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PANEL PROPOSAL

Panel Title

Sectarian Identity Formation and Intra-Group Muslim Rivalries in Southeast Asia

Panel Convenors

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Panel Abstract

This panel examines the dynamics of sectarianism in Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia, as well as in those countries with significant Muslim minority communities. The panel aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of sectarianism and the development of intra-Muslim group contestations by focusing on the multiple factors that shape modern sectarian identity formation within Southeast Asian Muslim communities. By moving away from rigid, primordial-centred and theologically-rooted conceptualisations of sectarian divides, the panel instead demonstrates the workings of multiple structural factors and contextual drivers in the construction of sectarian identities such as the politicisation of ethno-religious identities; competition over access to state recognition and resources; political uncertainty or change; subnational contestations over reinterpretations of religious traditions; and transnational ideological influences. Through the empirical examples provided in the papers of this panel, we seek to answer fundamental questions on why, when and how modern sectarian identities are variously emphasised and de-emphasised by different political, religious and social actors, as a consequence of the high salience or low salience of identifiable structural and contextual drivers in the different national contexts studied. The panel convenes junior and senior scholars of Muslim societies in Southeast Asia to address these questions from a sociological and political science interdisciplinary perspective.

Panel Type

Single Session (1 x 90 min)

Confirmed Presenters:

- 1) **Dr. Alexander R. Arifianto**, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Email: isalex@ntu.edu.sg
- 2) **Ms. Saleena Saleem**, University of Liverpool, United Kingdom, Email: Saleena.Saleem@liverpool.ac.uk

- 3) **Dr. Walid Jumblatt Bin Abdullah**, School of Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Email: walid@ntu.edu.sg
- 4) **Dr. Fanar Haddad**, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore, Email: meifh@nus.edu.sg

Discussant:

Dr. Saskia Schäfer, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany, Email: saskia.schaefer@fu-berlin.de

Paper Abstracts

Paper 1:

Whither Sectarianization in Indonesia? An Examination of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah Relations

Alexander R. Arifianto

The sectarianization thesis (Hashemi & Posner 2017) argues that ethno-religious cleavages between different Islamic sects within a given society occurs because their identities are politicized by state actors and elites to keep themselves in power. In the examination of the Indonesian case, I find while state actors do politicize and manipulate identities of different Indonesian Islamic groups – especially during Suharto’s authoritarian rule (1966-98) – cleavages between these groups also arises (and declines) due to how do the groups identify themselves vis-à-vis the other groups. External influence from transnational Islamic actors also plays an important role as well. This article examines the relationship between the two largest Indonesian Sunni Muslim organisations – Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. It finds while the group’s early history is characterised by sectarian rivalries between the two groups, over the past three decades such rivalries have gradually diminished. The two key factors that led to this diminished rivalry are: 1) political moderation conducted by leaders of both groups over the past three decades, and 2) perceived ideological threats from newer transnational Islamic groups - especially after Indonesia’s 1998 democratic transition. However, their rivalries can still resurface, especially during time of national elections, as the two organizations jockeying for political positions.

Paper 2: Hegemonic Islam and Pressures for Change: Constructing ‘Liberal’ Muslims in Malaysia

Saleena Saleem

This paper examines the social and political factors that contributed to the development of intra-Muslim group contestations centred around reinterpretations of religious traditions, and the consequent construction of new forms of divisions within the Muslim community in Malaysia. The paper builds on Cesari’s argument that a ‘Muslim national habitus’ was created when Islamic institutions became part of the state system in post-colonial Muslim-majority countries (2016). In the Malaysian context, the Muslim national habitus resulted in a hegemonic version of Islam and exclusivist discourses on Malay dominance. This created growing pressures for change from affected segments of society, from both the non-Muslim ethnic minorities and from within the Muslim majority community. Through an examination of the example of a reformist-oriented Muslim women’s group that challenged hegemonic Islam in Malaysia, the paper elucidates why and how opposing political, religious and civil society actors variously responded to these pressures for change. In doing so, these actors constructed a discourse of the ‘liberal’ Muslim, which effectively rendered some Muslim

groups as an inauthentic *other*. In light of recent political changes in Malaysia, the paper concludes with a consideration of the implications of this form of identity divisions within the Muslim community in Malaysia.

Paper 3: Ideological Cleavages in Muslim Communities: The Liberal-Conservative Divide in Singapore

Walid Jumblatt Bin Abdullah

Much attention has been devoted to the study of sectarian cleavages within Muslim communities: typically, these studies revolve around theological divisions, for instance, the Sunni-Shia or the Sufi/traditionalist-Salafi divides. While these cleavages are undeniably pertinent, this paper focuses on a division within Muslim communities which is not analysed as much: the liberal-conservative cleavage. The paper focuses on the Singapore Muslim community. I postulate the following: 1) religious identities or cleavages may, and do, exist regardless of state politicization of these identities, and 2) in the case of Singapore, both liberals and conservatives generally attempt to court the state and work within what has been defined as acceptable, rather than challenge the parameters set by the state. In the process of doing so, neither liberal nor conservative Muslims can claim to be faithful to liberal or conservative principles, but rather, have to make pragmatic compromises. This study challenges the sectarianization thesis posited by Hashemi and Posner (2017) by arguing that Muslim identities are dependent on the agency of individuals, and are not necessarily the consequence of state politicization. To be sure, states most definitely attempt to wield influence over religious communities, but actors do possess agency, and Muslim identities must be understood from the lens of the protagonists themselves, while not discounting the role the state may play in shaping identities.

Paper 4: Demystifying Sectarian Identity: A New Approach to the Study of Sectarian Relations

Fanar Haddad

The growing literature on modern Middle Eastern sectarian (Sunni-Shi'a) relations still struggles to comprehensively tackle the workings of sectarian dynamics. Even with the best of efforts, there is always an angle that is ignored, always a facet that is missed. This 'slipperiness' is less a reflection of the nature of sectarian identity and more a function of our mistaken approach to it. Specifically, it is rooted in the failure to formulate a theory of sectarian identity. Instead, most treatments of the subject take the existence and parameters of sectarian identity for granted and choose to obsess about an undefined 'sectarianism'. In so doing we essentially skip a step with cascading consequences on our ability to correctly understand modern sectarian dynamics. Put another way, we tend to overlook sectarian identity and focus instead on 'sectarianism'. Yet the conceptual starting point to understanding sectarian dynamics cannot be located in nebulous and essentially contested terms like 'sectarianism'; after all, whatever 'sectarianism' may denote, it is ultimately a derivative of sectarian identity. Rather, it is hoped that by shifting our focus from the '-ism' to the identity, we can develop a better appreciation for the multi-dimensional fluidity of sectarian identity and sectarian dynamics away from the rigid frames and binaries that have dominated the field thus far.