

From Dissertation to Book:



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Islamist Mobilization in Indonesia



Seated on the porch of a small bamboo Islamic boarding school, or *pesantren*, in Garut, West Java, sipping perhaps what was the strongest coffee I had ever had, I began to understand the focus of my dissertation. I was well into my fifth month of fieldwork as a PhD candidate in political science at University of Toronto, investigating how main-stream Muslim leaders had responded to new Islamist groups since Indonesia's transition to democracy more than a decade earlier.



I had just returned from Jombang, East Java, where I met various Muslim leaders and was amazed at how large and wealthy their Islamic boarding schools were. While pondering my observations of East Javanese *pesantren* in this small and modest *pesantren*, similar to all the others I had visited in West Java, I realized how different Islamic authority looked in these two regions of Indonesia. That day, I understood that my dissertation would focus on the links between the status of Muslim leaders, economic resources, and Islamist mobilization.

I graduated from the University of Toronto in 2019 and am currently a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada post-doctoral fellow hosted by the Cornell Southeast Asia Program. While at Cornell, I am working on a book manuscript entitled *Competition for Religious Authority and Islamist Success in Indonesia*. Based on my dissertation, the book seeks to understand radical Islamic mobilization in Java, Indonesia. The primary task I am pursuing while here will include some additional research, mostly in colonial and postcolonial archives, and the streamlining of the book's broader narrative.

My book's starting point remains the same as my dissertation. Since the democratic transition of 1998, dozens of small yet vocal Islamist groups in Indonesia have sprung up throughout the archipelago. In the early 2000s, groups such as the Islamic Defenders' Front

(Front Pembela Islam), were mostly focusing on "cleaning up" the streets of Jakarta from "sinful" activities such as gambling, prostitution, and alcohol consumption. Since the mid-2000s, however, they have expanded their agenda and started targeting "misguided" religious minorities, as well as people considered guilty of blasphemy against Islam. Bolstered by this new agenda, they have spread to smaller cities and rural towns throughout Java, attacking, closing down, or destroying mosques of Muslim sects deemed deviant and Christian churches considered illegal.

My research aims to understand why Islamist groups have clustered in some regions of Java and not others. In more general terms, the question driving my work is why do Islamist groups succeed in some regions and not others. The province of West Java, for example, accounts for nearly 60 percent of all Islamist protests and contains 50 percent of all Islamist groups in Java. The contrast with East Java, for example, is striking, given that this province has witnessed only 10 percent of the protests and contains only 20 percent of all the Islamist groups. What makes West Java so unique?

At first glance, West Java does not appear different enough to justify such a high level of Islamist success. The province has a higher unemployment rate and a slightly lower gross domestic product per capita but scores higher on various indicators of human develop-



The outskirts of Bandung (West Java) where many Islamic groups have been active.

ment and has less severe poverty than other provinces in Java. Socioeconomic grievances do not seem to explain the success of Islamist groups in that province. Islamist mobilization in West Java is often imputed to the local culture. Given its long history of Islamic militancy and its absence of Hindu-Buddhist history, academics and journalists often suggest that West Java, a Sundanese majority region, is a hotbed of intolerance and conservatism, an ideological environment conducive to Islamist mobilization. This explanation has always struck me as tautological: West Java is more intolerant, because it is intolerant. East Java, by contrast, is often seen as having a more tolerant and moderate brand of Islam, promoted by its dominant Islamic mass organization, Nahdlatul Ulama.

