

Budi

The cover features several horizontal bars of varying lengths and positions, some with a white-to-black gradient. These bars are arranged in a staggered, descending pattern from the top right towards the bottom right, creating a sense of movement and depth against the black background.

Essays edited by
Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib
Nurul Fadiah Johari

Kritik

These 22 thought-provoking essays from an array of Malay intellectuals with deep insights, have identified problems, defined them, made diagnoses and suggested possible solutions. They reflect a critical history of *budi* (intellect) and *budaya* (culture) while planting seeds of progressive ideas to transform the future of the 380 million inhabitants of the Nusantara region.

—Hoon Eng Khoo, Associate Dean (Academic Affairs) and Associate Professor of Science (Life Sciences), Yale-NUS College, Singapore

This timely volume addresses important issues closely related to the Malay community in the Nusantara. Through different lenses, twenty-two authors from different backgrounds contributed to such critical discourse with one common commitment towards progress – i.e. to reject the social construct of the Malay community as homogenous, monolithic and fixed.

—Hoon Chang Yau, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Asian Studies, University of Brunei Darussalam

This compilation of incisive and succinct essays by writers of varied backgrounds from the Malay world of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia represents a contemporary attempt to revive and advance the tradition of Malay intellectualism first developed in the 19th century, in which reform and progress are key motivations and themes. The writers collectively discuss major aspects of Malay society, drawing from a diversity of Malay, Islamic, universal and humanistic ideas of reason, culture and values. Epitomising the ideals of promoting a thinking culture that will examine issues honestly, critically and constructively, this book is a valuable reference not only for Malays but for all who seek reform and progress in addressing major social issues of our time.

—Lai Ah Eng, Adjunct Senior Fellow, University Scholars Programme, National University of Singapore

A fresh, critical, perceptive and courageous compilation of young contributors' reflections on vital sociocultural issues affecting the Malays in the region in the midst of development and unprecedented change. Offers a commendable effort that calls for further engagement by all concerned in improving the condition of our pluralistic society in its various dimensions.

—Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, Associate Professor & Head of Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore

Between the tendencies of Islamophobia and Islamophilia lies the rich field of the Malay intellectual tradition. This volume represents a return to the fountainhead of Southeast Asian Islam that is both dazzling in its erudition and tender in its passions. The mind and the heart unite in Budi Kritik, and the results are nothing short of a “blessing for all the worlds.”

—Mohan Ambikaipaker, Associate Professor of Critical Race and Postcolonial Studies, Tulane University, USA

This book voices young thinkers' concern towards the rise of conservatism and puritanism in the socio-religious life of the Malay Muslim community. They challenge the pervasive influence of political Islam and authoritarianism characterised by the pursuit for power, control and dominance. Using a critical discourse, the authors offer an antidote through promoting emancipatory ideas. They not only believe in the importance of democratic values, equality and diversity, but posit that Malay culture and the Islamic tradition contain rich legacies that uphold liberating values that are universal.

—Irfan Abubakar, Lecturer & Director of Centre for the Study of Religion and Culture, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Indonesia

This is a laudable effort by young thinkers to promote a progressive outlook amidst the current rise of conservatism and extremism. It gives hope to readers that thinking is not dead in an age of populism.

—Ahmad Syafi'i Maarif, Former Chairman of Muhammadiyah, Indonesia

Budi Kritik is an important book for the Malay community in Malaysia because of our neglect of a critical introspection for so long. This has led to the many issues we face today including a dependence on authority and a blind acceptance of bad leadership.

—Marina Mahathir, Malaysian activist, Author of *Telling It Straight*

Rising above the anti-intellectualism that deadens much of Singapore's public discourse, this collection of critical essays is an earnest plea for Malays and Muslims to be seen — and to see themselves — as inheritors of a culture and religion from which can be drawn inclusive, progressive values.

—Cherian George, Professor of Media Studies & Communication, Hong Kong Baptist University

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Budi

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Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib
Nurul Fadiah Johari

Kritik

To our friend and comrade,

Muhammad Nadim Adam

...damailah kau di sana...

An intellectual today ought to be an amateur, someone who considers that to be a thinking and concerned member of a society one is entitled to raise moral issues at the very heart of even the most technical and professionalized activity...

