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Religious Fundamentalisms and Student Life: A View from Indonesia

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Religious Fundamentalisms and Student Life: **A View from Indonesia**

Nathanael G. Sumaktoyo and Yuyun Rindiastuti

For the purposes of this case study, we begin from an understanding of religious fundamentalisms that centres on four key elements: (1) subjective interpretation of religious truths (claimed to be) based on God's laws; (2) actions based on those claimed truths; (3) imposition on people and groups; and (4) violation of human rights. In almost every circumstance, conflicts between fundamentalists and non-fundamentalists lie in the domain of human rights. Fundamentalists tend to regulate all aspects of life, from how women should behave and dress to how a country should be governed.

In the Indonesian context, fundamentalism can be grouped into two categories based on the motives that fuel it, which can be faith-spirited or secular in nature. Faith-spirited fundamentalism takes root in one's perceived obligation to create a society that abides by God's law. In this case, one might join a fundamentalist movement out of genuine ideological commitment, and enforce restrictions with the belief that they have been divinely ordained. Secular-goal fundamentalism, on the other hand, may be inspired by the pursuit of power, position, payment, or access to social networks and the sense of identity that fundamentalist groups foster. In such cases, fundamentalism itself is nothing more than a means to an end. The distinction between these categories has implications for counter-strategizing where, for example, efforts to shift public opinion might have little effect on those with purely ideological motives, but may influence more opportunistic fundamentalists with secular goals in mind.

This case study examines religious fundamentalism in Indonesia within the context of student life, as observed from the perspectives of student researchers. The analysis will be divided into three categories: (1) religious revivalism in Indonesia, with a focus on Islamic parties; (2) the role of Islamic student organizations; and (3) the influence of religious fundamentalism on student life.

Religious Revivalism in Indonesia

While Islam is a major religion in Indonesia and has the greatest number of followers, Indonesia is not legally an Islamic state. Former president Soeharto established *Pancasila* ("Five Principles") as the sole ideological basis of the nation and all political parties. This "New Order"[1] emphasized national integrity over religious identity and put Soeharto at odds with the many Islamic groups that envisioned Islam as the nation's ideology. It can be said that the authoritarianism of his regime empowered rather than eliminated subversive and extremist religious movements.

In 1998, mass demonstrations forced Soeharto to resign from the presidency. In the transitional period that followed, many fundamentalist groups, predominantly Islamic, began to take shape, including Laskar Jihad (Jihad Troops) and Front Pembela Islam (FPI or Islamic Defender Front). New political parties also emerged at this time, many religious in nature, whether Islamic, Catholic, or Christian. Because of the large Muslim population in Indonesia and its impact on the political constellation, the trend of religious revivalism analyzed here will focus on Islamic parties.

Broadly speaking, the rapid formation of Islamic parties and organizations can be seen as an effort to assert a sense of identity. A common concern among many of these entities was to achieve greater influence for the Muslim majority over Indonesia's laws. The campaign to accommodate so called Islamic laws into national law emerged in various forms. The most obvious political effort was the petition launched by a number of Islamic parties to reinsert into the constitution a long-removed obligation for Muslims to live according to the principles of *syariah*.[2] A less obvious move was the effort to tailor local laws to *syariah* principles. Since Soeharto's fall in 1998, the transformation of Indonesia's political system has included a radical change in power relations between Jakarta and provincial and local governments. Due to the policy of decentralization, cities and provinces have greater powers than ever before to pass local laws. While there has always been support for *otonomi daerah* (regional autonomy) in Indonesia, the passing of the Regional Governance Law (no. 22/1999) and developments since have made Indonesia one of the most decentralized states in the world.[3] Since regional autonomy provisions were implemented in 2004, many local governments have introduced legislation said to be derived from *syariah*. These should technically only affect Muslims but in fact are impacting other citizens as well. The city of Padang in West Sumatra province, for example, requires its Muslim students to wear the *jilbab*,[4] and the obligation has been slowly, though not explicitly, extended to apply to non-Muslim students as well.

