

John T. Sidel. *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press (Cornell Paperbacks), 2006. 304 pages.

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John Sidel wants to wrest the interpretation of Islamic violence in Indonesia from the grand view from above. It is not a question of a global network orchestrating a jihad in Indonesia. It is, rather, a matter of the place of Islam first in the Indies and then in the Republic. Marginalized, the key to its reaction is the terms of this marginalization. In Sidel's view, Islam is politically unsuccessful. Not that it does not win battles, even the presidency, but it does not succeed in establishing itself in such a way as to confer a secure sense of identity in its followers. In colonial times Islamic groups never equaled the success of Christians who, favored by the Dutch, became better educated and formed networks based on schools and religion. They then transferred their success to the Republic.

Sidel's account begins in detail with the changes in the New Order and the elements that combined to lead to violence. First, Chinese were prevented from taking political positions that would reflect and justify the place allotted to them in the economy. As a result they were left vulnerable because, as Hannah Arendt said about Jews, they had economic success without evident purpose. Suharto's insistence that Chinese always remain ambiguously Indonesian surely put in question others' nationalist credentials. Thus Muslims too are affected. Indeed, Sidel's book is a study of the incomplete development of an Islamic identity in Indonesia that would make them vulnerable to doubts about their place in the nation. And this is exacerbated by changes in the economy with the introduction of contemporary capitalism on a large scale with concomitant social dislocations. While the government-sponsored ICMI (Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia, the Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals) offered Islamic leadership a powerful place in the administration, ICMI leaders (did ICMI ever have anything but leaders?) were not able to represent the Islamic community (*ummat*). Not only were there various sorts of Islam and Islamic organizations, but the *massa* (masses), embodying the Hidden Force, the term Sidel borrows from Louis Couperous's novel of 1900 in which a shadowy figure embodies a vague but terrifying threat, come to be thought of as Muslim. This in the face of the increasing unbelievability of the communist threat. An Islamic *massa* was available for political mobilization. The *massa* in the New Order was the transformation of the *rakyat* (the people), but given a sinister connotation. What is new here is that the very vagueness of the *massa*, their lack of a precise sociological and cultural definition, left them open also to embodying an equally vague "Islam." And as such they could be brought back into the political process. Hence the success of the PPP (Parti Persatuan Pembangunan, United Development Party) in the 1977 and 1982 elections. But they were also held responsible for the violence that went with the term. The Islamic *massa* merged with the "latent danger" of resurgent Communism. That one term did not entirely replace the other, that "Islam" did not replace "Communism" as a source of danger but instead added to it, shows both the political forces at work and their delusional aspects.

The first period of detailed study is 1995 to 1997. This was the time of Church burnings and riots, as Muslims feared Christianization (magazines such as *Media*

Dakwah had numerous illustrated articles about houses said to have been turned into churches without government permits). These were often at once anti-Christian and anti-Chinese movements.

The next period is 1998, the time of *reformasi*. Sidel points out the importance of figures such as Amien Rais and of Muslim associations in the campaign that ended with Suharto's resignation. At the same time, market troubles were said to call for regulation "in the name of a higher—that is, Islamic—moral economy of sorts." (p. 126) There was a concomitant campaign against the influential, predominantly Catholic CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies) and Chinese and Christian groups. What marks this period is the ascension of Islam inside the Suharto regime and, at the same time, the massive discontent with Suharto that produced a situation in which the regime was condemned while members of it seen to promote Islam were not. Thus certain Muslims defended Prabowo, usually blamed for the riots of 1998. For them, to condemn the riot was to condemn Muslims. At the same time, defense of the riots themselves was hard to come by. Sidel is careful to distinguish the various Muslim groups from one another and to show the "Ambiguous and awkward position of Islam" (p. 130) at this moment.

Islam was not monolithic, in part because it was not a matter of codified beliefs; it was "a matter of affiliation within the political class, rather than a marker of a devout religious faith." (p. 130) One does not find a unitary Islamic movement or a unitary belief stimulating violence. The point is, however, that at that moment, in the guise of *reformasi*, Islam emerged within Indonesian politics in a new way. Behind the *reformasi* mass movement was a force trying to express itself differently than it had only a few years earlier. Instead of localized events that took place at various locations and involved people who knew each other, there was now, for the moment, a large movement whose members were anonymous. That it was not overtly in the name of Islam reflects the complication of the referent of that word and the multiple forces at work. What comes through in Sidel's analysis, which is circumstantial, detailed, and admirably clear, is a force that had not found its proper means of expression. The negative character of the events—the overthrow of the regime, the anti-Christian bias—thus turned out to be more important than the positive aims expressed by the students. That a certain inchoate, but nonetheless understood, Islam was at work was seen, for example, in the spray-painted slogans "Milik Islam" and "Milik Pribumi," interchangeable with each other.

Those were the marks of the Hidden Force of the people. A force hidden because it had not fully declared itself, even to itself. One sees in Sidel's analysis how a term of identity was in the process of being formed, with no assurance of success. It was a question of who was going to define the masses. And it was no longer a question merely of definition from above by the leadership. Instead there seemed to have been an emergence from below, which no one fully articulated.

