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Studying Islam in Southeast Asia

State of the Art & New Approaches

**GREG FEALY
& MARTIN
VAN BRUINESSEN**

On 7 and 8 July 2008, more than thirty people gathered at the Snouck Hurgronjehuis in Leiden for the workshop on "Studying Islam in Southeast Asia: State of the Art and New Approaches," which was organized under the auspices of the Australia-Netherlands Research Collaboration (ANRC) and ISIM. Martin van Bruinessen (ISIM) and Greg Fealy (Australian National University) were the convenors.

The workshop aimed to reflect critically on the current state of scholarship on Southeast Asian Islam and consider new approaches and possible collaborations to understanding Islamic politics, culture, society, and law in a regional context. The workshop was divided into three broad themes: (1) governance and bureaucratic administration of Islam; (2) transnational Islamic networks in Southeast Asia; and (3) Islam, media, and performance. A total of twenty-three participants, including seven Australian, four Indonesian, and nine Dutch scholars, presented papers on various aspects of these themes.

The discussions in the first panel began with a fresh look at the policies of the late colonial state and the under-studied "Guided Democracy" regime (1958-65) and at continuities across historical turning points and

political divides. The relations of trust established in the struggle for independence, e.g. among members of the Hizbullah militia, who later ended up in the state apparatus or in armed insurgent movements, constituted one such continuity that came up in several of the papers. Other papers engaged with Indonesian and Malaysian debates on

the legitimate place of the Sharia in society and state. Close attention was given to the modalities of incorporation of elements of the Sharia in national legislation and local regulations in both countries, with participants putting forward different interpretations of data to support arguments about the extent of the impact of Islamic law. A third group of papers discussed the elaborate bureaucracies in both countries that administer Islamic courts, education, and the hajj, and that occupy themselves with the struggle against alleged heterodoxy.

The transnational Islam panel looked at the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafism, Hizb ut-Tahrir and Tablighi Jamaat, as well as more liberal currents of Islamic thought in various parts of Southeast Asia and their networks of communication within the region. The discussions focused on explaining the remarkable differences between the various movements in degrees of adaptation to local cultural traditions. The relative weakness of intra-region connections as compared to linkages with the Middle East was another recurring theme of discussion.

The final sessions considered a variety of Islamic cultural expressions in Indonesia and Malaysia, and the role of performative arts – including dance and musical forms as well as oratory and adaptations of Sufi ritual – in *da'wah*, spreading religious messages. Presenters looked at how political, religious, and commercial forces, as well as the possibilities of old and electronic media – radio, audio cassette, video disc, Internet – are shaping these popular cultural forms, and analyzed the rhetorical styles and doctrinal content of popular preaching.

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