In 1998, the Partai Keadilan (PK or the Justice Party) was formed soon after Soeharto's resignation. Later reformulated as the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS or Prosperous Justice Party), it rose to prominence among Indonesia's Islamic parties following the elections of 2004.[5] Several factors might explain the growing popularity of the PKS. First, the party pursues what William Liddle and Saiful Mujani call a "two-track strategy,"[6] giving weight to both "Islamic issues" (including solidarity with Palestine and other Muslim communities around the world) as well as "non-Islamic issues" (such as anti-corruption and clean government). Despite the revivalism of religious identity in Indonesia, parties are hesitant to dichotomize between nationalist and Islamist agendas, and instead project an image of diversity in order to target a broader constituency. Second, the PKS claims to be a modern Islamic party. Initially known as an "exclusive party" of "mosque activists" targeting only the nation's Muslim community, the PKS gradually began to project a more inclusive image, distancing itself from the agenda of imposing *syariah* in Indonesia. As Yon Machmudi, one of the party's elites, declared, "PKS has not tried to impose *syariah* but rather it has attempted to revise its image by focusing on the issues of prosperity and justice."[7] The effort to radiate a more modern image is also evident in the party's campaign advertisements, one of which features youth in a punk aesthetic.[8] Another aspect of modernism is reflected by the party's support of young leaders to assume elite national positions. In contrast to the desperation that Indonesian people commonly express toward older leaders, young leaders appear to inspire hope. Proposing these youth figures as agents of change has done much to earn the PKS public support.

A third reason for the party's growth in popularity relates to its strategy for consolidating its base. The PKS is quite popular among educated youth, such as college students, and can be said to have the most organized recruitment system of any party and the most solid base of supporters. A student organization known as the Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia (KAMMI or Indonesian Muslim Student Action Union) serves as a recruitment and engagement role for the party, and its place in campus politics will be discussed in greater detail below.

Islamic Student Organizations

Students play an important role in Indonesia's politics. The change of Soekarno's Old Order to Soeharto's New Order, and the change from the New Order into the Reformation era—all of these transformations were initiated by student movements. A short history also indicates the relation between campus organizations and the birth and expansion of Islamic parties. The PKS and KAMMI are highlighted here because their well defined cadre-ization and recruitment mechanism has allowed them greater influence than other right-wing groups.

The formation of the PKS cannot be separated from the campus *dakwah*[9] movement, which was initiated by Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (the Indonesian Council for Islamic Preaching). Founded in 1967, it was initially intended to respond to Christian missionary efforts, but has subsequently also challenged the perceived threat of "liberal-minded" Muslims. In the 1970s, the development of the *dakwah* movement built upon the Islamic resurgence among well-educated Muslims, and university mosques became centres for *dakwah* activities. The Lembaga Dakwah Kampus (LDK or Campus Preaching Council) emerged as a formal campus organization with the initial goal of improving students' religious lives. LDK benefited in two ways from being officially recognized as a student organization. First, it began to receive financial support, and second, in formalizing its structure, it sent a clear message to the regime that it did not oppose the status quo and was merely focused on cultivating religious understanding.[10] As the LDK grew in popularity it was established in many secular state universities, with a broad network that coordinated *dakwah* activities among the various groups. In 1998, this network gave rise to the KAMMI, which established the PK (now PKS) soon after Soeharto's resignation.

Dakwah movements continue to be strong in mainly secular state universities, such as the University of Indonesia and Gadjah Mada University. There are several reasons why KAMMI is more popular in secular rather than Islamic universities. In its early years, its main purpose was to resist liberal thinking among Muslims, and secular universities were a good place to begin. KAMMI also benefited from the declining popularity of the student movements united in Kelompok Cipayung (Cipayung Group),[11] which was founded out of concern for the national situation and initially took an oppositional stance to the ruling regime. Those who had previously occupied student senates now saw their position taken by the new KAMMI, whose networks were more effective in recruitment and engagement, as well as capitalizing on religious issues.

Influence on Women's Rights

In the post-Soeharto era, education policies in Indonesia have had a negative impact on pluralism, because religion is a subject taught at every level, from elementary school to college. This is problematic because students learn only about their own religion. In a diverse country like Indonesia, too great a focus on one's own group can lead to the rejection of others. This policy opens the door to a formal transfer of extreme religious views from teachers to students, such as the rejection of female or non-Muslim leaders, and widespread opposition to pluralism.[12]

To some extent, fundamentalism can also be seen as influencing campus norms. Universities that have more religious students tend to be more conventional than secular universities. However, because secular universities are more likely private institutions located in big cities, the influences of other social variables (e.g., lifestyle, social status, etc.) must also be considered. In the context of campus and student life, continuous persuasion to wear the *jilbab* is a common manifestation of religious fundamentalism, and is congruent with the fundamentalist vision of an Islamic society in which women must hide their *aurat*.[13] Of course it must not be generalized that students wearing the *jilbab* all adopt a similar stand. On the one hand are those who wear the *jilbab* in response to a personal call, yet still respect the decisions of other students not to wear it. On the other hand are those who feel obliged to persuade other students to wear the *jilbab*. It is also worth noting that fundamentalism is not reflected in the choice to wear the *jilbab* itself, but rather in forcing the use of *jilbab* on others. On non-Islamic university campuses, where there is no formal regulation for students to wear the *jilbab*, this pressure comes from other students, both directly and indirectly. For example, a woman might continuously be told that she would be more beautiful if she wore the *jilbab*.