—EDWARD SAID

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INTRODUCTION

The prevailing level of education, culture and intellectual debate is important for the flourishing of a democratic ethos. Intellectuals in different guises play a crucial role in initiating dialogue and engaging the curiosity and passion of the public.

—FRANK FUREDI

*Orang boleh pandai setinggi langit, tapi selama ia tidak menulis, ia akan hilang di dalam masyarakat dan dari sejarah. Menulis adalah bekerja untuk keabadian.**

—PRAMOEDYA ANANTA TOER

IT WILL NOT be wrong to say that up to a century ago and beginning from the mid 19th century, Malay intellectual life was largely concentrated in Singapore. The strong presence of commercial printing presses was one important indicator of the vibrancy of the local production and dissemination of ideas. Proudfoot (1993) attributes this to “the urban mercantile environment of the Straits Settlements, with its higher levels of education and literacy” as well as her staging point for pilgrims to sail to and from Mecca, hence making Singapore as “ideally sited for the dissemination of information into

the peninsula and archipelago.”¹ Not surprisingly, it was also in Singapore that Malay reformism flourished, starting from the role of Munshi Abdullah (d. 1854) in ushering modern writings and critique, to the emergence of the Kaum Muda, which was led by the likes of Syed Sheikh al-Hadi (d. 1934) and Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin (d. 1956).²

The role of intellectualism was critical in shaping the early formation of the Malay intelligentsia. They were to be the shapers of a dynamic and evolving Malay socio-political scene, giving birth to early nationalism, modern institutions and religious reform. It was in tracing this element of reform and the search for progress through social critique and active participation in society that this book derives its inspiration from. What then can contemporary Malays in Singapore contribute in terms of an active intellectual and social life towards reform and progress? Where are the loci of critical thought in Malay public life? How can we generate social concerns through deep insights driven by the universal values that are not only anchored in the Malay historical and contemporary experiences but also of a universal import that are as much Islamic as it is humanistic? This book is a humble step towards laying the foundations for a new generation of Malay thinkers and writers who are committed to social reform and progress.

What is Budi Kritik?

Two words then come to mind: *budi* and *kritik*. The Malay word, *budi*, refers to “reason, mind and character”, derived from Sanskrit बुद्धि (*buddhi*), meaning intellect (related to Buddha, the Enlightened One). It is apt in describing the virtue needed in diagnosing and participating in societal issues. Azhar Ibrahim (2017), in his essay “Cultural Development and the Role of the Cultural Intelligentsia in Social Transformation” opines that *budi* “makes it possible for human society to create culture.”³ Hence, the virtue of reason that *budi* represents, combined with the will and ability to act or *daya*, becomes *budaya* or “culture”. It is this *budi* that is at the heart of this book. It is, in other words, a *will to think* for *cultural transformation*.

The second word that encapsulates the spirit of this book is *kritik*, derived from the English word, “critique”. *Kritik* is essential for social transformation. It adopts what the Brazilian educationist, Paulo Freire (1971), calls the ‘problem-posing’ method.⁴ In the formation of critical thinkers for society, it is important that the mind is trained to firstly, identify problems in society; secondly, define why they are problems that need to be addressed; thirdly, to diagnose these problems; and fourthly, to offer viable solutions to them.⁵

Combined, Budi Kritik is an embracement of the virtue of *thinking across issues with an element of critique for the purpose of development and progress*. In looking at the various issues in society, this book identifies five main themes: (1) culture, language and literature; (2) religion, tradition and reform; (3) identity, race and gender; (4) inter- and intrafaith diversity; and (5) sociopolitics, thought and education.

Thinking culture and the role of intellectuals

This book stands on the assumption that a thinking culture is a necessity yet lacking in society. The necessity of a thinking culture has been elucidated clearly in several writings and need not be repeated here. Suffice to say that progress can happen only when members of society are conscious and aware of problems and are able to correctly understand them. This forms what the Iranian intellectual, Ali Shari'ati (1986) terms as the '*rausyanfikir*' or 'enlightened thinkers'.⁶ The *rausyanfikir* do not necessarily emerge from the academe, and neither do they only preoccupy themselves with intellectual gymnastics and abstraction. The role of the *rausyanfikir* necessitates a moral position and exposing the shortcomings and failings of the existing order. As such, intellectuals are reflective and concerned about the problems plaguing society.

