The Religious Factor

In Recent Political Transformations in Southeast Asia

By André Feillard & Johan Meuleman

During the last few years, Southeast Asia has witnessed far-reaching transformations in the political sphere. Established governments and political systems have been replaced or regions have been conceded larger autonomy, if not independence. Calls for change remain strong. Both as causes and as effects of these transformations, Southeast Asia has undergone growing tensions between social classes, ethnic groups, and regions. In many of these processes religion plays a role, yet the importance and nature of the religious factor is often a subject for discussion.

New Order regime continue to have an impact on their ideas. In a paper on “The religious factor in political concepts during the early stage of Indonesian Reformasi”, Mathias Diedrich (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität, Mainz) showed that, although many parties used Islamic symbols, hardly any presented a concrete proposal referring to Islam in their programmes. A related theme was addressed in André Feillard’s paper “The reapparition of religion as a factor in Indonesian party politics”. She offered a critical analysis of a political survey from 1999 by William Liddle and Saiful Mujani and explained the distinction between santri (practising orthodox Muslims), abangan (Indonesian Muslims strongly influenced by pre-Islamic spiritual conceptions), tradition- alists, and secularists, or a more refined they were defined as the authors mentioned have done and many others still did. She drew attention to the development of a category of “new santri”, whose political attitudes appear to differ both from their parents and from the older category of santri.

In his “Between faith and politics. The rise of the Laskar Jihad in the political arena of Indonesia”, Noorhanidi Hasan (HASS/ISIM) offered important original information on the domestic and international background of a Muslim youth movement that has played a conspicuous role in the Moluccan conflict since the middle of 2000. On the basis of printed and Internet sources as well as interviews, the author discussed the social and political nature of this movement and its development in the context of recent political transformations in Indonesia and the Muslim world at large.

Inspired by his involvement with non-gov- ernmental organizations in Indonesia and with the study of social and political development, Nico Schulte Nordholt (Universiteit van Twente, the Netherlands) elaborated on the panel theme in a paper entitled “The religious dimension of political and social conflicts: a constraint for strengthening civil society?” In his effort to offer a balanced answer to this question, he concentrated on the importance of cross-religious reflexions and dialogue, and the necessity of involving all religious communities in the search for reconciliation in conflict-ridden Indonesia.

Remy Madinier (Université Jean Moulin-Lyon) discussed the “development of modernist Muslim discourse on Christians in independent Indonesia”. He explained how the status of Christians in the discourse of reformist Indonesian Muslims has progressively deteriorated, from the allies of reformist Islam in the 1950s to the culprit of all New Order sins in the early 1990s, and finally to traitors to their home- land from the end of the 1990s.

Three papers addressed the role of religion in present political competition in Malaysia. In spite of their differences of opinion on what the real questions in their country are, the two Malaysian participants, Patricia A. Martinez (“Utan- gling the new configurations of race and religion in Malaysia”) and Hasim H. Musa (“The recent Islamic reaf- firmation in Malaysia: germinating Islamic integrative ele- ments in the making of a future Malaysian civilisation”), both from the University of Malaya, agreed that the final stage of the Mahatir regime might well be characterized by increasing repression, including the introduction of restrictive meas- ures in the academic world. Both questioned the conclusion of the German researcher, Claudia Deriche (Gerhard-Mer- cator-University, Duisburg), writing on “Political Islam and Islamic politics in Malaysia: different faces and facets”, that the Islamic political or economic power, from colonial times up to the present. The manipulation of religious sensibilities has been a fre-quent strategy.

Hans Hägerdal (University of Växjö, Sweden) presented the results of two long series of interviews, concentrating on questions such as globalization, Pancaita (the Indonesian state ideology) and democracy, in a paper enti- tled “The role of the future: integrating political pluralism in the aftermath of the Indonesian New Order”. He concluded that most Indonesian Muslim intellectu- als are remarkably open-minded in their attitude towards modernity, a global world, and the other religious communities, but that the thirty-odd years of Soeharto’s