippines was the first to gain independence — General MacArthur did return, as he had promised, but it was only for a very short while and after not quite half a century of American rule the Philippines became an independent nation in July 1946. In the case of the Netherlands East Indies, despite a unilateral declaration of independence following the surrender of Japan on the part of Indonesian nationalists, the Dutch hung on until 1950 before they too relinquished their claim to their former territories in South-east Asia. The British hand-over of Malaya was an altogether more orderly and seemly affair, though the colonial administration had to fight a bitter war against communist insurgents in the years leading up to full independence in 1957. Singapore gained her own independence six years later when she joined the newly constituted Malaysia but subsequently separated from Malaysia in 1965, to become a fully fledged nation in her own right. British North Borneo and Sarawak, which previously had been administered by the British, joined Malaysia in 1963, while Brunei, which had been a British protectorate since 1888, gained full independence in 1984.

6.4 Post-Independence: A New World Order

Post-independence, the phenomena of new nation-states, demanding new forms of loyalty and heavily influenced by Western political culture, has posed grave difficulties for Muslims in South-east Asia. To a large extent, they represented the old social order, which had managed to survive in spite of colonialism — indeed in the case of the Malay sultans, the colonial experience had arguably strengthened their position in terms of consolidating their territorial control and power base — but the realities before them had changed so much, particularly at the national, regional and global levels, that they found themselves marginalised. Compared to other religious communities in the region, Muslims probably had far greater difficulty in readjusting to the demands brought about by the emergence of the nation-state. New political institutions integral to the formation of the nation-state, such as a secular constitution, an independent judiciary, citizenship, political parties, elections and so on, were unfamiliar to them and the transition to modern nationhood, based to varying degrees on the idea of a Western-style liberal democracy, has been a difficult one.

Islam is the official religion in Brunei and Malaysia. Indonesia recognises five official religions (Muslim, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Hindu and Buddhist) but with Islam dominating 88 per cent of its population. Islam is deeply rooted in the southern islands of Philippines though only an estimated 5 per cent of the population are Muslims. An estimated 14 per cent of the Singapore population is Muslim.

Brunei's legal system is based on English Common Law, with provision of Islamic law only on the Muslims. The legal system in Malaysia is based on English common law, with both Islamic law (Shari'ah) and customary law (*adat*) constituting significant sources of law, particularly in matters of personal status. The Indonesian legal system is extraordinarily complex,

the independent state having inherited three sources of law: *adat* law, traditionally the basis for resolving interpersonal disputes in the traditional village environment; Islamic law which often applies to disputes between Muslims; and Dutch colonial law.¹¹⁹ The Philippines legal system is heavily derived from the Spanish (e.g. family and property) and the United States (e.g. taxation, trade, government). Singapore's legal system is based on English Common Law, with the Muslim Law Act 1966 establishing the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapore (Singapore Islamic Council) to advise the President on matters relating to the Islamic religion. As such, Islamic law is most prominent in the legal systems of Indonesia and Malaysia with the incorporation of Shari'ah law, whilst in Singapore and Brunei, the legislatures allow less involvement of the Islamic law and in Philippines it is virtually not included in its legal structure.

6.5 The Philippines

One response has been the emergence of so-called separatist movements initiated by Muslims who tried to isolate themselves from what were perceived as undesirable Western and Christian influences. In the Philippines, for example, Islam has always been closely linked to an ideology of resistance against first, the Spanish-directed expansion of Christianity during the colonial era, and subsequently, after independence, the authority of the Christian-dominated Republic of the Philippines. After the Second World War, despite the Philippines' being granted almost-instant independence from the United States, the Muslim Moro people in the south still felt persecuted by the Christian majority in the north and resented the fact that

¹¹⁹"Indonesia — The judiciary" (1992), Country Studies Series by Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, Country Data (<http://www.country-data.com/>), 17 June 2004.