Alatas (1977) characterises this group as the ‘functioning intellectuals’. They should serve as a collective voice across various levels of society, neither as a lone martyr nor a messiah. They may come from various backgrounds and not necessarily the traditional sphere of the academia. There is a political responsibility as much as it is a moral calling.

But why is it important to imbibe a thinking culture and to have functioning intellectuals in the sociopolitical landscape? The present climate of populism may serve as a warning. Typically, the inability to understand problems turns people towards emotive responses. While responding emotionally to problems is a natural reaction, it becomes problematic when those with vested interests leverage on people’s emotions to control the direction of public discourse. This creates susceptibility to demagoguery and fearmongering from those interested in monopolising and dictating truths in society. Absence of thought leadership in society also permeates various levels of society, leaving public discourse to be shaped by those with vested interests in assuming moral authority, power and control. This is very pertinent in the present context and Malay society is replete with examples. One common example is the rise of religious conservatism typified by an immediate aversion to new ideas and obscurantist

concerns detached from the deeper and bigger problems facing the community.

It is our contention that the task of building a thinking society is not a professionalised activity best left to the academia. It is a collective responsibility and cuts across various spheres of society, including the arts, media and literary circles. With this in mind, this book gathers young writers from various backgrounds and provide platforms for forums and discussions – some of which resulted in reflections that were penned as commentaries that we have in this book. It is our hope that a thinking culture should no longer be the purview of the elites dominating institutions and structures within the Malay community; but rather, democratised to include the ‘awakened’ intelligentsia with a commitment to reform and progress. Ultimately, a thinking culture should be a norm for society as a whole. To do that, we need spaces and platforms to promote active engagement with ideas and this book is one such space.

Ideas within and beyond

This compilation consists of essays by 22 writers of varied backgrounds: academics, researchers, community organisers, social activists and young professionals. Most are reflections emerging from the sociopolitical and

religious context of Singapore society, while some are commentaries specific to the wider Malay world, including Malaysia and Indonesia. Undoubtedly, the territorial boundaries of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia do shape the specifics in terms of lived experiences and attitude; but beyond these, there is a high degree of shared historical, cultural and religious consciousness that binds what we can identify under the term '*satu rumpun*' or 'one stock'. It makes for fluidity in identification of issues that cannot be properly characterised as 'Singapore', 'Malaysia' or 'Indonesia'. We are, after all, living in a globalised world. What happens in each of these countries does affect the others, as much as how social groups do network and share resources – including ideas – across the politically constructed lines that define a nation. Hence, this volume sees a need to include contributions from two writers from Malaysia and two from Indonesia. Their reflections are pertinent to the overall diagnosis of various aspects of Malay society.

In closing, we note that a project of seeding progressive ideas within the Malay community requires a sustained collective effort as much as individual commitment and consistency. We hope that this small contribution will go a long way in ensuring that the dynamic intellectual tradition and reformism among the

INTRODUCTION

Malays remain active and dynamic as part of the overall aim of producing a functioning intelligentsia that can contribute to the development of society as a whole. The writers made a conscious effort to actively identify problems in society, define and diagnose them, and offered ways to overcome these problems through deep thinking, cogent analysis, perceptive insights, and an unwavering commitment to lasting peace and progress. It requires a courage to think, to discuss and to write. This is what Budi Kritik hopes to inspire in the hands of readers.

Mohamed Imran & Nurul Fadiah

April 2018

Singapore

* Man can be clever as high as the sky but as long as he does not write, he will disappear from society and history. To write is to work for posterity.

Endnotes

- 1 Ian Proudfoot, *Early Malay Printed Books: A provisional account of materials published in the Singapore-Malaysia area up to 1920, noting holdings in major public collections*. Academy of Malay Studies and the Library University of Malaya, 1993; p. 7.
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RECLAIMING THE RICH AND DIVERSE
TRADITIONS IN ISLAM IS KEY TO
COMBATING EXTREMISM

MOHAMED IMRAN MOHAMED TAIB

CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM SOCIETIES are confronted with choices which will shape the future of Islam. These choices are best presented, not as a binary, but as a complex matrix with two contending forces.

