Anak Agung Banyu Perwita

**ISLAM’S “SYMBOLIC POLITICS” IN INDONESIA**

**ABSTRACT**


**Key Words:**

Simbol politik • Sistem politik • Politik Islam • Sekularisasi politik • Agama politik

“If someone is able to separate sugar from its sweetness, he will be able to separate Islam religion from politics”

(Wahab Chasbullah)
“The Islamic movement should detach itself from involvement in politics. Islam is a moral force, a way to promote morality.”
(Abdurrahman Wahid).

The two quotations, above, clearly suggest an endless debate about the political role of Islam in Indonesia’s politics. This article discusses the role of political Islam in Indonesian politics and the dynamics of the interaction between the Muslim society and the State in the Indonesian political system. However, the extent to which the Islamic as a “religio-politics”–factor played a significant role in Indonesian has been subject to debate. Therefore, this article will assess the hypothesis that “government’s policies are also influenced by the religious views and beliefs of policymakers and their constituents”.

It is widely agreed that world politics has changed so rapidly and dramatically since the end of the Cold War era. To be more specific, the management of global politics has been dramatically challenged by the new strategic environment following the September 11 terrorist attack. The rapid changes in world politics, of course, pose a tremendous challenge for any nation-states, particularly in new countries such as Indonesia, in managing the process of democratization. At this point, the role and the task of the state in managing its national affairs is becoming more crucial and more complicated as it is sometimes required to deal with problems beyond its normal sphere of competence.

During the Soeharto era as MacIntyre argued, the policy making was heavily ‘state-centred’. As a result, the possibility for ‘extra-state actors’ (society, for example) to play a major role in policy formulation was very limited. It was due to two main strategies which were applied by the Soeharto’s regime: *inclusionary*, aimed to co-opt the larger society into conditional participation in domestic political process which was principally controlled by the State; and *exclusionary*, seek to mitigate or even deny the role of society in influencing the wider political community through political repression.

The resignation of President Soeharto in May 1998 which was then followed by the mushrooming of Islamic political parties and Islamic radical groups in Indonesia has propelled a bigger role of wider society in policy making process. This phenomenon was believed to be one of the crucial indicators of dramatic changes in Indonesia’s domestic political map and of the re-emergence of Islam as a political force in Indonesia’s domestic politics.
The discussion of this article is divided into several parts. The first part will delineate the role of Islam in Indonesian politics. The discussion on this section is structured on several subdivisions, such as the position of political Islam during the New Order era (Soeharto era), the establishment of ICMI as the new political legitimacy for the New Order, and the re-emergence of political Islam in the post-Soeharto's politics. The rise of political Islam and the globalization era is discussed in the next section.

Political Islam and Indonesia's Political System: A brief Review of Indonesia's Politics.

Political Islam itself is a modern phenomenon. Many studies revealed that it has roots in the sociopolitical conditions of Muslim countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the history of Islamic involvement in Indonesia's politics, most of it has been colored by the tension and conflict between the government/the ruling authorities (State) and Islam (Society) and between society itself particularly between Islam and non-Islam. From the pre-independence to the post-Soeharto period, Indonesian Muslims utilised Islam both as their banner of resistance to colonialism, exploitation, repression and as a source of (religious) nationalism. It is often argued that during the Soeharto's authoritarian New Order, for instance, Islam became more radical than ever before.

Those periods also marked disunity among Indonesian Muslims. As the Islamic world is not monolithic, Islam in Indonesia was also split along "ideological and generational line" which divided Indonesian Islam into different Muslim communities, such as: Modernists and Traditionalists; radicals and moderats; Shiah and Sunni; and the level of religious consciousness among them, as labelled by Geertz, in Abangan, Santri and Priyayi. In doing so, Indonesia's Muslim society is neither a monolithic community nor a single political entity. The following sections elaborate the dynamics of state-society relations in Indonesia's politics.

The New Order and Islamic Community: A Fragile Alliance and Controlled Participation.

