

The Politics of Islamic Law: Local Elites, Colonial Authority, and the Making of the Muslim State. By IZA R. HUSSIN. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. viii, 351 pp. ISBN: 9780226323343 (paper, also available in cloth and as e-book). doi:10.1017/S0021911818002917

In *The Politics of Islamic Law*, Iza Hussin demonstrates that the colonial encounter in British Malaya, India, and Egypt not only marginalized Islamic law but also centralized it in several significant ways. Charting a course beyond conventional approaches to law, religious doctrine, jurisprudence, and politics, Hussin produces a detailed analysis of the cultural and political complexity of the centralization of Islamic law in the colonial state. Drawing upon extensive archival research, she describes how Malay, South Asian, and Egyptian elites navigated structural and political opportunities within the colonial system. She also points out that the curtailed space of Islamic law is a realm in which local elites and other colonial subjects resist constraints even while being paradoxically hampered by the terms they contest. Indeed, Hussin makes a major contribution through the manner in which she elucidates the dynamic flux of concepts such as state, law, ethnicity, religion, and politics in the changing and varied colonial and postcolonial contexts. For instance, in chapter 5, following an instructive discussion of representations and the making of Muslim states, she informs us that “[i]n Malaya, Islam became more and more identified with the Malay elites and the rural Malay peasants that they claimed to protect” (p. 205).

In the two final chapters, Hussin proceeds to explore the entanglements of Islamic governance and the modern Muslim state as well as the contemporary politics of two high-profile apostasy dramas, the Lina Joy and Nyonya Tahir cases. She astutely follows the growing significance of the politics of law in colonial Malaya, India, and Egypt as subjects paradoxically embrace and attempt to enhance the jurisdiction of sharia within projects of modernity and secularity. Taking a cue from Talal Asad’s theoretical approach to secularism, Hussin elucidates the interconnected politics of paradox of the shifting dynamics of religion and secularity across these colonized regions. Moreover, she illustrates that the two controversial apostasy cases involving Malay women reflect the simultaneous ascendancy of the arcs of law and ethnicity in the context of contemporary Malaysia. Here, given the “symbolic centrality” of law and ethnicity, the Malay Muslim majority appears to have less religious freedom than non-Muslim citizens. Noting that the politics of Islamic law have changed over time, Hussin suggests the significance of detailed ethnographic and archival research of the linking of sharia, society, and the modern nation-state in contemporary societies. This fine text is likely to be of interest to scholars of Asian studies, state formation, secularism, modernity, and postcoloniality.

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