What I argue, however, is that these variations in Islamist mobilization

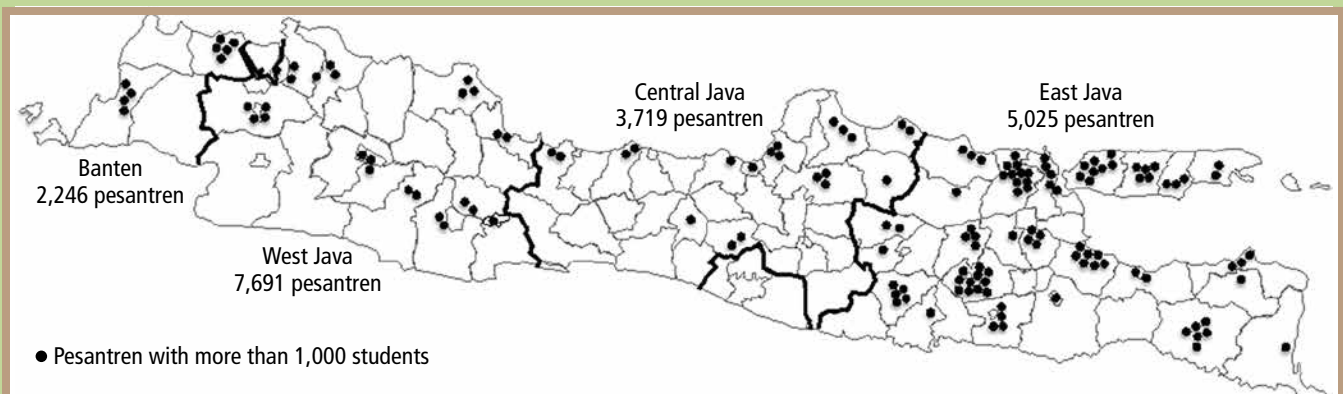
across Indonesia are rooted in the way Islam is structured and institutionalized in the province, rather than socioeconomic grievances or the local culture. While conducting fieldwork in Java in 2014-2015 and 2016, I observed surprising differences in the status and wealth of Muslim clerics (called *kyai* in Indonesia) throughout Java. As I traveled east of the island, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) tended to be larger and had more students and more land. As I traveled west, however, schools were smaller, had fewer students, and did not own much land. In addition to dozens of interviews with Muslim clerics, I went on to collect data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which confirmed those astonishing variations.

The Islamist-prone province of West Java has more schools than East Java, but those schools are twice as small, on average. West Javanese schools have

small landholdings, and only a fifth engage in agriculture while at least half of the schools do so in East Java. West Java also has a much more leveled authority structure. The map illustrates regional differences in Islamic authority by representing with black dots schools with more than 1,000 students. As we can see, West Java has only twenty-four schools with more than a thousand students, while East Java has an impressive ninety-two. In other words, despite having far more Islamic boarding schools, there are no dominant schools in West Java, as most of them are small.

These institutional differences, I contend, are crucial for contemporary patterns of Islamist mobilization in Java. The influence of a Muslim cleric in Indonesia is inherently tied to the size of his Islamic boarding school: clerics with more students generally command more influence both in and outside their region. Influential clerics are better able to leverage their popularity into access, power, and resources. Low-status clerics with fewer students are much more peripheral and have fewer opportunities to do so. Instead, they are precarious or have to be particularly entrepreneurial if they are to survive in the longer term. The shortage of large schools in West Java means that the province has a shortage of influential clerics. Islamic authority is thus inherently more competitive and prone to appropriation in West Java.

My interviews with Muslim leaders revealed that West Java was particularly susceptible to the emergence of radical groups because of a larger pool of political “entrepreneurs.” Low-status cler-





Alamendah, a village south of Bandung (West Java) where the local pesantren engage in agriculture.

ics—who abound in the region—found it useful to join, support, or form a new Islamist group as a way to expand their religious authority. They used morality and sectarianism as ideologies of mobilization to stake out their own claim to power and wealth. Through mobilization, many gained recognition and followers and were better able to leverage their authority into influence and power.

Why did Islamic institutions grow so differently in East and West Java? What is so unique about West Javanese “soil”? This important question forced me to research back in time when the differences started to take shape. The majority of Java’s largest and most influential schools were opened some time between 1800 and 1945. I argue that the differences between East and West Java are rooted in the history of colonial and postcolonial state building in the region.

