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INTRODUCTION

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The 1989 collapse of state socialism in Europe ushered in a wave of political democratisation and economic liberalisation that quickly spread from Eastern and Central Europe to the Soviet Union. Observers began to question whether this wave would reach Southeast Asia, whose authoritarian regimes were themselves products of the Cold War. Indeed, there was some precedent for believing it would. Thailand had actually begun its transition to democracy a year earlier, in 1988, while Philippine protesters had overthrown Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. Suharto’s “New Order” regime, however, appeared especially resistant to calls for reform. Buffeted by gaudy growth figures, the regime had already faced down an internal challenge from within the military and an international human rights crisis in East Timor. Moreover, it had begun cultivating support among Indonesia’s emergent Muslim middle class, largely to isolate military and civilian rivals within the ruling class. Equally, though, Suharto hoped this new-found piety would inoculate the regime against the popular convulsions experienced elsewhere.

Despite the regime’s efforts to co-opt Islam, orthodox Muslim voices were increasingly prominent among those calling for political reform. Prior to the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, these voices were less of a movement and more a loose association of the likeminded, linking reform-minded cadres within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah to a diffuse network of Muslim youth groups, labour organisations and NGOs promoting human rights. Crucially, these Muslim reformists were not just Muslims seeking reform, but Muslims articulating explicitly religious arguments for reform.

Islamic arguments for democracy and human rights drew heavily from the philosophy of modernist scholar Fazlur Rahman, his Indonesian protégé, Nurcholish Madjid, and likeminded traditionalists such as Abdurrahman Wahid (who, as NU’s Chairman, directed the organisation to disavow its quest for an Islamic state). As anthropologist Robert Hefner noted, these arguments were demonstrably similar to those made by Catholic reformists in southern Europe and Latin America two decades prior – arguments that preceded the “Catholic wave” of democratisation and inspired Jose Casanova’s (1994) articulation of “public religion” as a sociological concept.

Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia tells the story of these Muslim reformists: their ideas, their efforts to turn autocratic Indonesia into a democratic and civil pluralist state, and the challenges they faced along the way – not least of which came from other Muslims. It argues that a paradigm shift in Muslim political consciousness, which Hefner calls “civil Islam”, undergirded these efforts.
Civil Islam, Hefner argues, is an orientation toward civil pluralism justified through Islamic scripture and philosophy. This new civil pluralism, moreover, “[denies] the wisdom of a monolithic ‘Islamic’ state and instead [affirms] democracy, volunteerism and a balance of countervailing powers in a state and society” (Hefner, 2000, pp. 12–13). Yet it is not a facsimile of Atlantic or Continental liberalism; rather, it is an attempt to harmonise Western democratic theory with Islamic values and Indonesian conditions. In Hefner’s words, civil Islam offers a “middle path between liberalism’s privatization and conservative Islam’s bully state”, a path that “passes by way of a public religion that makes itself heard through independent associations, spirited public dialogue and the demonstrated decency of believers” (Hefner, 2000, p. 218). The success of this middle path, he argues, would be crucial to the health of Indonesia’s democracy.

Hefner juxtaposes civil Islam with conservative Islam, which experienced a concurrent – and to a degree state-driven – resurgence in the 1990s. Though not precisely defined, in Indonesia conservative Islam describes the large and heterogeneous category of Muslims who either wish to reinsert the Piagam Jakarta (Jakarta Charter) into the Indonesian constitution or pass sharia-derived legislation on a more ad hoc basis, and who are often hostile to religious minorities, minority sects within Islam, and the pluralist underpinnings of Indonesian nationalism more broadly (Hefner, 2000, pp. 128–138).

Thus, Civil Islam is also the story of conflict among Indonesian Muslims over the soul of the democracy-to-be: between the advocates of an inclusive Islamic civil pluralism and advocates of an exclusionary Muslim nationalism.

The democratic state that emerged from the crisis of transition reflected the civil Islamic ideal in crucial ways. It has lifted restrictions on the press and social organisation, reaffirmed the state’s commitment to freedom of religion, pluralism and human rights, exerted civilian control over the military, and confronted violent terrorist organisations seeking to overthrow the state, and has – by all accounts – overcome pernicious legacies of voter fraud and election violence to deliver relatively free and fair elections on a regular basis.

At the same time, the state continues to privilege its institutionally recognised faith communities, has reinforced rather than removed blasphemy laws from the books, has failed to confront violent Islamist vigilante groups, and has allowed provinces, cities and regencies to pass sharia-derived bylaws – including some that arguably violate constitutional ideals. Furthermore, although Indonesia is undoubtedly a more open and free society than it was under Suharto, religious minorities increasingly feel excluded and at-risk in a society that is growing more religious and more conservative in its religiosity, and is now witnessing the mass mobilisation of a distinctly political understanding of Muslim conservatism.