Sidel concludes his description of the second stage with these sentences: "Even as the avowed representatives of Islam appeared to be assuming the reins of national state power in Jakarta, the hold of Islam on the broad mass of Indonesian society remained very much in doubt. This doubt, and other doubts and anxieties that came into view with the transition from Suharto's authoritarian rule, helped give rise to new forms of religious violence in the country." (p. 131) Previous violence was local and

was a form of complaint, one might say, directed to governmental authorities. Churches were burned because they had no government permits to justify their existence, for instance. Thus even this might be termed “vertical” as opposed to the term Sidel uses for the violence of the time after Suharto’s fall: “horizontal.” These were the anti-witch killings, the “interreligious pogroms” of Poso and Maluku, and gang warfare. These, one concludes, were the result of the very ambiguity of Islamic identity as it emerged not yet fully expressed from the period of the *massa*.

In Indonesian politics there are always two stories, however. One is from the bottom of the political hierarchy and the other from its top. Sidel had earlier expressed the thesis that the violence of this period was the result of the disruption of networks that occurred with Suharto’s fall. How did one reach from the provinces to the top? The routes were violently contested. It is at once a political interest—who will get what—and an attempt at self-expression. There is a pull from above and a push from below. But a push the terms of which were set by the gradual emergence of Islam in the earlier periods Sidel describes. (Sidel does not, of course, leave out the Christian side; he describes their attempts to protect their position and the resulting aggressive violence.)

The success of Islam in reaching the presidency was also its failure. The fragmentary and undefined nature of Islam (the two are not the same) underlay the jihad that followed from the disappointment with this failure, and also was a response to Christian atrocities against Muslims. In this period, the local, spontaneous, from-below nature of the reaction was replaced by planning, with jihadists sent thousands of miles from their place of recruitment. This was eventually ended by the reaction of military and other elites. Sidel traces the seemingly more indigenous, popular movements associated with Salafi and Wahabist thinking and said to be part of Al-Qaeda, showing their connection to Al-Irsyad, to Persatuan Islam, and to the breakaway Islamist groups of the 1950s. These groups were a long-standing part of the Indonesian political scene and engaged in the struggle for national recognition, just as were others. However, they distinguished themselves from the mainstream Muslim groups. What is interesting about them is, given their DDII (Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia, Islamic Propagation Council of Indonesia) roots, they can be seen as one form of Indonesian nationalism rather than as entities having a basis outside nationalist history. Indeed, it seems to me that Sidel’s book best makes sense if they are so considered. The degree to which they fit into the trajectory he traces of an emergent Islam is the degree to which the terms of their recognition are “Indonesian” rather than purely Muslim. There is ambiguity here that has to be traced to their particular history and the sense in which one comes to interpret it. It seems to me finally to bear a resemblance to the story Michael Laffan told of the history of the idea of the *ummat* in the nineteenth century as the basis for Indonesian nationalism. A true history in the sense that the events occurred, but a failure in the sense that eventually mainstream nationalism prevailed with its idea of unity in diversity.

Sidel here, as throughout the book, uses anthropological accounts and NGO reports, formulating his explanation out of the excellent detailed accounts of such anthropologists as Lorraine Aragon, Patricia Spyer, and others. This is an imaginative, even daring attempt to draw a synoptic account which, at the same time, does not distort the views of those close to the events. Anthropology here is rather subtly

transformed. It is closer to history or even journalism, a history of the present, when one sees it set next to NGO reports. On the other hand, among the copious footnotes in the book, there are only a few that cite both Indonesian and Western language accounts. But there is, it should be evident by now, a serious sociological aim in this book, namely, to trace the evolution of an identity that has yet fully to emerge. This identity is not simply there to reveal itself at some point in the present or the future. It is the effect, in the first place, of colonial history. It is a question of class relations, but "class" here is inflected by the Dutch policy of keeping the market as isolated as possible from the peasantry in order not to turn them into a proletariat. That describes Clifford Geertz's thesis, which is used here to real advantage. The result was to force peasants into collectivities with their own identities. "More than anywhere else in Southeast Asia, the peasantry of the Indonesian archipelago was drawn into production for the world capitalist economy under administrative structures that reified, reinvented, and reinforced collective identities." (p. 41) And the effect of that is told in Sidel's next sentence:

More than anywhere else in Southeast Asia, the pattern of anticolonial struggle in Indonesia ... involved widespread popular mobilization. Small wonder that by the early 1960s Indonesia boasted the single largest Communist Party in the world outside the Soviet Union and China, and that even after the anti-Communist pogroms of 1965–66 the national elite has remained haunted by considerable fear of a mobilized underclass. (p. 41)

The Hidden Force in Sidel's use of it is this underclass that strives for expression. The form that this expression takes in this book is "Islam," but it could be any other term that vaguely designates those who have not yet achieved a full place in the nation. The starting point here is that the collectivities, the villages, the *banjar* (irrigation societies), and so on are not classes. "Class" understood conventionally refers to a group whose members see their common interests and shared social place in regard to others. In the Indonesian case, the underclass wants to have the sociological and political definition of itself as "villagers," "farmers," "peasants," and even "workers" transcended by another term, such as *rakyat* or *massa*. This is the effect of the colonially induced blindness to "the people's" place in the world. "Islam" is the term that the actors in Sidel's book chose to mark this emergence. That this is so far only sporadically successful marks also the perduring gap between elite leadership and this underclass. In this book, we are given both sides of the struggle for this emergence with a complexity far richer than I can reproduce in this short review. *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad* defines the place of Islam in Indonesia now and in the recent past with force and clarity. It has no rival in that respect. But it is also an essay on the attempt of "the people" to define themselves and the difficulty they have had and still have in finding a means of articulation. It is, then, an important book about democracy today.

[Editor's Note: For a second review of *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad*, see page 187, this issue]