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The Asian side of the world
Editorials on Asia and the Pacific 2002-2011

CNRS Éditions

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DOI: 10.4000/books.editions-cnrs.12636
Publisher: CNRS Éditions
Place of publication: CNRS Éditions
Year of publication: 2012
Published on OpenEdition Books: 20 August 2019
Serie: Science politique
Electronic ISBN: 9782271122223



<http://books.openedition.org>

Electronic reference

FEILLARD, Andrée. *Tsunami in Sumatra: questions raised within Indonesian Islam* In: *The Asian side of the world: Editorials on Asia and the Pacific 2002-2011* [online]. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2012 (generated 03 April 2020). Available on the Internet: <<http://books.openedition.org/editions-cnrs/12636>>. ISBN: 9782271122223. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.editions-cnrs.12636>.

Tsunami in Sumatra: questions raised within Indonesian Islam

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MARCH 2005

More than two months after the disaster that struck in South-East Asia on 26th December 2004, the adding of more words to the tsunami and the 200,000 lives that it claimed, may seem hollow, as the subject has already provoked a plethora of articles and photographs. We now know that unrivalled solidarity has resulted in promises of aid of 8 to 9 billion dollars to the affected regions, from Thailand to Somalia. Some NGOs have claimed that the tsunami may have changed the way people think, particularly in Europe. Would it also have brought about changes elsewhere?

In the last few months, researchers based in Asia have been able to make many observations on the reactions of the societies affected, both near and far, by the disaster, in their lives sometimes, but also in their perception of the world, death, life, God or nothingness. Be it in India, Thailand, Africa or Indonesia, families have experienced a similar tragedy, but each society gone through the ordeal differently.

For Indonesia, this tragedy happened in a period of great doubt, six years after the fall of Suharto and the prolonged economic crisis that accompanied it, followed by democratic reform and decentralisation. Its consequences are even less certain. Since the new political system was established, Indonesia has held its first democratic elections in July and then in October. The presidential elections saw Megawati, Soekarno's daughter and the standard-bearer of democratic change since the beginning of the 1990s, ousted in favour of a "democratic" General, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. In December, confidence was growing in Indonesia, as it closely watched the first steps of its new idol Susilo, otherwise known as "SBY", whose supporters had boldly ignored the candidates of well-established political parties. The press, impatient to finally see the "real

reformer” at work, had given Susilo a hundred days to prove that the people (*rakyat*, the banner adopted by its coalition, Kerakyatan) had been right to put their trust in him. On 26th December, these hundred days had still not yet passed.

During this difficult time, even the confidence of the general public (*rakyat*) was curiously met with a growing fear within the highest echelons of power. On 16th December, President Susilo invited 70 people for a four-hour long special prayer session at the palace mosque, led by a well-known Arab Imam, Abdul Rachman Al-Habsyi. Divine protection was sought. Some of his colleagues believed that Susilo was suffering from restless nights. Ever since he had moved into the palace in October, misfortune had doubled; a Lion Air aircraft had crashed at the end of October in Solo leaving 23 dead, the President’s car and convoy had caused six deaths and tens of injured people by blocking the traffic on the highway, two military helicopters had crashed causing 19 deaths and an earthquake had seriously shaken Papua New Guinea.

Indonesia was forging an identity for itself after 32 years of the Suharto regime where religious and political factors have been inextricably linked since the 1990s; the tsunami could hardly be perceived as a mere natural disaster. Minds were troubled well beyond the devastated lands, and intellectuals asked themselves in the press and on the Internet what message was God (Tuhan, Allah) trying to send us with this tsunami sweeping through Aceh, “Mecca’s veranda” (*serambi Mekka*), one of the oldest lands to be Islamised, a Sultanate that was the strongest in withstanding Dutch colonisation and an ancient starting point for pilgrimages to the Arabian peninsula?

From the big Banda Aceh mosque, in a sermon that he gave one Friday in January, the Secretary General of the Board of Ulama, Din Syamsuddin, declared, “perhaps this disaster happened because we have forgotten Allah and his teachings and we have failed to practise Islamic Law (Sharia).” Din Syamsuddin’s “perhaps” became a peremptory statement at the Indonesian Mujahiddin Council of Ba’asyir (directed by Abu Bakar, still in prison), whose spokesperson declared that it was sin (*kemaksiatan*, vice) and the source of all disasters, “a terrifying sin in the country, such as the refusal to practise Sharia in the government, which has led to widespread corruption, murder, rape, drug consumption, prostitution, gambling, alcohol consumption, apostasy, terrorism and anarchy”. Aceh, however, had just passed laws that were still unique in Indonesia, the *qanun* voted by the local parliament of Aceh in 2002 in favour of regional autonomy, making it compulsory for men to attend Friday prayer in the mosque and for women to wear the veil. These extreme opinions on the sins committed by the people of

Aceh and Indonesia generally remained a minority; they even startled many intellectuals, who in return appealed for reason.