In the beginning of the New Order era, the government perceived Islam as “the most important civil force in society”. Together with the army, Islamic groups were the largest political forces which strongly supported the New Order in crushing the communists. The 1966-1969 period was a “honeymoon” between the government, military, students and anti-communist groups, including Islamic organizations.
However, in expecting that its political power in the period of the New Order would increase, the Muslim community had seriously miscalculated. The military/ABRI (now TNI), which was dominated by officers from (secular) nationalist group, still had the perception that Islam could threaten political stability and that the Muslim community still wanted to establish an Islamic state. The “temporary alliance” between the New Order and the Muslims was over in 1969 particularly when government attention was fully concentrated on the 1971 general election.

As Ramage explained, there are at least three characteristics of the New Order's changing perceptions of Islam in 1970-1980s. First, the defeat of communism in Indonesia left Islam as the only major ideological alternative to the New Order itself. Second, the New Order government still had a strong perception of the possibility of the intention of Islamic parties to impose the establishment of an Islamic state, or at least, the implementation of Islamic laws in government policies. Lastly, since the Pancasila asas tunggal had become or the sole foundation of all organizations in 1982, then political development should be put behind the need to accelerate the pace of economic development. In other words, the New Order regime put economic development and political stability as the top priority of national development. Anti-political Islamic attitudes, then, crystallized in the New Order regime, particularly the military. As Liddle noted, this attitude of the New Order to the political Islam led to the perception of Islam as “political enemy number two” after communism.

The New Order regime produced several policies to eliminate the possibility of political instability which were categorized by many Muslims as anti Islam. The policies, as Santoso argued, were aimed at positioning Islam on the periphery of Indonesia’s political life. The perception of Islam as a threat to the political system of the New Order pushed the regime together with the military to adopt a policy of containment and of the de-politicisizing of Islam.

One strategy applied by the New Order to contain Islam as a political power was “divide and rule”. The major aspect of this strategy was that Islam could continue to develop its religious and cultural dimensions without entering the political arena (de-politicisation of Islam). This policy caused 'internal conflict' among Muslims in which, as Starkey argued, Soeharto successfully divided the Islamic community.

The inability of Islam to further play a significant role in politics domestic and international was due to the absence of any strong political party, organizations, or institution, which united all Indonesian Muslims.
This was not only because of internal conflict within Islamic groups but, more importantly, because the government successfully prevented the emergence of such an organization. Even though PPP was the only Islamic political party, it was unable to unite all Indonesian Muslims. This was mainly due to PPP being established by the New Order. Deliar Noer notes that numerous Islam organizations such as the government sponsored Indonesian Council of Ulama, the Council of the Propagation of Islam, and other social organizations like NU and Muhammadiyah had failed to represent Indonesian Muslims' interests. In this context, as Hassan argued, the relationship between the state and religion is influenced by the internal dynamics of Muslim societies.

Despite the New Order regime's success in de-politicizing Islam, in the late 1980s a revival of Islam as a political force was underway, particularly among the young generation. Some observers believed that one of the factors behind the re-emergence of political Islam was the demands of the Muslim community for a stronger political voice in domestic politics. Another important factor was the Iranian revolution. But others argued that the most important factor was the change in Soeharto's perception of the Muslim community, as discussed in the following section.

**The Establishment of ICMI: the Revival of Political Islam or New Source of Political Legitimacy for the New Order?**

From the late 1980s to the 1990s, Soeharto changed his domestic policy and tried to re-build a stronger political coalition with Islam by introducing an Islamization strategy. This strategy, which focused on "the accentuation of Islamic symbols in public discourse and the accommodation of religious socio-political powers," was believed by many scholars as a way of Soeharto's regime to contain the spread of its crisis of legitimacy after more than two decades of power. As part of it, the Soeharto's regime introduced the Islamic Court Bill, Islamic sharia banks and the presidential decree of the Compilation of Islamic Law.

There were two major reasons for Soeharto's policy changes to Islam. The first was Soeharto's political need to respond to what he perceived to be declining political support for him from the military. Much like his predecessor who once looked to the communists to counteract unhappy army officers, Soeharto looked to Islam to play the same role. The second reason was the external impact of the political revival of Islam globally. From the late 1970s and early 1980s, Islam popularity began to rise significantly in Indonesia. As a source of spiritual, ethical, social, and
political advice, the Islamic revival in Indonesia was also part of a movement occurring throughout the world, in places such as in Iran and Egypt.

