

Preface

About 15 months ago, several of us got together to discuss the prospects of a cultural and intellectual rejuvenation of Asia. It is an idea that has been circulating around for some time, known popularly as Asian Renaissance. It has attracted new interest lately with the emergence of China and India, following that of Japan, as new economic powers. Such a rise is affecting the global balance of economic and political powers — a point made all the more evident by the ongoing financial crisis. However, the rise of Asia is likely to exert an even more enduring influence if it is accompanied by a cultural and intellectual rejuvenation. We formed a small study group and chose Amartya Sen's *The Argumentative Indian* as a starting text. In the midst of this, we were drawn to the complex nature of the issue of state and secularism. It is an issue that holds great relevance for a number of Asian countries. We decided to widen the scope of discussion to include scholars from other Asian countries and preferably one or two from outside Asia.

We were fortunate enough to be able to bring together a group of contributors from Bangladesh, China, Egypt, France, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Turkey, and Singapore to share their thoughts in a two-day workshop on 25–26 November 2008. They are scholars and social activists with diverse backgrounds — sociology, political science, philosophy, religion, law, and history — and their diverse backgrounds are reflected in the chapters of this volume. This has its pluses and minuses, and we believe different readers will form their own lists of the strengths and weaknesses inherent in such diversity.

The diversity presented some difficulties in finding an overarching framework to the book and has therefore played a part in influencing our presentation of the chapters. We have departed from the normal practice of

writing an introductory chapter which contains a summary of the various papers. Instead, each chapter has a brief abstract, and we hope the reader will take the trouble to thumb through the book to pick and choose what catches his or her attention.

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We are also indebted to Professor Wang Gungwu, Mr. Chew Kheng Chuan, Mr. Bertrand Ford, Professor Zheng Yongnian and Professor Yang Dali for their encouragement, support and guidance.

No workshop can be held without the authors, and we would like to record our gratitude to all the contributors.

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