A young liberal Muslim intellectual who came to present me with his latest book, amused himself with guessing the interpretations that people would continue to give of the event. Was the tsunami a result of badly practising Sharia or, on the contrary, practising Sharia? The audacity of his own question, asked in a light-hearted tone, had frightened him a little.

The idea of a punishment for the lack of devotion was less commonly shared than that which I heard on the evening of 31st December in Javanese at an old *dalang*'s [puppeteer] home in Yogyakarta. The puppet, Semar, half-man, half-god in the Javanese shadow theatre, an old wise man looking like a clown, claimed that that night, the people of Aceh were being punished for some other mistake; they had long, stopped listening to the voice of reason – the need for unity in the country – and had pushed for separatism. In a deep voice of a wise man, Semar explained on a white screen lit at night that Megawati had sent her troops, followed by those of Susilo, but as nothing came of it, God had lost his patience.

In the airplane to Yogyakarta, a Sumatran Muslim businessman, an educated and rather lively Batak man, about fifty years old, told me that, according to the dailies, a giant python had come out of the waters just in time to save a woman and her child. God exists “after all maybe”: he added, hesitating a little before offering such an easy explanation, but not so shocking in a country where the supernatural is talked about everyday. Above all, it was the grand mosque's resistance to the tidal wave that reassured the believers who had hardly listened to the rational explanations of architects, who explained that the big open arches, typical of these constructions, made all the difference.

Haidar Bagir, a very influential Muslim intellect, head of the largest Islamic publishing house, *Mizan*, offered an explanation for the tsunami in the largest daily *Kompas* in a syllogism; 1. God exists 2. God is good. 3. God is all-powerful 4. God is therefore omniscient 5. The world is filled with wickedness and evil. The new magazine, *Syir'ah*, close to liberal Islam, published the reply of a fairly well known young cleric, Saïd Agil Siraj, according to whom the tsunami was undoubtedly Allah's will, but it was not for us to judge if it was a good or a bad thing.

The question of God's responsibility and man's sin will probably continue to make ink flow. Can the debate strengthen the weight of the Conservatives who were trying to include an increasing number of elements of Islamic law in positive law elsewhere in Indonesia? Would the Islamic militia, who we have seen at work during the month of Ramadan, break into cafes and billiard halls in Jakarta in the evenings, to find a message of divine encouragement in them? It is certain that until now, the

Ulama Council has proved to be an unmatched authority, opposing the cremation of those who were against the opinion of the former President, Abdurrahman Wahid, a man still highly regarded as a living saint (*wali hidup*) in East Java's countryside.

Every Indonesian person was glued to the television for months. In less than a week, the television channel, Metro TV, had attracted a huge audience by broadcasting its disturbing images and trying to bring families together (the dramatic gatherings were televised live). During the gatherings, there were tears, prayers, even songs composed for the victims and nothing was censored for children. In front of her parents after seeing the strong images being played, a young four-year neighbour locked the living room in which the television was in and kept the key in her pocket, accusing her parents of sin (*dosa*) for watching human suffering.

However, Indonesia has also rediscovered Aceh, this northern province of Sumatra, closer to Malaysia than Jakarta, a region hardly known to 220 million Indonesians, except the army (the negotiations with the GAM, the secessionist movement, resumed after the tsunami). There has been a big movement of solidarity as young volunteers were seen leaving Java for Sumatra by car or lorry with food, crossing more than 2,000 km of difficult roads.

During the first week, the food that was collected started to rot until the American, and later French, helicopters came (rather quickly), bringing smiles, tears of gratitude and images of old women of Aceh wrapping their arms around soldiers, but this was already giving rise to signs of renewed xenophobia that had been lying low since the loss of East Timor in 1999, fuelled by the fear of "Christianisation" in the 1920s. Suspicion quickly emerged, something unthinkable for most of the 2,000 foreigners there. The arrival of American protestant missionaries, especially those from Wordhelp, openly announced a relief project for 300 orphans that was later abandoned. However, this was to only stimulate the paranoia that had been feeding the Islamist press since 1998.

The tsunami thus became a topic of philosophical and religious debate and that was particularly disturbing as new players – some of whom were practically unknown five years ago – partly and silently replaced the old religious authorities. An 80-year-old cleric who lived in the depths of East Java, one of the oldest students of the famous Koranic school of Tebuireng, having become a friend during the last fifteen years, told me by mobile phone that "it is certain that God wanted to tell us something, but we do not know what. Those who claimed to know what it was, were in a way, replacing God as they spoke in his name. It had, in fact, become their speciality."

It must be said that Islamism concerns a minority that is not representative of Indonesian public opinion. Another matter that is worrying an increasing number of Indonesians and foreigners alike is the fate of national and international aid that go into the province, partly directly into the office of the Vice-Governor. The Governor in question, A. Puteh, was tried and found guilty for corruption, one of the “actions of the hundred days” of the reformer President. The administration was decimated by the tsunami. The question is thus whether those who remain will be able to face such an exceptional situation and comply with the transparency that foreign donors demand.