The major result of this new relationship between Islam and the New Order occurred in December 1990 when Dr. B.J Habibie, the Minister of Research and Technology, with the support of President Soeharto established and chaired ICMI (Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia or Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals). ICMI played a significant role in sponsoring the expansion of the authority of Islamic courts, greater Muslim programming on television (including lessons in the Arabic language), the appointments of ICMI leaders to high offices such as cabinet ministries and provincial governorships, the establishment of the Islamic Bank Muamalat in 1991, the Abdi Bangsa Foundation and the Center of Information and Development Studies (CIDES), considered the association think tank, as well as the Islamic daily newspaper Republika. With all the above instruments of ICMI, Islam was becoming more assertive politically and economically.

The establishment of ICMI, as Liddle has argued, was the clearest step taken by Soeharto in accommodating the desires and sensitivities of the Muslim community and deepening his own identification with Islam. Even though the establishment of ICMI invited some public debates and controversies, ICMI, which gained support from almost all government officials and prominent Muslim political activists and intellectuals, can be regarded as the “sign of the new centrality of Islam in Indonesian public life”. He further argued that the establishment of ICMI was a mere political tool of those in power. Moreover, it was also a “political move by the government” which accidentally met a Muslim community demand for a greater position in politics.

The establishment of ICMI was actually an illustration of the ‘accommodation’ policy of Soeharto in managing the Indonesian Islamic community. This policy aimed to please the Muslim community in order to have it express its support and loyalty toward the existing power holder. However, even though the pressure of the Islamic community was getting stronger in policymaking, Soeharto still had the ultimate authority to control it for the sake of his political interests.

Some elements of the Islamic community such as Nadhalatul Ulama, and the military, however, strongly resisted the creation of ICMI. KH Abdurrahman Wahid of NU contended that “I am ready anytime to enter and join ICMI, if the fundamentalists, the militants, do not control it, if
Professor Habibie does not use it for group interest politics”. These critics perceived ICMI “not as a vehicle for Muslim penetration of the state but for state penetration of Islam”.  

In the military itself, there was also resistance to acknowledging ICMI due to the fear of re-politicising the Islamic community. The secular-nationalist faction of ABRI perceived that the establishment of ICMI would push the reemergence of Islam as a political force in Indonesian politics which in turn would jeopardize political stability and national unity. This faction also suspected the revival of Islam as indicated by the establishment of ICMI “would re-open old and divisive debates on whether Indonesia should be an Islamic state”. This resistance led to the creation, initiated by Gen. Edy Sudrajat, of ICKI (Ikatan Cendekiawan Kebangsaan Indonesia or the Association of Indonesian Nationalist Intellectuals) which was non-sectarian. However, this association did not get approval from President Soeharto until it changed its name to PCPP (Persatuan Cendekiawan Pembangunan Pancasila, Intellectuals' Association for the Advancement of the Pancasila). It was mainly because the former name of the association could give a negative image to the public that there was a conflict between the military and the Indonesian Muslims.

This phenomenon indicated that there were endless suspicions by the military of the emergence of Islam as a major political force in Indonesian politics which they perceived could jeopardize national unity and stability. Moreover, this also reflected the competition for power between the Muslim community and the secular-nationalists in the military in the policy making of the New Order regime.

**Political Islam and The post Soeharto's politics.**

Despite the marginalisation of political Islam during most of the Soeharto era, one of the major developments that may have a significant impact on state-society relations in the late New Order period was the revival of of Islamic-oriented middle-class politics. The young Islamic generation began to significantly speak about the need for a greater role for Islam in domestic politics and foreign policy making.

The fall of Soeharto in May 1998 has opened up new opportunity for political Islam to re-enter to Indonesia's politics. This was indicated, for instance, by the establishment of new Islamic political parties and their participation in June 1999 General Election. Many of new political parties adopted Islam as their ideological orientation and utilized Islam as their political linkage between the party, Muslim communities and the state. As
Rabasa argued this period also produced political disorder which created tactical alliance between some elite and military factions and Islamist extremist to expand their political influence in policy making and implementation.\(^3\)

The most interesting feature of the establishment of new Islamic political parties is that most of the parties do not endorse the creation of Islamic state as their primary objectives but to advocate Islamic values as a source of inspiration in democratisation discourse.\(^4\)

The resignation of Soeharto, on the other hand, also provided a significant momentum for the emergence of Muslim radical groups, such as Forum Komunikasi Ahrusunnah Waljama’ah (FKWAL) with its paramilitary group, Laskar Jihad, Front Pembela Islam (FPI or the paramilitary force of the Defender of Islam), Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (the Indonesian Holy Warrior paramilitary force) which is chaired by Abu Bakar Ba’asyir (now under police detention for his alleged involvement in the Bali bombing), and the Jama’ah al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin (JAMI) and the Front of Hizbullah.

