

Southeast Asia and Islamic Public Value: A Postscript

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1. Islamic Public Value¹

The current theme issue of *Halduskultuur* is one of the publications emerging from "Islamic Public Value," a John Templeton Foundation grant based at University College London's Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose (UCL IIPP), of which the three co-editors, and the authors, are members. The project aims to uncover, and present as legitimate, the perspectives of otherwise underrepresented and underexplored Islamic institutions undertaking polycentric governance and administration and creating public value to better the lives of their constituents and neighbors.

The authors of the case studies presented here investigate, to this end, sometimes centuries-old autonomous indigenous institutions "still" operating across the Islamic world, and in this case, particularly in Southeast Asia. What is specific about them, and what thus makes this pursuit special, is that they are not NGOs – a common-enough model – but institutions that are, to various degrees, part of the state sphere – some as *Ersatz*, some as a secondary government, some semi-integrated with central administration, that is, governing in the shadows (Peters 2019), and some fully part of the government of the day. They therefore dovetail with the more community-based approach to state service provision that is often at the core of the reinvention of the state in the 21st century (Mazzucato et al. 2021), something all the more important when that reinvention is facing serious obstacles since 2024 (Buchsteiner 2025). They form what we call Indigenous Cooperative Institutions (ICIs), and they do so in an Islamic, and in particular in a Sufi, way (Drechsler et al. 2024).

Exploring these ICIs as such has an important dual effect: It helps us to reflect on the Western aspect of global "best-practice" governance and administration, to recognize its framing power, and to notice its bias. But even more important for the current project and special issue, at the same time, it shows and showcases working Islamic models of cooperation and public value creation that could serve as models to learn from, but at the very least contribute positively to the rich fabric of integrated living-together (even of the West) in both state and society (Chafik and Drechsler 2022).

The overall project does so along three poles: In time and space, in theory and practice, and in governance and faith. That is, we look at the rich, diverse group of successful Islamic institutions, generally with a contemporary and future orientation, but also including highly successful examples from – often relatively recent – history that fell by the wayside during the colonial period of Western ascendancy. The current special issue focuses on the governance

¹ This section is based on Drechsler et al. (2025b).

and public service provision aspects, and a little less on how precisely they are anchored in, and express, Islamic values and principles of faith – both in a philological sense (the teachings of Islam as such) and in a sociological one (Islam as practiced).

2. Southeast Asia

When we commenced planning the Islamic Public Value (IPV) project, which Rainer Kattel later joined as Co-PI, we tried to have samples from all relevant geographical spheres, without aiming at completeness. It was only via the development of the project, which thus proved to be truly iterative, that Southeast Asia emerged as a, indeed the, particular regional focus, which is now well-displayed by the present theme issue of *Halduskultuur*. In fact, even both the kick-on workshop of the conference, still somewhat limited because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the central Governance conference in mid-2024 took place in Bangkok, mostly for logistics reasons, but also because of the project center of gravity having veered to there. Once again, this issue does not aim at covering all Islamic areas in the Southeast Asian sphere, but it does give, we hope, a meaningful sample and thus survey in several respects.

Southeast Asia is special because here, quite uniquely, we find countries whose dominating administrative systems belong to the three spheres of Non-Western Public Administration (NWP), that is, Buddhist, Confucian, and indeed Islamic – Mainland SEA is mostly Buddhist and Maritime SEA Islamic, with Singapore and Vietnam encompassing strong Confucian elements – and some more or less Western systems (particularly the Philippines), with most of them, of course, being hybrid (see Drechsler 2013, 2015). We therefore have countries with Islamic dominance, with good Islamic representation, those where Islam is a minority, and even a persecuted one, in a relatively cohesive space. Arguably, we have all kinds of government models as well, from vile dictatorships via competitive authoritarian systems to democracies that are at least not more challenged and deficient than some of the leading Western ones today.²

Southeast Asia is dominated, economically, geographically, and demographically, but also in other respects by Indonesia, the largest Muslim-majority country in the world, and one of the four largest countries overall – we used to call it one of the three largest democracies, but that has become a difficult label to apply, not least because of the democratic qualities of the other two contenders. From a social-scientific perspective, which the IPV project necessarily takes, Indonesia is therefore the *primus inter pares* of Islamic nations, something that is often not readily present in the minds of non-SEA experts. The apparent overrepresentation of Indonesia in the project and especially in this issue is therefore no such thing: We do have three essays dealing with Indonesia, but this is as it should be, given the importance and eminence of the country, both for Islamic Public Value and otherwise.

2 Mahbubani and Sng (2017) is far too positive on ASEAN, *a fortiori* from the 2025 perspective, but it nutshells the region in an excellent way.