During the nineteenth century, Java was under increasing direct rule as the Dutch sought to modernize the state. Yet, the Dutch placed most of West Java under a different political regime called

the *preangerstelsel* (Priangan system). Under that regime, the Dutch pursued high profits on coffee but little in the way of state building. Even once the Dutch abolished the Priangan system, most of West Java remained under a distinct administrative regime. One key feature characterized this regime. The Dutch did not implement village institutions until much later, did not provide villages with “village land” (called *tanah bengkok* in Indonesia), and did not collect land taxes like elsewhere in Java. In the absence of land tax and village land, used elsewhere to pay native officials, they let native officials rely on informal taxation and corvée labor as a means of retribution. These discretionary powers led to perhaps the most exploitative and oppressive system of forced labor in colonial Java.

Some of the native officials that benefited the most from this system were the *penghulu*, or the government clerics. Elsewhere in Java, *penghulu* were marginal officers in the colonial bureaucracy. Instead, independent clerics (*kyai*) who owned and operated an Islamic boarding school were the true leaders in

the countryside, but not in West Java. In this region, the Dutch granted the *penghulu* the monopoly over the collection of Islamic charity (*zakat* and *fitrah*). This prevented independent *kyai* from collecting an important source of revenue, as they did elsewhere in Java, which is one reason why we find few large pesantren in West Java.

These initial differences in colonial styles shaped subsequent political cleavages. In the late and early post-colonial period, most Javanese clerics became increasingly cohesive as they resisted the incursion of modernist Islamic leaders and communist groups in rural Java. This conflict prompted clerics to strengthen their ties, further institutionalize their authority, and grow their schools.

In West Java, however, the colonial regime led to a different political cleavage. Clerics were divided, not cohesive. Some clerics furiously opposed the colonial regime and their native representatives, particularly the *penghulu* because of their monopoly over Islamic charity and their lavish lifestyle. Others were part of the *penghulu* patron-cl-



Above: A pesantren in the regency of Bandung, West Java.

Below: Alexandre interviewing KH Acep Sofyan, chairman of the Islamic Defender's Front, in Tasikmalaya, West Java (2015).



ent networks and supported colonial authorities. The 1920–30s were particularly violent in West Java as both groups frequently clashed. After independence, traces of that conflict fueled the Islamic rebellion that took place in the region.

In response to the unrest in West Java, state officials started to repress independent clerics. Strategies of repression became one of the dominant modalities of interaction between the state and Muslim leaders in West Java for the years to come. As a result, from the 1920s to the 1950s, Islamic life was profoundly disrupted in West Java:

dozens of Muslim clerics left the country, some were killed, and their Islamic boarding schools destroyed. From the 1960s on, Muslim clerics were almost fully under the grip of the state in West Java. By contrast, they were still largely independent in East Java.

Under the Suharto regime (1967–98), the weakness of Muslim clerics kept West Java in a relatively peaceful state. Yet it is this very weakness that is now backfiring in the post-transition period. Weak clerics have had trouble engaging with the expanded opportunities of the democratic era. In an increasingly competitive political environment, clerics in

West Java are less able than their counterparts in East Java to convert their religious authority into political capital. Because of that, they have had more incentives to line up with radical Islamist groups, as they can quickly bolster their standing and influence. The Islamist groups have thus found West Java a particularly fertile ground for their activities.

Cornell University and the SEAP program have been invaluable for me as I work on this book project. I am currently conducting some additional research at the Kroch Library, one of the largest collections of primary and secondary material on Southeast Asia. Moving forward, I am particularly interested in documents such as the *Inquiry on Land Ownership* of 1867, the *Declining Welfare Inquiry* of 1905–14, and the *Population Census* of 1930 for all the rich and detailed information they contain about land ownership patterns in Java. I was happy to be involved in the Cornell Modern Indonesia Project conference last spring, as it was on religious intolerance in Indonesia. I look forward to presenting my work to the SEAP community on November 21, 2019 at the Gatty lecture series and know I will benefit tremendously from the experience. 🕌