Many of them are new groups which have emerged since the interregnum of President BJ Habibie. These groups tend to adopt literal interpretation and understanding Islam. There are reports that members of the leadership have been close to certain Army Generals, sponsored, or at least assisted, by certain circles within the “Green” faction of the Indonesian military.\(^5\) Moreover, these groups have been untilized by this faction to justify its own political agenda.\(^6\) The major of goal of these groups is to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia or, at least, to implement Islamic law (Shariah) as a state ideology in Indonesia.

However, the main reasons of the increased radicalism of these groups were the government's failure to enforce the law and solve a number of ethno-religious conflicts, and the rampant corruption at all levels of society. Therefore, Azra points out that one of the important solutions to mitigate the rise of radicalism was “to restore government authority and re-strengthen law enforcement agencies”.\(^7\) Besides that, another scholar also reveals that the rise of these radical groups was “a consequence of interrelated developments at both domestic and the international levels... and a combination of different factors, both religious and political, in forging its activism and militancy”.\(^8\) Even though it is important not to overemphasize the role of violent radical groups, these groups have performed an alternative voice in the policymaking process in which cannot be abandoned at all by the state.
Martin Van Bruinessen has appropriately commented on radical Islamic groups in Indonesia under four regimes in Indonesia by arguing that:

...of the post Soeharto governments, Habibie’s depended even more on the support of the Islamist than Soeharto did, and it was under him that radical Muslims were given arms and were employed as paramilitary auxiliaries of the police and army. Abdurrahman Wahid had to face these violent radical groups and attempted to bridle them but failed because of his weak control over the armed forces. There was little doubt that the armed groups were sponsored and given free rein by Wahid's military and civilian opponents. President Megawati has even less legitimacy in the eyes of the Muslim radicals, not only because she is a woman but also because her party is perceived to be dominated by anti Muslim elements. This has given the conservative Muslim elements in her coalitions extra leverage, that may result in some Islamizing measures. It has also made her dependent on, if not hostage to, the military. The arrest of Jaffar Umar Thalib in May 2002 and the absence of serious protests against it suggest that it may well possible to contain the radical groups but at the cost of the military's return to power.

Globalisation and the rise of Political Islam.

As discussed above, the rise of many Islamist radical movements in Indonesia initially emerged in the wake of specific social and political crises in the Muslim world, particularly as a societal-political phenomenon. Yet, they are also a result of the politics of globalisation. In the words of Holton, the revival of political Islam in many Muslim countries could be interpreted either as “a deglobalising trends towards localism and regionalism, or as a reglobalising movement challenging the credentials of Western approaches to globalisation”. In other words, the political Islam in this respect is simultaneously global, regional, national, and locally specified. To borrow the study of Angel M. Rabasa et al (RAND Corp), the sources of Islamic Radicalism can be classified into three classes: conditions, process and catalytic events as follow:

The Sources of Islamic Radicalism

Conditions

- Failed political and economic models
- Structural anti-westernism
- Decentralization of religious in Sunni Islam
The Islamic resurgence
Arabization of the non-Arab Muslim world
External funding of religious fundamentalism and extremism
The convergence of Islamism and tribalism
Growth of radical Islamic networks
Emergence of the mass media
The Palestinian-Israeli and Kashmir conflicts

On the other side, the revival of political Islam can also be seen as a unifying factor and a focal point for the rallying political resistance against the international system and the State itself in the era of globalisation. In other words, the globalisation of Islamic revival can also be interpreted as a part of domestic as well as trans-national and international process. It was basically a response to the global conspiracy against Islam or global hegemony of the Western world, particularly the US. Since the end of Second World War, the US has been taking positions of dominance and hegemony in the Muslim world. The West exercised its influences through a variety of financial and military means a good deal of hegemony on the internal politics of Muslim countries, including support for regimes that are less supported by the majority of their own people. The Islamic revival was also a refusal to the process of political and cultural homogenisation of the Western world.