Election years from 2014 to 2019 have proven to be especially difficult stress tests for civil Islam, as digital globalisation and mass communication across social media have fuelled the rise of new forms of identity politics – in Indonesia as elsewhere. Hoaxes, rumours and disinformation campaigns have taken root within public and private spaces, inflaming tensions with religious minorities and encouraging more demarcation between advocates of Islamic civil pluralism and of exclusionary Muslim nationalism. Meanwhile, the combination of newly accessible ideas transmitted via YouTube and Facebook from the Middle East and the ongoing migration of liberal activists into political parties and other establishment channels have created new opportunities for conservative religio-political entrepreneurs – most notably in the dramatic 2017 mobilisation to defeat (and eventually jail) Jakarta’s Christian governor, Basuku Tjahaja “Ahok” Purnama (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; Mietzner, Muhtadi, & Halida, 372–G. BROWN AND A. FAUZIA
Given the rise of such challenges, how should we read *Civil Islam* with two decades of hindsight?

In October 2017, the National University of Singapore’s Asia Research Institute convened a one-day workshop to revisit *Civil Islam* two decades on from its publication. The articles included in this special issue, each of which derives from papers presented at the workshop, all address the question from different angles. In “Whatever Happened to Civil Islam? Islam and Democratisation in Indonesia, 20 Years On”, Robert Hefner (2019) revisits his landmark work with tempered optimism about the state of Indonesia and Islam’s role in its continued democratic development. He contextualises the approach taken in *Civil Islam*, re-examines its central precepts in light of recent developments, and discusses how he might have articulated its core theories and conclusions from the vantage point of today. Ultimately, he concludes that advocates of civil Islam were successful in convincing the public that democracy, constitutionalism and pluralist citizenship were compatible with Islam, but rather less successful in doing so for the equal rights and privileges of religious minorities.

Jeremy Menchik (2019) examines the potential role Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) could play in a democratic reversal. NU has long been considered an integral component of Indonesian civil society – and as such, one of the main forces upholding democracy and its underlying values. Menchik, however, presents evidence that support for democracy and pluralism among its leaders and cadres is highly contingent. Specifically, he argues that NU has both democratic and authoritarian-compatible tendencies, and that it is willing to forgo its commitments to democracy and civil pluralism on certain “red line” issues, such as blasphemy. Menchik concludes that, if Indonesian democracy dies, it will likely be because Islamists and Muslim populists are able to exploit this tension and “capture” NU for an antidemocratic agenda.

In “Civic Islam: Muhammadiyah, NU and the Organisational Logic of Consensus Making in Indonesia”, Gustav Brown (2019) examines policy interventions by Muhammadiyah and NU to resolve contentious parliamentary debates over religious pluralism. Drawing from debates over a proposed anti-pornography bill (2006–08) and over the legal status of the Ahmadiyah sect (2005–11), Brown argues that these interventions follow an organisational logic, resulting in compromises designed to maintain internal solidarity and consensus among competing factions within the organisations. Because the goal is consensus-making rather than a robust defence of pluralism, the results are typically ambiguous for religious pluralism. Muhammadiyah and NU thus embody a “civic” Islam rather than the civil pluralist tradition described by Hefner.

Eva Nisa (2019) observes how Muslim women exemplify a pluralism of religious expression in Indonesia, through participation in organisations and forums ranging from the “civil Islamic” to the puritanical and Islamist. Through an analysis of ideologically disparate groups seeking (different forms of) gender justice, she explores how Indonesian Muslim women define and redefine the religious public sphere and their place within it.

**Conclusion**

Since *Civil Islam’s* publication, Indonesia has experienced a series of convulsions related to Islam’s place in state and society. These include deadly sub-state conflicts in Maluku and
Central Sulawesi (1999–2004), a sustained terrorist bombing campaign (2002–09) and Islamic vigilantism aimed at purveyors of vice, “blasphemers” and religious minorities (1998–present). It has also included several legislative challenges to Indonesia’s institutional system of religious pluralism, as well as hundreds of sharia-inspired bylaws enacted at the regional and local level – all of which assert, in some way, the primacy of Islam over Indonesia’s other recognised faiths. At the same time, the pluralist underpinnings of state and society remain – not least because of their Muslim defenders, who include politicians, ulama, members of civil society and grassroots activists. There is no simple answer to “Whatever happened to civil Islam”, perhaps because it is, paradoxically, both more deeply embedded and more precarious than at any time since Indonesia’s transition to democracy.

Note

1. The Jakarta Charter was a clause in the draft 1945 constitution that obligated all Indonesian Muslims to follow sharia (and obligated the state to enforce it). The clause was removed from the final draft of the constitution.

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