

Book Review

***Indonesian Pluralities: Islam, Citizenship, and Democracy.* By Robert W. Hefner and Zainal Abidin Bagir. Contending Modernities. Notre Dame, IN: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2021. viii+268. ISBN: 9780268108618. \$100.00 hardcover, \$40.00 paperback.**



Journal of Interreligious Studies
December 2023, Issue 40, 87-89
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

On May 13, 2018, an ISIS-inspired family carried explosive packages to three separate churches across Surabaya City, Indonesia, including one that I often attended. It marked the first encounter of “the safest city” with such a religiously motivated terror. The hashtag *#tidakadayangaman* (nowhere is safe) inundated social media, reflecting the spread of profound shock. Surprisingly, within just twelve hours, thousands gathered at the city center, bore candles, and declared an open war against terrorism. That night, the hashtag *#kamitidaktakut* (we are not afraid) triumphed, followed by people all over the country. The virtual conversations that were fueled by fear and anxiety were now filled by calls for peace and coexistence. President Joko Widodo responded immediately, initiated a nationwide hunt, and vowed to eradicate terrorist networks “until its roots.” As a result, a legal revision was done to enable military forces to neutralize potential threats preemptively.

Indonesian Pluralities: Islam, Citizenship, and Democracy offers an invaluable framework to give a name to similar efforts in amplifying the call for peace and coexistence nationwide. Comprising seven chapters, the book, which started as a project in 2015 funded by the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, is curated and edited by Robert Hefner and Zainal Bagir, who also contribute to the first and concluding chapters to provide both the methodology and the national-level background. I recommend reading Hefner’s and Bagir’s first before going into all the local stories curated in each chapter.

The main aim of this anthology is to identify models of “scale up” normativities in calling for social recognition, coexistence, and peace across Indonesia. Scaling up, the phenomenon in which Hefner has been interested over his dedicated career, involves invoking “a normative and psychocultural resonance for large numbers of people, similar to that which psychiatrist and anthropologist Arthur Kleinman (1991) has described as ‘amplification’ in subjective experience” (11-12). This process elevates the subjective experiences of minorities in specific locales, which serve as a starting point for building collective awareness in the minds of the majority and other locales. Given that the ethico-political objective of many activists and movements in Indonesian society is “social recognition,” scale up proves indispensable (7-10).

After reading the entire book, my initial reaction was one of admiration for the almost seamless and productive exchanges and connections among the chapters, despite the uniqueness of their respective fields. Take, for instance, Chapter Two, where Erica M. Larson delves into the mechanisms of “sociocultural scaling” implemented by various institutional bodies, steadfast in their efforts to uphold Manado’s status as a model of plural coexistence. Here, Christians, often viewed as “the insiders,” play a pivotal role in preserving social harmony. In contrast to Larson’s depiction, in Chapter Three, Kelli Swazey focuses instead on the “outsider” status of Christians in the post-conflict ecotourism of the Banda Islands, wherein a false narrative about the origins of the *orang Banda* (Banda people) is inadvertently perpetuated, forgetting the vital role Christians played in safeguarding *adat* (unwritten laws, rules, and customs) prior to the 1988–2001 conflict. Transitioning away from interreligious conflict, Chapter Six, by Alimatul Qibtiyah, investigates groups in Yogyakarta scaling up their perspectives on gender normativities. Her typology encompasses the textualists, the moderates, and the progressives.

While those three scholars appreciate the *particular* resources and methods provided by local wisdom as well as by religious laws as the normative frameworks in the process of scaling up, Marthen Tahun (Chapter Five), within the context of Ambon, presents a contrasting argument. He emphasizes that “the dominant influence today is [instead] the almost *universal realization* that conflict did not bring any good” (140; emphasis added). Tahun elaborates on the strategies employed by the interreligious peace-making labors, highlighting people’s tactful use of “positive avoidance” to sidestep potentially contentious issues and maintain “the still-fragile social peace” (145). Common refrains like “*Katong su cape*” (We are exhausted) or “*Barenti jua*” (Enough is enough) echo the collective weariness (145–46).

Working as a religious leader and scholar among the predominantly Chinese-Indonesian group, I had hoped this book would extend its observations to the Chinese-Indonesian women’s community who currently live with the haunting traumas of the 1965 and 1998 tragedies. This inclusion would significantly fortify the success of the book’s aim due to one important reason: What the call for democracy or the method of scaling up looks like would appear noticeably distinct if it is practiced by this specific marginalized group. To be sure, Hefner astutely highlights the multilayered obstacles faced by the *kepercayaan* (belief)-based recognitions, acknowledging the complexity compared to religion- or ethnicity-based recognitions (29–32). However, both he and Bagir seem to overlook the relentless struggles faced by Chinese (predominantly Christian) women in their pursuit of social recognition and justice in the aftermath of tragedies. Their struggle for recognition is complicated not only by their gender and religious identity but also by their *nonpribumi* (nonindigenous) status, due to the problematic *pribumi-nonpribumi* (indigenous-nonindigenous) dichotomy.

I want to highlight one of three noteworthy features of this book: its inclusion of scaling-up models by the non-protagonist in Indonesian democracy, notably Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, which endeavors to establish a radical Islamic nation they think it is supposed to be (Chapter Four by Moh. Iqbal Ahnaf). At the outset, Hefner emphasizes that this project’s observations extend beyond the pluralist groups or the “good guys.” Instead, they focus on “the *most influential* actors and organizations shaping processes of public recognition in each region” (6). Hefner follows Chantal Mouffe’s theory of “agonistic plurality,” wherein conflict and disagreement are embraced as unavoidable and even desirable facets of democratic life, mirroring the complex reality of Indonesia. Towards the book’s conclusion, Bagir reiterates that “[d]emocratization

opened up a free arena not only for ‘good guys’ but for a competition of normativities, a fierce one” (223). Certainly, this inclusion ushers in an inevitable philosophical conundrum for readers who begin considering what can count as the best treatment toward such an intolerant group like Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, to recall what Karl Popper once elucidated. To this issue, readers might find a fruitful discussion if this book is read in conjunction with Angus Ritchie’s *Inclusive Populism: Creating Citizens in the Global Age* (The University of Notre Dame Press, 2019) and Matthew A. Benton and Jonathan L. Kvanvig’s *Religious Disagreement and Pluralism* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

Two other strengths pertain to geographic and gender issues. The authors deliberately decentralize their geographical concentration and shift it away from Jakarta and the over-exposed Java Island. In terms of gender, nearly all contributors, except Swazey (Chapter Three), underscore women’s pivotal roles in attaining social recognition and other scaling-up strategies, although it is Qibtiyah (Chapter Four) who pays more attention to rising theological debates, specifically concerning gender norms and some hermeneutical divergence, within the Muslim group.

In summary, *Indonesian Pluralities*, along with other works attempting to depict Indonesia, has undertaken a risky yet important job. However, its achievements deserve more than just celebration, given Hefner and Bagir’s avoidance of stereotypical Javanese and Soekarno versions of Indonesian democracy. This book is particularly valuable for graduate students, professors in comparative and sociology of religion, and field researchers exploring Indonesian studies. Yet, it also holds merit for anyone interested in understanding how interreligious coexistence in a country with a profound Islamic social imaginary can still be scaled up.

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