

EuroSEAS Conference 2019
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

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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
School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

2) Ms. Saleena Saleem
Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology, University of Liverpool, United Kingdom

3) Dr. Walid Jumblatt Bin Abdullah
School of Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Discussant:

Dr. Saskia Schäfer
Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

We plan to invite 1 other presenter with a paper that examines the dynamics of sectarianism within Muslim minority communities in Southeast Asian countries such as in Thailand.

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 the groups identify themselves vis-à-vis the other groups. External influence from transnational Islamic actors also plays an important role. 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 jockey 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 Sisters in Islam, 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 different 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: Muslims in Singapore (paper title to be confirmed)

Walid Jumblatt Bin Abdullah