

The Internal Dialogue of Islam in Southeast Asia

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With adherents concentrated in Indonesia, Malaysia, southern Thailand, the southern Philippines and parts of Cambodia and Burma, Islam is one of the major religions of Southeast Asia. According to early historians, the religion first reached the region approximately one thousand years ago. Its real spread, however, did not occur earlier than the thirteenth century. The Islamic era in Southeast Asia's southern rim began with the establishment of Islamic kingdoms (of the type termed "agrarian paternalistic and bureaucratic" by Max Weber) in Terengganu, Malaysia, and in the northern part of Sumatra. Frequent warring undermined the long-term success of these petty kingdoms, but history has amply shown that the lively traditions and cultures nurtured by Islam in the region were not confined to political boundaries or palace walls. For every manifestation of Islamic palace culture there grew a popular counterculture. This popular movement was the real vehicle of Islam's spread during the dark age of political subjugation by subsequent European colonial administrations.

In the colonial periods the indigenous palace courts succumbed to political manipulation by European governors and governor-generals. At the same time a tradition of resistance developed among the Islamic peoples of the region. Led by religious leaders and joined by dissatisfied sectors of the nobility, resistance took the form of short-lived messianic and millenarian rebellions as well as the more sublime form of passive resistance to successive colonial "plans of enlightenment." At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, a new variety of passive resistance developed, i.e., an economic struggle to liberate local trades from the domination of foreign capitalism. Without an understanding of the real cause of the domination against which it fought, the struggle enjoyed only dismal prospects. But before its final failure it succeeded in developing an indigenous class of Muslim merchants and traders in Indonesia in the first half of this century. In the Philippines Muslims continued their

resistance by strengthening their communal pattern of land ownership.

The coming of nationalism in the region, which coincided with the spread of Pan-Islamism from the Middle East, gave a new outlet for Islamic resistance against colonial rule. Underestimated for decades, the aspirations of Pan-Islamism gained strength gradually. After independence theocratic ideologies and religious intransigence arose in Indonesia and Malaysia, and again later in the Philippines and parts of Thailand. To explain this increased militancy on the part of important sectors of Southeast Asian Muslims, concrete causes and grievances must be taken into account. These include the land policy of the governing circles and the systematic efforts to destroy Islam in various countries of the region in the name of "politicization" and "development." "Increasing religious intensity," as Soedjatmoko from Indonesia has labeled this militant tendency, presently emerges in many forms. These range from the armed struggle of the "Mindanao rebels" and the reemergence of religious politics in Indonesia and Malaysia to the obscure armed resistance of Thai Muslims against their government. This increased militancy shows similar features for the entire region, although aspects are manifested more clearly in some parts than in others. Most importantly, wide circles of vocal and organized Muslims feel that serious political setbacks have endangered their very political and cultural identities. Moreover, they believe that they no longer enjoy an unsurpassed cultural ascendancy in the region.

This situation poses trouble for the region's national governments by hardening the existing relations between the Islamic movement and other groups. Dangerous misunderstandings already exist between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia and Malaysia. The threat of what Muslims call "Christianization" is felt acutely and serves as a pretext for an aggressive "defense" that militantly demands a curb on the religious activities of Christians in both countries. The rise of

Islamic fundamentalism (more aptly called scripturalism) is the direct result of this development. The call for the purification of Islamic creeds from the corrupting influences of modernity and the secularization process reverberates in many mosques and prayer houses of the region. In Indonesia, Malaysia and parts of the Philippines, the "turning back of the clock" is an evident development among Islamic movements.

In the face of the "threat of Christianization" vociferous groups have intimidated other sectors of Muslim sociopolitical life. Should this chain reaction in the relations between Islamic and other groups continue, a basic misunderstanding with devastating effects on the stability of the region will certainly materialize.

The need presently exists for a better understanding of the real situation within the polity of the region's Islamic movements. The traditional sector within these movements possesses an adaptive capacity and can reach an accommodation with other sectors of society without losing its own identity. It must be encouraged to take a more assertive role in formulating and implementing positive programmes with genuine participation. This requires developing indigenous cultural resources and not simply superficial adherence to governmental "development plans." Such an approach will enable the traditional sector in the Islamic movements to develop its own strength vis-à-vis other groups in the society as a whole and place it in the mainstream of the region's cultural and socioeconomic life. In the long run the sense of belonging that arises from this kind of participation will obviate the need for intransigent postures on the part of the Islamic movement at large.