Book Review: Schäfer, S. (2026). Mobilizing Mainstream Islam. The Politics of Orthodoxy in Indonesia in Comparative Perspective.

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Ever since what was described as the "conservative Turn" (van Bruinessen, 2013) and the new Islamic nationalism (Bourchier, 2019), Indonesianists have puzzled over why and how Indonesia, after the downfall of the authoritarian Suharto regime, famously described by scholars as an Islamic-yet-democratic and pluralist society (Hefner, 2000), has become increasingly intolerant. In a country so proud of its pluralism and diversity, minorities like LGBTIQ people, Ahmadis, liberals, and secular people have experienced an increasing amount of stigmatization since about the mid-2000s, when conservative versions of Islam became more and more influential in both politics and society.
abstract, authors, affiliation, etc.).

Saskia Schäfer, who led the research project "Secularity, Islam, and Democracy in Indonesia and Turkey" at Humboldt-University in Berlin, has investigated this issue in *Mobilizing Mainstream Islam*. Her recent book is based on her research from that project, in which she investigated Indonesian Islam from a comparative perspective. In her new book, she draws on her fieldwork and data from her previous research (e.g., Schäfer, 2016; Schäfer, 2018). These insights are thus brought into dialogue with new accounts of scholarly research as well as news coverage. *Mobilizing Mainstream Islam* scrutinizes the growing orthodoxy and its political implications by analyzing mainstream Islam as a homogenized and bureaucratized interpretation of Islam that has brought about a new form of religious nationalism. The book's main focus is on how this religious nationalism came into being in a new relationship between Islam and the state in the 2000s until the 2016/17 protests against the then-governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, and the 2019 elections, which marked, as the author argues, the peak of a rise of conservative and extremist forces. The normalization of Islamist social conservativism, through state regulations and the monitoring of citizens' behavior by established as well as new emerging religious institutions and organizations, significantly challenged Indonesia's religious pluralism. Not only did it contribute to the hegemonization of new, conservative orthodoxies within Islam, but it also stressed Islam's role within Indonesia's nationalism. Schäfer argues

convincingly that mainstream Islam engaged in negotiations on the reconfiguration of Indonesian nationalism of the post-*reformasi* era and merged with Indonesian nationalism into what she calls an Islamist Conservative Majoritarian Synthesis. In this synthesis, religious orthodoxy and Islamic conservatism are protected by the state, and this enables conservative forces to shape mainstream views on Indonesian nationalism.

The first chapter investigates the rise of mainstream Islam with a seemingly paradoxical framework of religious homogenization on the one hand and political decentralization on the other. Saskia Schäfer shows that electoral competitions in a decentralized political framework have facilitated political actors and policies that rely on a homogenized and bureaucratized version of Islam and Islamic nationalism. This chapter also outlines how, in a *longue durée* perspective from colonialism to *reformasi*, modernity and nationalism have shaped the categories of 'proper', officially recognized religion (*agama*) on which the recent Islamist Conservative Majoritarian Synthesis relies. In the main part of this chapter, it is explained how in post-Suharto Indonesia, the Islamist Conservative Majoritarian Synthesis came into existence through a fourfold decentralization: As elections, civil society, religious authority, and media became decentralized, conservative social forces used this new competitive environment. Economic uncertainties and instabilities, Schäfer analyzes, also facilitated demand for religious orthodoxy as a way to introduce clear guidelines and certainties in an increasingly unstable social-political environment.

The second chapter investigates the marginalization of Ahmadiyyah and Shi'a. It convincingly analyzes that this marginalization was part of defining conservative religious orthodoxy as an integral part of Indonesian nationalism. The chapter stresses the importance of the collaboration between conservative religious institutions such as the MUI and the state for this process. Thus, it is analyzed how, through theological delegitimization and the discourse of Shi'a and Ahmadiyyah as deviant and a threat to the nation, Ahmadiyyah and Shi'a have been increasingly marginalized. The most intriguing argument in this chapter is, to my mind, that the discourse of liberalism and minority rights proved to be of little use for defenders of these marginalized communities and that religious conservatism was on the rise due to the absence of an emancipatory and culturally suitable political vocabulary. The following chapter repeats and strengthens this argument by investigating more patterns of othering, such as nonreligiosity and LGBTIQ identities. It is shown how human rights rhetoric failed and more localized approaches, such as the concept of an Islam of the Archipelago (*Islam Nusantara*), might provide a culturally rooted, better-suited discursive strategy when making the case for diversity and minority rights.

In chapter four, Indonesia's shift toward the politics of orthodoxy is compared with Malaysia, which represents a more state-driven, top-down example of a mainstreaming of conservative Islam. The author demonstrates brilliantly in this chapter that open public discourses, like in decentralized Indonesia, are not a necessary condition for the rise of religious nationalism, but that electoral competition, the liberalization of the public sphere, and formally democratic institutions that characterize post-Suharto Indonesia have resulted in patterns of religious nationalism often similar to those that can be found in Malaysia. The chapter also argues convincingly that, in a comparative perspective – not only with Malaysia but also with other authoritarian nationalist-religious movements across the globe – the Indonesian case demonstrates that religious nationalism can emerge and thrive without a central leading figure, even without a central movement or party.

Another great merit of this book is that it does not fall into the trap of economic reductionism, nor does it reduce the phenomenon of orthodox mainstream Islam to a mere discourse

issue or to a matter of pragmatic realpolitik and elite decisions. Instead, Saskia Schäfer skillfully brings together different analyses that are all concerned with the issue of declining pluralism and increasing authoritarianism. Like Vedi Hadiz (2016), who argued that the rise of Islamic populism forged an inter-class alliance, Saskia Schäfer emphasizes economic issues. Also, Jeremy Menchik's (2016) argument that Indonesia's communal tolerance is a distinctive non-liberal or non-Western approach echoes in this book. By adopting Sudipta Kaviraj's (2010) notion of "thin religion" – religion as a narrow and straightforward set of rules –the book also offers a profound critique of the Islamist Conservative Majoritarian Synthesis without simply setting religious conservativism and nationalism in Indonesia in opposition to Western liberalism. In doing so, the book offers intriguing new concepts of understanding Indonesia's recent transition as well as food for thought.

While Saskia Schäfer mentions Indonesia's more inclusive and pluralist past, she does not simply argue for a return. Indonesian society was indeed pluralistic in the past, as it is demonstrated in the opening vignette on the Istiqlal Mosque in central Jakarta, which was designed by a protestant and incorporated Javanese and Arabic elements, and until now is a reminder of post-independence versions of religious harmony and multicultural pluralism. The arguments presented in the book, however, move clearly beyond a nostalgic plea for a return to such a condition. Instead, the book suggests a profound critique of identity politics, for instance, when Schäfer writes in the conclusion that it is an irony that the Islamist Conservative Majoritarian Synthesis was not only facilitated by decentralization and the political competition of leaders and religious authorities, but also by identity-based discourses that were initially designed to protect minorities. It is this internal contradiction of liberal identity-based political discourse that proved not to be simply the opposite of the Islamist Conservative Majoritarian Synthesis, but an integral part of its success.

Whether or not Indonesian concepts beyond such a liberal paradigm – such as the aforementioned *Islam Nusantara* – can offer a convincing alternative to the Islamist Conservative Majoritarian Synthesis remains to be seen. In the meantime, however, scholars have to understand the current dynamics. Here, the book offers a profound critical analysis and novel concepts that make it a must-read for Indonesianists, scholars of religious pluralism, as well as for a broader readership of political scientists interested in authoritarian religious developments beyond parties, movements, and strongmen.

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DISCLOSURE

The author declares no conflict of interest.