3. The Issue

This brings us to the specifics of this theme issue. We chose *Halduskultuur*, the in-house journal of the Ragnar Nurkse Department at TalTech, which has served as a kind of “second home” of the IPV project, because its specific orientation, both as regards NWP and an explicit non-emphasis of “method” as a guarantor of validity (Gadamer 1990). Thus, we were able to include more experimental and narrative content than mainstream journals would have permitted – especially regarding an uphill-battle topic as this, or any Islamic one (see Drechsler et al. 2025b). We believe the journal’s open-access policy, strong quality control, and indexing more than compensate for the disadvantages of not choosing a more distant venue.

The issue overlaps to some extent with the project’s *omnibus* Governance publication, a comprehensive Edward Elgar volume (Drechsler et al. 2025a), but only in parts. Although two essays on Indonesia and the one on Thailand also appear in the latter, if in substantially different forms, one Indonesia contribution and the essential Philippines and Cambodia ones are completely new. They appear here mostly for reasons of timing, as not all research teams joined the project from the beginning and emerged only later. What the Elgar volume entails and this issue does not are the theoretical pieces – the project’s aim was always to create a basis for theorizing on Islamic Public Value, but as we went along, very substantial theory reflections emerged, especially by members of the Advisory Board. Here, we have the cases pure and simple, and those interested in further theory are directed to the book.

With case studies of Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, we are missing several important SEA countries. In Laos and Timor-Leste, Islam is arguably quite marginal, but even in such cases, we would have had fascinating case studies, and Vietnam’s Cham community would have been important to cover. Brunei is an Islamic country, but the omission of Malaysia, a Muslim-majority country with significant elements of Islamic Public Administration especially as regards its unique, rotating Monarchy (see Noh 2014, in this journal), is particularly regrettable. Although we had a planned work package and essay in progress, the project did not materialize.

The case with Singapore is a little different: while it is a Confucian-Western hybrid (Drechsler 2018), Singapore takes great pains to emphasize that it is multicultural and that Islam and the Muslim-Malay population are a key part of it. However, when a Singapore case study was explored, it soon became apparent that there are, in fact, no Islamic institutions in Singapore that match the IPV criteria, only those that deal with religion itself (see Steiner 2015).

4. Myanmar

What is particularly regrettable, however, is that we were not able to include a case study of Myanmar, or better, of the Rohingya community. Victims of genocide and expulsion in waves from their homeland by the terrorist military junta of their homeland, masquerading as a government since a coup in 2021 (Drechsler 2021), they have (been) settled in giant camps in Cox’s Bazaar, Bangladesh, which, with a million inhabitants, is the largest such camp system in the world (Hussein and Duggal 2023). Although the Bangladesh government, both before

and after the 2024 revolution, has accommodated the camps (Islam et al. 2022), there is very little hope, and not even a serious plan, of how to solve this giant humanitarian crisis, something quite off the global agenda today, as is the catastrophe in Myanmar itself.

Refugee crises seem to be set to become more, not less, in the immediate future, and many if not most victims of mass expulsion and catastrophes that create camp life might be Muslims (see UNHRC 2024). It is therefore particularly important, and in fact promising, to look at how inmates in such camps, and Cox's Bazaar is the best, that is, worst, example, administer themselves and gain some agency. Islamic culture and structure are all that is left to the Rohingya, and one would intuitively assume that with or even against Bangladeshi and United Nations administration (see Islam 2024), this is the *locus* of some autonomy and self-governance, even self-empowerment, such as is possible.

This seems indeed to be the case. It is particularly difficult to investigate Cox's Bazaar, because both the powers that be clearly do not welcome either journalists or scholars to the camp, and there is very scant literature so far. However, the IPV project was able to start some investigation in the camp itself, including by local Rohingya researchers, although the prohibition of higher education and the forced reduction of internet access there make this very difficult (participant observation and interviews).

Based on such research, and here we thank especially our project assistant M. Ayeas, we have indeed been able to ascertain, for now, that any autonomous administration of the camp, government truly in the shadow, is based on earlier Islamic structures from the Myanmar communities. This includes the provision of *moktob* (Islamic kindergarten) taught by Muslim scholars who are hired via a general assembly in the local mosque and financed from community donations.

Perhaps the best example is the institution of *mazhi*, a community leader position that seems actually to be an IPV innovation from the camp in that it is based on the earlier Islamic village mayor position close to the *hakem* in the Cham community in Cambodia (Van Schaack et al. 2011) but specifically transformed to serve camp needs. The *mazhi* is a reputable elder elected also in the mosque under the supervision of the *Imam* who, among other obligations, deals with the community communications with Bengali and other authorities and groups of power, including armed bandit groups allowed, somehow, to enter the camp (but see Rahman 2024), and who is also paid via community donations (All of this information is based on internal fieldwork.)

Although it was, again, not possible to develop this in time for the current issue, we hope to have a separate publication about Islamic Public Value among and by Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh sometime soon. Deplorably, the aforementioned expected rise of refugee numbers and their tendency to victimize Muslims makes research about the possibility of their self-administration, if at a minimum, particularly significant. It also shows, if against a truly dark background, how existentially important scholarship about Islamic Public Value can be.

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