southern Philippines was economically and politically inferior to the north. Beginning as early as the 1950s, they have managed to enlist the support of Muslims from all over the world, including Saudi Arabia, who have collectively objected to the perceived mistreatment, even persecution, of their coreligionists in the southern Philippines. Islamic governments have donated money they were earning from the petroleum trade to Muslim Filipinos and supported the study of Muslim Filipino students in Saudi Arabia. They have invited Muslim leaders to Middle-Eastern conferences to discuss their problems, and they have sent, and continue to send, Islamic missionaries to teach the Islamic religion in the southern Philippines.¹²⁰

Today, Islam is strong in Mindanao and the other smaller islands of the southern part of the Philippines. The Bangsa Moro struggle for statehood in the southern islands of the Philippines dates back more than 300 years to the sixteenth century when Muslims first resisted Spanish colonisation and then American imperialism for almost half a century. In the contemporary period, resistance to the Philippine government persisted right through the 1950s till today. The most militant of the Islamic groups, Abu Sayyaf, has been linked to the Al-Qaeda and its more recent activities have occasioned American military intervention.¹²¹

6.6 Indonesia

The Islamic experience in colonial and modern Indonesia is a mass of internal contradictions. Although Sumatra was the

¹²⁰Vloeberghs, Isabelle, "Islam in the Southern Philippines", Northern Illinois University.

¹²¹Saravanamuttu, Johan, *Political and Civil Islam in Southeast Asia* (2003), <http://www.toda.org/grad/vancouver/Project%20Reports/islam.html>, 17 June 2004.

area of initial acceptance in the thirteenth century, Islam has never succeeded in displacing indigenous customary law, or *adat*, and the two systems of jurisprudence coexist, side by side, if not in actual conflict, then as two competing perspectives for any given situation. In Java, on the other hand, Islam has been absorbed into a wider Javanese cultural setting and has thus acquired its own, peculiarly Javanese flavour. In both areas, Islam was important in the development of modern Indonesian resistance to colonial rule¹²² and Muslim political parties continue play an important part in contemporary Indonesian politics. Moreover, the religion is entrenched in institutions of State to a considerable extent; there is a (national) Department of Religion and a system of Shari'ah Courts as well as Islamic universities and institutions of higher learning.

We see that Muslims in Indonesia in the 1950s were very fragmented. Islam was represented by two big groups. The first one was the modernists, represented by the Muhammadiyah and also by the Masumi Party in the 1950s. The second group was the traditionalists, represented by the Nahdlatul Ulama. These two wings of Indonesian Islam rarely come to agreement amongst themselves, not only on religious matters but also in political matters.¹²³

Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim nation with 80 per cent of its 210 million population identified as Muslims, justifying the attention paid by the rest of the Muslim community on the Presidential elections in 2004.

¹²²See Noer, Deliar, 1973.

¹²³"Indonesia: Balancing the Secular State with Islam, post-September 11", <http://www.abc.net.au/ra/asiapac/programs/S674845.htm>, 12 September 2002.

6.7 Malaysia

In Malaysia, the transition to independence and the attainment of nationhood has been achieved relatively smoothly, though not without a certain amount of trouble along the way.

In 1826, the British settlements of Malacca, Penang and Singapore were combined to form the Colony of the Straits Settlements. From these territories, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the British established protectorates over the Malay sultanates on the peninsula. Four of these states (Pahang, Perak, Selangor and Negri Sembilan) were consolidated in 1895 as the Federated Malay States.

During British control, a well-ordered system of public administration was established, public services were extended, and large-scale rubber and tin production was developed. This control was interrupted by the Japanese invasion and occupation from 1942 to 1945 during World War II.

After World War II, Britain tried to exert its previous authority and in October 1945, drew up a proposal to unite all the Federated and Unfederated Malay States, together with Penang and Melaka, under a centralised government known as the Malayan Union. Singapore, however, was excluded and considered to be a separate case on the grounds of its economy, racial structure and strategic importance, and was to remain a British colony.