On the one end is the continuous desire to carve out a separate and exclusive identity defined as everything in opposition to the existing age. It hinges upon the idea of the totality of “Islam” as an ideological system. The underlying basis for this struggle is power, or the capture of it either through violent ways (e.g. *jihadi* groups) or democratic means (e.g. Islamist parties). The idea of the caliphate and the implementation of specific forms of punishments, represent this attempt to assert an “Islamic exceptionalism”.

On the other end is the critical and creative reworking of Islamic political thought in the direction of greater

engagement and adjustment to the modern conditions. It represents a desire to be part of the debates on democracy, secularism, human rights and ethics, and to contribute to the inquiry on what is the good in a modern, pluralistic world that we are in. Islam, in this sense, is seen as a faith that guides and inspires in the process of social change, instead of being reified as “the solution”.

These two opposing forces are part of the “pathways of modern Islam” as described by Dr Ali Allawi during a conference on “Islam in the Contemporary World” in 2016.¹ He described Islamic thought as one rife with contestations, and evolving “along tracks that crisscrossed, backtracked, advanced, and retreated, interacting with, or confronting other world or regional systems.”

Yet, it is also important that Muslim societies are not seen within an exclusionary lens. Firstly, Muslim societies are subjected to the same social forces and must be analysed along with its interactions with other world-systems. Secondly, a long historical approach is necessary to understand the present and how the burden of history continues to impact contemporary Muslim societies. Thirdly, data indicates that Muslim aspirations for good governance are similar to that of their counterparts. A 2013 Pew Research Center report on “The World’s Muslims” indicates that Muslims around the world embraced democratic systems and rejected violence,

with clear majorities in most Muslim countries saying that suicide bombing can rarely or never be justified in the name of Islam.²

What these mean is that the contemporary phenomenon of Islam cannot be understood by mere recourse to the specific beliefs of Muslims. While it may be true that some Muslims were driven to act in accordance to their theology, one must look beyond the surface expressions and dig deeper into factors that made one particular version of theology more prevalent than another.

Religious interpretation, after all, is diverse and subjected to the context of society. Why do, for example, the Palestinian Territories and Afghanistan have a higher percentage of Muslims saying suicide bombers are often and sometimes justified (40% and 39% respectively), compared to much lower percentages in other countries? The variations cannot be explained without recourse to the sociopolitical climate and conditions of a locality, beyond the specific belief and theology.

It is crucial to acknowledge that contemporary Muslim societies have yet to come to terms fully with the residue of the age of colonialism. At the turn of the 20th century, there was an awakening within the Muslim world to come to terms with the superior “West”. Realising that the Arab-Islamic world was once a beacon of civilisation, there was

deep soul-searching on what went wrong. Reformists like Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (d. 1873) and Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) advocated for Muslims to learn from the West, while striving to maintain authenticity by returning to the fundamental spirit of Islam. Ibrahim Abu Lughod, in his book, *Arab Rediscovery of Europe* (1963), described this period as “selective adoption” of Western culture that were adapted within the legal and moral framework of Islamic law.³

But by the mid-century, reform took an exceptional turn by mirroring itself to be in direct opposition to the West. Several factors may account for this: one, the neo-imperial ambitions of European powers in the demise of the Ottoman Empire – as exemplified in the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, which includes laying the foundations for the state of Israel; two, the failures of secular Arab regimes to deliver progress, which eventually led the masses to see them as stooges of the West. This was further compounded with American interventionist policies in Muslim countries, that include its invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in the post 9/11 era. These represent a trauma in Muslim consciousness that has yet to come to terms between the “glorious past” and the stark reality of underdevelopment and political humiliation.

Further seeds of radicalism can be traced to the dynamics of Muslim internal politics. One particular factor stood

out: the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Locked in desire for influence in the Muslim world, both countries had utilised religion as a vehicle for legitimacy to rule, giving currency to political Islam.⁴

What emerged then, are narratives that gave meaning to a mind under siege. These narratives include the apocalyptic notion of end times that will bring Muslim armies into direct confrontation with the forces of the *dajjal* (false messiah); the global conspiracies hatched by anti-Islam forces, including the domination by Jews and Christians; and the need to reclaim the caliphate as the only legitimate form of governance.

