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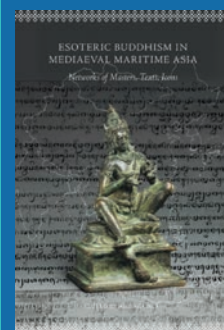
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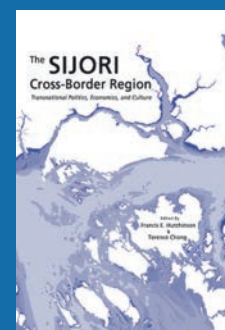
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Pentecostal megachurches in Southeast Asia

Terence Chong

THE ARTICLES PRESENTED HERE are ethnographic studies commissioned by the Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute on Pentecostalism in Southeast Asia. Part of an edited volume to be published by ISEAS, these articles are excerpts from chapters which examine the growth of Pentecostal megachurches in urban centres in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore as well as their congregations and the politics and history from which they have emerged and flourished. Indeed the independent Pentecostal movement has been growing rapidly in Southeast Asia in recent decades, benefiting from the broader expansion of charismatic Christianity from the 1980s onwards in Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as further afield in Taiwan and South Korea.

The conventional definition of 'Pentecostalism' is the emphasis on the deeply personal spiritual experience of God, baptism of the Holy Spirit, expressive worship, belief in signs and miracles, and *glossolalia*. According to estimates, there are 7.3 million Pentecostals in Indonesia; 2.2 million Pentecostals in Philippines; 206 thousand Pentecostals in Malaysia; and 150 thousand Charismatic Pentecostals in Singapore.

A 2011 Pew Research Centre study estimated that there are 279 million Pentecostals worldwide, comprising 12.8 per cent of all Christians. There are no accurate estimates for the number of Pentecostals in Southeast Asia but the percentage of Christians (including Catholics) in Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Singapore are 13.2 per cent, 8.8 per cent, 85 per cent, and 18 per cent, respectively. The exact number of Pentecostals are difficult to pin down because most country censuses do not differentiate Pentecostals from the larger Christian community. In addition, Pentecostalism does not have strict doctrines or hierarchy, and may manifest as standalone churches or as fringe congregations in mainline denominations.

There are several reasons why Pentecostal growth in this region is important. Firstly, to a large extent the Pentecostal movement has an ethnic face. The majority of Pentecostals in urban centres like Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Surabaya, Jakarta and Manila are, with some notable exceptions, upwardly mobile, middle-class ethnic Chinese. In countries where the ethnic Chinese are in the minority, Pentecostal churches and cell groups are crucial spaces for social networking, business contacts and identity-making.

Secondly, it has a wide economic appeal suggesting an ability to tap into different concerns and aspirations. For while the Pentecostal megachurch is often associated with the middle classes, it has great attraction for the poor and the working class in urban centres like Manila. Thirdly, the central figure of the charismatic leader in Pentecostal churches means that senior pastors enjoy great deference and sway over large congregations. In actual terms, this has meant the ability to mobilise financial capital; and the conflation of politics, business and religion to varying degrees raises the spectre of religious nationalism.

Perhaps most crucially, these studies will demonstrate that Asian Pentecostalism has both transnationalising and indigenising characteristics. Drawing from the west and other parts of the world, Asian Pentecostalism is also driven by local prophetic preachers who are able to craft contextual theologies. As such, Asian Pentecostalism is simultaneously recognisable as a part of a global phenomenon and available for examination only as a politically and historically specific movement. These articles, together with the other chapters in the edited volume will offer an updated ethnographic survey of Pentecostalism in Southeast Asia.

Terence Chong, Senior Fellow, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute; and regional editor for the News from Southeast Asia section in the Newsletter.

Counting souls: numbers and mega-worship in the global Christian network of Indonesia

En-Chieh Chao

INDONESIA HAS a Pentecostal community of an estimated 6 million, among which the Mawar Sharon church is one of the most dynamic and popular. Also known as 'The Rose of Sharon' or GMS, the youth-centered church is particularly attractive to students in Indonesian college towns. While GMS has a strong ethnic Chinese representation, particularly among the leadership strata, in reality its congregations are made up of multiethnic, middle-class individuals oriented towards a global Christian revival. Such individuals are drawn to GMS's market-driven approach to evangelising where number-glorifying and mega-worship services echo strongly the ethos of mass consumption, a point clearly illustrated in the metropolitan city of Surabaya where GMS was founded.

Surabaya, Indonesia's second-largest city, has a population of 3.12 million (5.6 million in the metropolitan area). Known for shipbuilding, food processing, electronics and furniture manufacturing, the city's residents comprise the Javanese majority, Madurese, and Chinese, as well as other ethnic groups such as the Sundanese, Minangkabau, and Bugis. In terms of its religious profile, Surabaya hosts the Grand Mosque of Surabaya and is a strong base for the country's largest Muslim organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama.

Alongside GMS as one of the fastest growing churches in Surabaya is Bethany Indonesian Church. Bethany is the largest Pentecostal church in Indonesia with over 1,000 branch churches around the country and claims to have more than 250,000 members. Like GMS, Bethany was

founded and led by ethnic Chinese Indonesians, although the latter's congregation is predominately middle-aged while the former is especially popular among university students. Both these Pentecostal churches are more of a middle-class religious phenomenon that arose as a result of economic growth under the New Order (1966-1998) regime, than an ethno-religious movement.

One of the key characteristics of contemporary Pentecostalism is its extension to areas of life beyond the religious. Pentecostals in Surabaya, for example, conduct self-help workshops for career building, family bonding, women's issues, children and parenthood. Such programmes are not confined to Pentecostals. They are also common among their middle-class Muslim counterparts who combine theology and entrepreneurship and hold seminars in prestigious hotels.

However, unlike Islamic *pengajian akbar* (great sermons) and other self-help workshops, most of which are somber affairs, the praise and worship of Bethany and GMS, and Pentecostalism in general, are far more boisterous, resembling pop concerts. These praise and worship events are locally known as 'KKR' (*Kebaktian Kebangunan Rohani*, literally 'Service of Spiritual Growth'), and demonstrate that Pentecostalism is not only "a portable faith" for the individual, but also a show-business faith designed for the collective.¹

The ingredients to such boisterous 'mega-worship' are upbeat music, dramatic sermons and dynamic dance. Replacing traditional instruments like the pipe organ or choir hymns are R&B bands, mesmeric gurus, and FM radio pop songs. In the megachurch sensationalism unites believers with the divine while the flashy multimedia employed