However, the publication of the Malayan Union proposal incensed the Malays, especially as it eroded the power and status of the Sultans and the loss of rights for the Malays as a whole. They threw their support behind the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) founded by Dato Onn bin Jaafar of Johor in March 1946. UMNO vehemently resisted the introduction of the Malayan Union, and Dato Onn toured the country leading demonstrations of national mourning.

The issue aroused widespread political consciousness among the Malays. The stiff opposition in Malaya and informed criticism at home prompted the British Government to recall the idea altogether. In its place, a provisional kind of caretaker government was installed whilst the British set up a Working Committee comprising Malays, and later a Consultative Committee on which the other Malayan races were represented to submit reports.

Based on the reports from the two committees, the British Government formulated the Federation of Malaya Agreement, the terms of which were put into practice in February 1948. Its territories were identical with those of the abandoned Malayan Union. The chief official of the Federation was a British High Commissioner, whose appointment had to be endorsed by the Malay sultans. There were two councils: an Executive Council and a Legislative Council, whilst the sultans were members of the Conference of Rulers. The issue of citizenship of the Federation became much more restricted than under the Malayan Union.

Under the twin pressures of a communist rebellion and the development of a strong Malay nationalist movement, the British introduced elections, starting at the local level in 1951. Political cooperation amongst the three main ethnic groups in the country, that is the Malays, Chinese and Indians, was forged by the formation of the Alliance, which comprised UMNO, the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). In the first Federal elections of 1955, the Alliance won 51 out of the 52 seats contested. At a ceremony held in Kuala Lumpur on 31 August 1957, Malaya's Independence was proclaimed. Tunku Abdul Rahman became the first Prime Minister of Malaya, and held the post until 1970. The British colonies of Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah

(called North Borneo) joined the Federation to form Malaysia on 16 September 1963.¹²⁴

Singapore withdrew from the Federation on 9 August 1965 and became an independent republic. Neighbouring Indonesia objected to the formation of Malaysia and pursued a programme of economic, political, diplomatic and military “confrontation” against the new country, which ended only after the fall of Indonesia’s President Sukarno in 1966.

Local communists, nearly all Chinese, launched a long, bitter insurgency, prompting the imposition of a state of emergency in 1948 (lifted in 1960). Small bands of guerrillas remained in bases along the rugged border with southern Thailand, occasionally entering northern Malaysia. These guerrillas finally signed a peace accord with the Malaysian Government in December 1989. A separate, small-scale communist insurgency that began in the mid-1960s in Sarawak also ended with the signing of a peace accord in October 1990.¹²⁵

Under former Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamed’s watch, Malaysia was transformed by twenty-first-century infrastructure and rapid growth. Yet race and religion remain flash points in a secular nation with a Muslim majority and elite Chinese and Indian minorities. For twenty-two years, Mahathir held radical Islam at bay without alienating the Muslim majority to build a prosperous, multiethnic nation.¹²⁶

¹²⁴*Windows to Malaysia* (http://www.windowstomalaysia.com.my/nation/11_4.1.htm), 17 June 2004.

¹²⁵*Malaysia* (2003), U.S. Department of State (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2777.htm>), 17 June 2004.

¹²⁶Montlake, Simon, “Islam will test new Malaysia chief”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 30 October 2003.

Malaysia, a democratic nation of 25 million people, has a large non-Muslim population and does not enforce Shari'ah or strict Islamic law. Whilst Islam is Malaysia's official religion and Muslims make up more than 51 per cent of the population, the country is not an Islamic state.

The main opposition party of Malaysia, PAS, has been unsuccessful in the bid to push the country towards a stricter Islamic state with their failure to replace the main governing political party, UMNO, in the March 2004 elections. UMNO continues to lead Malaysia with their leader, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who took over the reins from Mahathir Mohamed on 31 October 2003.

