Jihad in Paradise: Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia

Mike Millard
New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2004. 155 pages.

Jihad in Paradise explores cultural and religious interaction in Singapore and compares this with the intolerant radical Islamism threatening the country and Southeast Asia in general. Millard, a senior journalist who first worked on East Asia and then Southeast Asia, artfully conveys his descriptive yet analytical narrative of how Southeast Asia underwent radical change due, in

large part, to the influence of global and regional terrorism. Meanwhile, Singapore has yet to move forward by allowing greater political freedom and developing mutual dialogue and cooperation between its different religious communities. The Malay minority must also adjust itself to such pragmatic economic and political climates. Singapore's future depends on how well it manages multicultural diversity and balances its economic progress and political democracy.

The book is divided into six chapters. In his introduction, Millard observes how Singapore and Southeast Asia were generally prosperous and peaceful until the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, 9/11, and the 2002 Bali bombings. He realizes that his book is not an "inside story," for he regards himself as only journalist who is deeply interested in human realities and their regional and global dimensions.

In chapter 1, "Arrival and Discovery," Millard makes a sharp contrast between capitalist Chinese-plus-Indian Singaporeans and culturally backward and economically poor Malaysians and Indonesians partly due to their emphasis on cultural and religious values rather than on capitalist material pursuits and competition. By asking one Singaporean scholar why Singapore could be so well developed, he is told that it was due to good leadership and luck. The Afghanistan crisis has had its ramifications in Singapore and Southeast Asia, for "Singapore remains part of ground zero of a global jihad, coveted as part of a Southeast Asian Islamist state" (p. 17).

The next chapter, "Sources of Jihad," makes ideological linkages from "Islamist extremists" in Afghanistan and Pakistan back to their origins in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, as well as from Kashmir, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Through his readings and interviews, Millard finds out how Osama bin Laden was ideologically influenced by his teacher, Dr. Abdullah Azam, and the larger movement of Wahhabism, whose main ideologue was Sayyid Qutb. After 9/11 and the American toppling of the Taliban, Singapore's intelligence agency faced – and thwarted – an anticipated threat.

Chapter 3 tells the story of terror in Singapore and how, in early 2002, the Internal Security Department, supported by most local Muslim leaders, arrested the terrorists, many of whom had trained in Afghanistan. He agrees with the assertion that such spiritual leaders as Ibrahim Maidin and Abu Bakar Baashir disseminated radical ideology and explains the terrorist goal of creating a regional Islamic state, such as the caliphate, that would impose the Shari`ah. He argues that Singaporeans should be tough in containing radicalism while building more tolerance and interfaith dialogues, and develop critical thinking while maintaining economic advancement. He warns against

forging Singapore's Muslims into a separate psychological and political in-group and into an internationally oriented Islamic community.

Chapter 4 explains how things changed after the Bali bombings. For example, Singapore sought to deal with it by furthering integration programs, avoiding ghettos, making different ethnic groups mix with each other, and curbing Islamic radicalism. Millard tells of his conversation with Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's senior minister, who believes that the terrorist actions had nothing to do with local conditions and that Malay Muslims should be more rational in their political orientation in order to prevent external ideological influences. The white paper "The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism" says that those arrested are secularly well educated but had also received ideological indoctrination from spiritual leaders and visited Afghanistan. American support for Israel, oppressive regimes in the Middle East, and Saudi influence have also contributed to the rise of radical Islamism.

The story then moves on to Malaysia at a time when the United States had begun its latest invasion of Iraq. Millard interviewed Nik Aziz, leader of Parti Islam seMalaysia (PAS), which controlled the states of Kelantan and Trengganu. Nik Aziz offers a conservative worldview, as opposed to the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO), for he sees Islam as the solution to all problems. However, he says that he would understand if non-Muslims chose civil law instead of Islamic law. Nik Aziz criticizes capitalism because of its emphasis on profit at the expense of other cultural, moral things. He also says that democracy is not at odds with Islam, which recognizes consultation (*shura*), but that an Islamic democracy cannot tolerate certain things (e.g., gay marriage and immoral tourism). After the conversation, Millard thought that Aziz, a pious man, could be "arbitrary and even tyrannical," arguing that "the moral dictums of a religion are not an appropriate substitute for [the] laws of a multicultural state, and Islam offered no exception to this" (p. 117).

Chapter 6 discusses how Singapore may look forward amidst the changing local and global contexts by eliminating censorship, developing a civil society to counter a hegemonic government, and allowing political education. Agreeing with Kirpal Singh, a Singaporean Sikh writer, Millard writes that creativity is needed. More importantly, Singapore should rethink the whole country to ensure greater freedom of the press and thinking and allow Malay Muslims to participate more actively in building the nation. While Islamism is a "spiritual disease" (p. 142) that should be dealt with, Muslim societies should make a positive, rather than a destructive, contribution to the world: "If a healthy pluralistic society can be created and maintained in Singapore, there is no reason why it cannot be so elsewhere or even everywhere (p. 140)."

Millard's lack of knowledge about Islamic history and teachings has trapped him in some fallacies. For example, he equates Islamism and violence (see p. xix). *Islamism* refers to Muslim groups who use Islam as their political ideology, even though they may be non-violent. His understanding of jihad is limited, for he presents it only as holy war and terrorism. Lastly, his depiction of Indonesia suffers from unnecessary over-generalization when he writes that "Indonesia, and the Philippines … were more receptive to the message of Islamic militancy" (p. xviii), thus ignoring the fact that Indonesia is generally moderate and peaceful, despite the terrors in Bali and Jakarta. He also portrays Indonesian Muslims as mostly "poor with little education" (p. xix) and "corrupt" (p. 10). Millard should have included moderate and even liberal voices, such as those of the Muhammadiyah and the Nahdlatul Ulama, and should have said something about the country's much-improved state of education and prosperity, all of which would have provided a more nuanced analysis of Muslims, Indonesians, and Southeast Asians in general.

Most of what Millard says about Islam, jihad, madrassahs, Islamism, Wahhabism, Indonesia, and Southeast Asia is too general. For example, regarding the Malay people, Winstedt's book *The Malays: A Cultural History* (1947) is largely outdated when it comes to contemporary Malays. With regard to Islam and the West, Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis (1996) and Bernard Lewis' *What Went Wrong* (2002) have also been criticized by many. Despite these shortcomings, *Jihad in Paradise* is a useful reading for students and general readers interested in the relationship between Islam and politics in Southeast Asia.

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