

# After September 11: Islamism in Southeast Asia

Islamism, which is defined by some scholars as political discourse and action that attempts to centre Islam within the political order (Roy 1994; Sayyid 1997), has been a conspicuous phenomenon in different parts of the Muslim world, mainly since the eruption of the Iranian revolution in 1979. Southeast Asia has been no exception. This region has witnessed a proliferation of Islamist movements, which have been highly assertive in seeking the restoration of 'authenticity' and the implementation of Islamic visions in all aspects of life. During this period, Islamism has been involved in a contestation for the public sphere, although its challenges have never significantly threatened ruling regimes in the region. The proponents of Islamism have actively produced counter-hegemonic discourses by proposing Islam as an alternative to the existing political, social, economic, and cultural system. The panel 'After September 11: Islamism in Southeast Asia' aims to examine the impact of the present increase of Islamism in the region.

Agenda >  
Southeast Asia

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Since 11 September 2001, when American airliners hijacked by terrorists struck the twin towers of the World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon, the dynamics of Islamism in Southeast Asia has apparently undergone some significant changes. This tragedy and its repercussions have not only facilitated the move of Islamism into the centre of the discursive field, but also radicalized its discourses and actions. It appears that the hostility to the United States in particular and the West in general has become a dominant colour of Islamism in Southeast Asia after 11 September.

In Indonesia, for instance, the rhetoric of global holy war (jihad) against the so-called 'West-cum-Zionist conspiracy' has increasingly enjoyed wide currency in popular political discourse. Massive demonstrations exploded in several cities, demanding the implementation of the Islamic sharia, viewed as the only answer to challenge the hegemonic system imposed by the West. Similarly in Malaysia, placards and banners hoisted with slogans like 'we love jihad' could be found everywhere and Osama bin Laden appeared to be a hero for thousands of young people. In the Philippines, Abu Sayyaf's radical Islamist group intensified their terrorist actions by kidnapping hundreds of foreign tourists. The peak of radical expressions of Islamism occurred

when high explosive bombs exploded in Legian, Bali, on 22 October 2002, taking the lives of 185 foreign tourists.

It is of interest to note that, while the world's hegemonic powers have become more rigorous in presenting the negative image of Islamism associated with terrorist actions, Islamist media has flourished and attracted new audiences. At the same time clashes and tensions have increased among Muslims from different groups, as they increasingly dispute religious symbols and public spheres. The political dynamics of the region in general have changed, particularly where various governments have been urged to put political pressures on Islamist groups, the targets of the global anti-terrorist actions led by the United States.

## Objective of the panel

Our panel at ICAS 3 will focus on the issues around Muslim discursive disputes, demands for implementation of the sharia, shifting attitudes of the ruling regimes to Islamism, presentation of Islamism as projected in the media, and long-term impacts of the increasing Islamism on Islam in the region.

Focusing on the events that have followed in the wake of the 11 September tragedy, this panel will seek to answer several basic questions, which include: What are the dynamics of Islamism in Southeast Asia after 11 September? What is the significance of anti-Western sentiments for the groups or political parties bringing such discourse into the public sphere of various countries? To what extent will anti-Western sentiments influence the societal discursive formation of Southeast Asian Muslims? How is the future of 'peaceful Islam', which

still constitutes a dominant character of the majority of Muslims in Southeast Asia vis-à-vis 'radical Islam', associated with anti-Western sentiments?

The participants of this panel will comprise scholars of sociology, anthropology, political science, Islamic studies, and media studies, who have been particularly concerned with Southeast Asia. The panel will be addressed to scholars, observers, and those who are interested in the new political developments in Southeast Asia in relation to the issue of Islam.

We believe it to be of importance to analyse the changing trends in Islam in Southeast Asia in the wake of 11 September tragedy, and the subsequent excessive campaigns by the United States against 'Islamic terrorism'. Understanding the changing trends in Islam in Southeast Asia in relation to the 11 September issue will contribute to a more comprehensive study about Southeast Asia in particular and Asia in general, regions which are facing the challenges of rapid modernization and globalization in the twenty-first century. ◀

## References

- Roy, Olivier, *The Failure of Political Islam*, trans. Carol Volk, Harvard: Harvard University Press (1994).
- Sayyid, Bobby, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism*, London: Zed books (1997).

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## Note >

At ICAS 3, the IAS will present several panels dealing with a large variety of topics. For more information, see the next issue of the *IAS Newsletter*.