6.8 Brunei

In 1888, Brunei became a protectorate of the British Government, retaining internal independence but with British control over external affairs. In 1906, Brunei accepted a further measure of British control when executive power was transferred to a British resident, who advised the ruler on all matters except those concerning local custom and religion.

The discovery of large oilfields in the 1920s brought economic prosperity to Brunei. The country was occupied by the Japanese in 1941 and liberated by the Australians in 1945, when it was returned to Britain. In 1950 Sir Omar Ali Saifuddin Saadul Khairi Waddien (1916–86), popularly known as Sir Omar, became sultan.

In 1959, a new constitution was written declaring Brunei a self-governing state, whilst its foreign affairs, security and defence remained the responsibility of the United Kingdom. An attempt in 1962 to introduce a partially elected legislative body with limited powers was abandoned after the opposition political party, Partai Rakyat Brunei, launched an armed uprising, which the government put down with the help of British

forces. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the government also resisted pressures to join neighbouring Sabah and Sarawak in the newly formed Malaysia. The sultan Omar eventually decided that Brunei would remain an independent state.

On 4 January 1979, Brunei and the United Kingdom signed a new treaty of friendship and cooperation. On 1 January 1984, Brunei Darussalam became a fully independent state.¹²⁷ The current ruler of Brunei is Prince Al-Muhtadee Billah.

Governed by an Islamic monarchy, Islam is the official religion in Brunei, though religious freedom is guaranteed under the constitution. It holds membership in the United Nations, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). In some quarters of society and government, there is also a vigorous interest in the implementation of a law code based on Islamic law. At present the Brunei legal system is a British colonial one, including much legislation of English origin, and it might be suggested that some questioning of this system is an inevitable part of the process of decolonisation. In this regard, it should be remembered that Brunei became fully independent only in the mid-1980s. Another consideration in explaining the current Islamic enthusiasm in political, legal and social areas is the role of religious influence from Malaysia, where there has occurred a strengthening of Islamic institutions since the 1970s. To replace the colonial-based law with a more Islamic-influenced system, however, raises two issues. First, Brunei is in many ways a moderate rather than a fundamentalist Muslim state: it is influenced by long-established traditions of Muslim kingship and the government is also concerned to promote a strong commitment to Malay ethnicity as well

¹²⁷ *Brunei Darussalam* (2004), U.S. Department of State (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2700.htm>), 17 June 2004.

as a sense of Islamic brotherhood. Second, the Brunei Government is seeking to become a serious player in ASEAN, and particularly a major centre of commercial activity in the East Asian growth region, embracing Indonesia's Sulawesi, Moluccas and Kalimantan, Malaysia's Labuan, Sarawak and Sabah and the Southern Philippines. Demands to implement a more vigorously Islamic legal (and perhaps political) system will need to be balanced against the desire to present Brunei as a growing commercial entrepôt especially attractive and welcoming to the international business community.¹²⁸

6.9 Islam in South-east Asia Today

The chronic problem of armed Muslim insurgency in South-east Asia in pursuit of the goal of secessionism is far from over, whilst the post-Second World War experiment with nationhood is still going on. The shortcomings of liberal democracy are glaring and in the wake of a more general resurgence of Islam, worldwide, in the 1970s and the 1980s, many Muslims feel the need to reassess the whole range of Western ideas, values and institutions, which appear to have created tensions, dissatisfactions and even disillusionment amongst the people. There has been a demand for desecularisation and Islamisation. An Islamic resurgence is clearly evident in Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia. With the tremendous resources available in South-east Asia, in terms of manpower, raw materials, capital, markets, entrepreneurial skills, and a probably renewed and religiously inspired vigour to look for alternatives, the economic and religious future certainly looks brighter for the Muslims of South-east Asia.

¹²⁸*Asian Focus Group — Asian Analysis*, The Australian National University (1998), Asian Focus Group (<http://www.aseanfocus.com/asiananalysis/article.cfm?articleID=51>), 17 June 2004.