The significant rise of political consciousness of Islamic organizations in many part of both Muslim and non-Muslim countries, for example, is one of the crucial indicators of the Islamic revival in the last decade. This also may lead to the effort of the establishment of the “non-territorial Islamic state” or the cross border flows of political Islam between (Muslim) groups/entities operating in different countries. This phenomenon concurrently applies with the proposition of 'the hyperglobalist thesis' that new forms of religious (social) political organizations will supplant traditional nation-states as the primary political units of world society.

The Indonesian domestic political map has significantly changed when the political awareness of the Muslim community, the number of Islamic
political parties and groups have significantly increased in the late 1990s. The political Islam which was represented by some Islamic radical groups has also been used as political symbols and a marker of political identity in policy making process and even in certain foreign policy implementations. So far, Indonesia has been a shining example of democracy for developing countries and “Islamic countries. Yet, a strategy to implement the vision of democratization agenda in Indonesia’s foreign policy, to a large extent, will be based upon consensus building between the state and the larger society as well as the domestic and international level. In this context, the degree of “secularization of polity” and “religionalization of polity” concerning the relationship between the state and society (religious community) at the national level will remain debatable in the making of Indonesia’s foreign policy in the post Soeharto era.

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End Notes:

1. Symbolic politics can be defined as “collective process of construction, distribution and internalization of political symbols (Phrases, images, norms, rules etc) which present a significant influence on foreign policy during the democratization process”. See Corneliu Bjola (2000). The Impact of “Symbolic Politics” On Foreign Policy During The Democratization Process. Paper presented at the Kokkalis Graduate Student Workshop On Southern and Eastern Europe, Harvard University.p.3.


4. In this writing, political Islam is defined as “a form of instrumentalization of Islam (ideas, symbols, and values) by individuals, groups and organizations that pursue political objectives. It provides

5. This term is defined as “relations with God provide shape and meaning to political actions and orientation”, quoted from Angel M.Rabasa 2004. The Muslim World After 9/11. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.p.1.


8. Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia or the Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellecuals.


14. Ibid.


17. Ibid. p.104.

18. This statement was argued by Dr. Deliar Noer, one of Islamic scholar who has very critical to the New Order regime. The Jakarta Post, 30 January 1995.

19. Ibid.


25. Ibid.
26. For a clear chronological elaboration of the ICMI, see Hefner, ibid. See also Abdul Azis Thaba 1996. *Islam dan negara dalam politik orde baru (Islam and state in the politics of new order)*. Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, p.290-300.
29. There are at least three different interpretations on the purposes of ICMI namely: political, social and economic. Firstly, some groups of Indonesian society (Christian minority and non-santri) perceived ICMI as “the opening wedge in a new attempt to turn Indonesia into an Islamic state” and as “a typical example of New Order bureaucratic politics”. Secondly, the main goal of ICMI is “to improve the quality of human resources in Indonesia”. Lastly, ICMI can serve as “a weapon in a struggle of ordinary Indonesians against the predatory business elite of the New Order-style capitalist development”. See William, R Liddle. 1996. “The Islamic turn in Indonesia: a political explanation”. In *The Journal of Asian Studies*. No.3, August, p.613-634.
36. Ibid.
38. As Azra. 2001. points out, the rise of political Islam is “the most visible political developments in the era of post Soeharto Indonesia. See his article "The Challenge of Political islam to Megawati". The Jakarta Post, 22 November.
41. Laskar Jihad and FPI have been dismissed just a few days after the Bali Bombings.
43. This statement has been raised by Munir, Chairman of Kontras, Jakarta, 30 November 2002.
47. For further discussion on this issue, see for example Elizabeth F.Collins (2003). Religious Resurgence At the End of the Twentieth Century. In Chaidar S Bamualim, Dick Van Der Meij, Karlina Helamnita eds. Islam and the West: Dialogue of Civilizations in Search of A Peaceful Global Order. Jakarta: UIN Syarif Hidayatullah and Konrad Adenaur Stiftung,pp.27-34.
51. For further elaborations on socio-spatial networks of social interactions in today's global politics, see Michael Mann. 1999. Has globalization ended the rise and rise of the nation-state?. In, T.V Paul, John A. Hall. International order and the future of world politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.p.239.


