Religion and Nationalism in southeast Asia, by Joseph Chinyong Liow, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, 282 pp., $29.99 (Paperback), ISBN-13: 978-1316618097

In May 2017, the establishment of a wilayat (province) by militants who pledged allegiance to ISIS shook not only the Philippines and its neighbors but also the rest of the world. The Merdeka Center, a Malaysian opinion research firm, published a study on extremism in November 2018. Their reports noted that support for global and regional terror groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah was present across Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines and that intolerance among Muslim respondents toward other religious groups was high in all countries except Thailand. Even before the establishment of the wilayat hit the headlines, Joseph Chinyong Liow, the author of “Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia,” had examined the relation between religion and political violence in these four countries. This book was also the first major scholarly book in the 21st century to undertake a comparative study of religion and nationalism in Southeast Asia after Fred von der Meden’s work with the same title was published in 1963. Liow’s work is quite ambitious in that it tries to overcome the excessive focus of Area Studies on parochial details. At the same time, it tries to avoid the overgeneralization we see in the flourishing terrorism research that tends to regard religious extremism as an explanatory factor. The major contribution of this book is that, while explaining the complex political and social context of each case, it also materializes a comparative study.

Liow first establishes the conceptual basis for religious nationalism and its mobilization based on studies of religious conflicts, nationalism, and social movements before he transitions to a series of case studies from chapter 2 to 5. Liow argues that religion is not merely a matter of faith but that it provides a framework for national imagination through which the issue of legitimacy is understood. It also serves as a means of mobilization for collective action. The book maintains that nationalism is an ideology that is constructed and that the role of religion in the conception of nationhood changes over time and context. Having said that, Liow does not take the Eurocentric linear conception that secular nationalism is the outcome of historical evolution and that modernity will replace religion. However, the conception of nationhood arises as a result of negotiations and contestations of the relationship between religion and the state for the stakeholders. In the context of Southeast Asian

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1Krugman, “The myth of Asia’s miracle.”
countries, religion becomes prominent in politics when people are debating who is/is not a part of the nation. Liow then explores the specific cases of Southern Philippines (chapter 2), Thailand’s southern border provinces (chapter 3), Malaysia (chapter 4), and Indonesia (chapter 5) to understand how and why the mobilization process itself was framed in religious terms, the currency that religious narratives possessed, and why they resonated such that mobilization was successful (page 203).

Both the Philippines and Thailand are not Muslim-majority countries. Armed secessionist struggles by Muslim minorities, however, have continued in the southern parts of their territories. In both cases, religious nationalism resonates with the perceived illegitimacy of the central state and marginalization in the course of history. In reality, no singular Bangsamoro (Southern Philippines) and Nayu (Malay-Muslims of southern Thailand) narratives exist. However, the loss of ancestral lands, the stereotypes of the central government being against Muslims, as well as the shared memory of victimization have given rise to a collective identity. This collective identity has been accompanied by the reframing process of historical narratives of premodern independent sultanates. Through the Philippine government’s transmigration and integration policies, Islam became an increasingly important feature of the collective identity of the Bangsamoro. Thai nationalism in the form of Chat, Sasana, Pramahakasat (Nation, Religion, King) imposed by the central government as well as the ubiquitous Islamic religious schools, pondok, reinforce local narratives of Malay-Muslim history and identity. Muslims have a common narrative to resist the non-Muslim conceptions of nationhood in their respective countries.

Malaysia and Indonesia are Muslim-majority countries that face communal, interreligious, and intrareligious tensions. In Malaysia, Islam is the official religion and ethnic Malays are legally defined as Muslims. Ketuanan Malayu (Malay dominance) has been considered the fundamental feature of Malaysian nationhood, and non-Malay citizens are often portrayed as a threat to Malay rights. Competition for Malay-Muslim votes during the Mahathir administration caused the politicization of Islam, and the reframing process of nationhood gradually gave Islam centrality to the Malay identity (page 150–152). Indonesia’s state principle Pancasila referred to the five pillars including “belief in one supreme God,” and the country recognizes six official religions. However, the Muslim community’s fear of Kristenisasi (Christianization) has influenced the post-independent political structure. After the collapse of Suharto’s regime (1967–1998), during which Christians were favored under the authoritarian rule, political entrepreneurs mobilized mutual suspicions among faith communities to incite violence. In both Malaysia and Indonesia, the reframing process of nationhood not only incites tension between religions but has also given rise to the notion of deviant Islam. Malay-Islamic nationalist narratives, mobilized by the Malaysian government, and the democratization process in Indonesia highlighted deviant Islam such as Ahmadiyah or Shi’a, which have the potential of undermining the state principles.

By comparing these four countries, Liow concludes that the conflicts in Southeast Asia are well-explained by the idea of religious nationalism. He cautions that religious nationalism should not be mistaken for religious fundamentalism, which seeks to conform the government to religious dictates (page 44). He also argues that despite the universalistic appeal of the Islamic faith, the scope of religious conflict has been decidedly limited in Mindanao and the southern Thai provinces (page 226).

Although it is beyond the scope of the book, the question of how “the universalistic appeal of the Islamic faith,” not to mention both Islamism as well as global jihadism, has influenced the conflicts in these area should not be overlooked because the cases discussed in the book overall focus on Islam. Tensions between the call for oneness of Islam and the diversity in which Islam is practiced across countries have long been observed in history. Since the 1970s,
many studies have documented the growing influence of Islamic revivalism among Muslim societies worldwide. The narratives of Islam in which people seek their life or a social and political order based on Islamic principles could underpin a type of collective identity that differs from that of the state-based nation. Regarding jihadism, Liow mainly attributes the radical interpretation, specifically the understanding of *jihad qital* (armed struggle) of Muslims as *fard ‘ayn* (individual obligation), to the Abu Sayaf group in the Philippines (page 86); however, this idea is not very uncommon in other Muslim societies in Southeast Asia. Even in southern Thailand, a booklet found from a dead insurgent revealed that there are people who share the view that the militant struggle against non-Muslim and hypocrites is *fard ‘ayn*. Liow also mentions this type of “malignant perspective on *jihad*” in southern Thailand but in the context of how religious terms are used in legitimizing their nationalist struggle (page 123).

It may be worth questioning how and why global Islamism or jihadism resonates with religious nationalism in some cases and when does religious nationalism turn into religious fundamentalism. As Liow’s book illustrates, in multireligious or multiethnic societies, the social order is oftentimes maintained on a very fragile balance. Further, social order in such societies often stands on values that differ from Western concepts such as human rights or equality. In such societies, subtle external interventions or internal changes can cause insecurity and disrupt the equilibrium. Therefore, attention should be paid to the Islamic element of not only “othering” but also “binding” people together for collective imagining beyond nations. Modern, post-independent states in Southeast Asia are based on a specific notion of nationhood that is changing over time and context. “The other” cannot exist unless they do not turn against the dominant notion of nationhood that states present. At the same time, human migration both regionally and to Muslim countries outside of the region is very common. Cross-border connections in terms of religious education and commerce have always existed in Southeast Asia and other Islamic regions thus far. The quality and quantity of cross-border connections have gradually changed. When narratives of global *ummah* or perhaps the regional *ummah of nusantara* (Malay world) resonate with people’s imaginations, a reframing process of collective identity might be formed in the existing societies.

**Bibliography**

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