The prolongevity of these narratives is certainly one factor that account for the attraction of ISIS propaganda to those who long for a sense of adventure in the ultimate cosmic showdown between the forces of “good” versus “evil”. ISIS’ choice of the name *Dabiq*, a location in northern Syria where Muslim medieval prophecies indicate a great battle that will occur to signal the coming of end times, is not coincidental. Jihadi groups milked the siege mentality of certain segments of the Muslim populace to draw them into a cosmic war. Aside from factors such as alienation and social dislocation, such narratives play a role, particularly for those who have not been exposed to a rich and diverse tradition within the faith.

Hence, reclaiming the discursive space should form part of the strategy in combating contemporary religious extremism. For generations, the discursive space in Muslim societies have been plural. Contestation of ideas have not led to the destabilisation of Muslim societies, but instead enriched Muslim thought in the various domains. Embedded within the discursive space was a moderating mechanism where religious scholars upheld the highest ethical conduct when confronted with disagreements. This form the moderation principle where tolerance and openness were among the virtues upheld. Moderation (*wasatiyyah*) is not a compromised position. In its linguistic usage, *wasat* (middle/moderate) signifies strength, like the sun in mid noon.⁵

This moderation is best seen in the development of Islam within the Malay-Indonesian world. Dubbed as “Islam Nusantara”, it captures the spirit of *rahmatan lil alamin* (“blessings for all”): a tolerant, accommodative and open form of Islam that moves with the time yet retain the authenticity of Islamic ethical teachings based on acceptance of diversity, peaceful co-existence and harmonious assimilation with local context and culture. It is no surprise that the idea of resurrecting a caliphate found little support among Indonesian Muslims. In fact, the idea of a caliphate is an aberration that can only be found peddled by ISIS and other fringe radical groups such as Hizbut Tahrir. In a 1935

national conference of Nahdlatul Ulama in Banjarmasin, traditionalist *ulama* accepted the principle of nationalism and upheld the notion of *al-Jumhuriyah al-Indonisiyah* (Indonesian state) instead of *Daulah Islamiyah* (Islamic state). This largest Muslim country had thus far seen miniscule recruits for ISIS compared to other parts of the world, according to a December 2015 report by intelligence think-tank, The Soufan Group.⁶

What can the history and development of Islam in this region, therefore, teach us?

Firstly, the best bet against extremism is to anchor a person to his local culture. Local cultures often embed historical memory and wisdom that can mitigate the process of alienation. Radicalised youths are often those who are in search of identity and do not have strong social anchors to keep them rooted. Secondly, the role of the traditional *ulama* must not be discounted. Professor Qasim Zaman in his book, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age* (2012), shows how traditionally educated religious scholars who may be thought to have vested interest in the preservation and defense of tradition, had often been vigorous critics of particular aspects of tradition and hence an important contributor to reform in Muslim societies.⁷

In the face of extremism, the agenda of reform must now occupy centrality in modern Muslim consciousness.

Muslim extremists often tout a monolithic and reductionist form of Islam. Yet, the experience of Muslim societies is the very opposite. Reclaiming the rich and diverse tradition within Islam, will be crucial to combat extremism.

Endnotes

- 1 Keynote Address, “The Pathways of Modern Islam”. Conference on Islam in the Contemporary World, 28 April, 2016, organised by S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at the Nanyang Executive Centre, Singapore.
- 2 Pew Research Center, “The World’s Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society.” 30 April, 2013; <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview/>.
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- 7 Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

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ABOUT THE LITERARY CENTRE

Incorporated in Singapore in Nov 2003, The Literary Centre relies primarily on sponsorship, group resourcefulness and individual initiative for its activities and projects.

It is currently directed by noted Singapore literary pioneers Alvin Pang and Fong Hoe Fang.

ABOUT THE READING GROUP

The Reading Group, Singapore (www.thereadinggroup.sg) is a discussion circle and informal network advocating for critical discourses on contemporary Islam and Malay intellectual thought. The thrust of the network are to have a critical appreciation of our Muslim intellectual traditions; be able to engage on contemporary discourses on Islam; inculcate a diagnostic and reconstructionist thinking of society; and address Malay intellectual and cultural identity, vis-à-vis Malay thoughts on development.