In assessing differing levels of assertiveness among young women, the question of leadership is useful to explore. While our research found no formal restriction barring women from top positions in any campus organization, of concern is what lies behind written rules. As is widely noted, fundamentalist groups are paternalistic and see men as superior to women, which makes women's leadership a sensitive issue. Many men openly refuse to be placed under female leaders, while others do not openly express opposition, yet still remain hesitant. The greater the presence of fundamentalists within a student organization, the more unlikely it is to have a woman as chairperson. For example, LDK and KAMMI have never had a woman as chairperson.

Fundamentalist influences can also be observed in students' attitudes on university campuses. This is evident in segments of daily conversation, such as "vote for a female candidate only if she is much better than the male," or "man is a better leader than woman." This attitude can often influence the way some women see themselves, where many do believe they will end up as housewives. This self-perception diminishes their willingness to compete for leading positions in organizations, especially if their competitors are male. In such cases, women close off their own opportunities, which may be the most damaging aspect of fundamentalism. Free individuals will fight for their rights, but individuals who have accepted the idea of obedience will do nothing for their own sake.

One can compare the situation of female leaders in Bina Nusantara University (BINUS; i.e., the first author's university) and Sebelas Maret University (UNS; i.e., the second author's university). In BINUS, which is a secular

private university located in Jakarta, female leadership appears not to be an issue. There are female candidates in almost every campus organization's election. They not only stand for election, but also frequently win and take on executive positions. The research indicates, however, that while women often assume high-ranking positions in organizations, these are merely administrative roles, such as treasurer (to document cash flow) or secretary (to file documents and write mails). This reflects a sexist trend, as these positions are based not on personal qualification but rather on stereotypes that women are better organized.

Mainly in public universities, fundamentalism is compounded by the paternalistic Indonesian (especially Javanese) culture to form what we call a "hidden unwillingness" to accept female leaders, and also causes women to be more accepting of a male-dominated world. This makes them less ambitious than their colleagues in secular private universities.

Analysis and Reflection of the Strategy

Fundamentalist movements are attractive because they speak to real problems. They preach in local mosques about how to deal with the burdens of life, and they speak simply about the way to attain entry to heaven. They also create a heavy dependence on authority, either the scripture itself or the person who interprets it. Once indoctrinated, students often lose the courage to act freely. They begin to doubt the rightness or wrongness of their actions and rely on religious authority rather than judge their actions themselves.

One of the most significant challenges for human rights organizations is to reach the broader public, to engage ordinary lay people by communicating as they do. In 2006, in an effort to increase dialogue in the university campuses on this issue we published a mass bulletin advocating pluralism and opposing fundamentalism. The bulletin was named *Warna Bangsa* (Colour of the Nation) and about 600 copies were printed and circulated to some campuses through friendship networks. During the six-month grant period, four editions were published, with the third focused entirely on women. This edition presented information about Raden Ayu Kartini (1879-1904), a famous Indonesian feminist, and also critiqued gender-biased laws (for example, the Anti-Pornography Act passed by the Parliament in October 2008[14] and Tangerang's Anti-Prostitution By-Law passed in 2005[15]).

A unique characteristic of the bulletin was the use of common language. Unlike other student publications, the *Warna Bangsa* targeted students who were uninterested rather than engaged in politics. To do this, it used daily language and avoided provocative and complex language, trying to consider what and how readers would want to read, rather than only what and how the author wanted to communicate. Comical caricatures, for instance, have advantages over purely text articles. Where an article requires effort and willingness to read completely, a good caricature can provide the same information in a simpler and subtler manner.

The experience of publishing the bulletin provided useful learnings. First, while a bulletin can serve to stimulate an individual's thoughts, unless he or she is willing to confront social pressure, we cannot expect an immediate change to occur. Second, bulletins and other publications are more informational than campaign tools. This is particularly relevant for political and social issue publications, which appeal more to people who have already taken a position, rather than those who are undecided. In the *Warna Bangsa* experience, despite the attempt to target a broad spectrum of students, the data showed that those who provided feedback (comments, criticisms, or opinions) were students who were already engaged in the issues. There is of course a positive side to this. Such publications can be very informative for people who are interested in the issue, serving just as scientific journals do in academic domains, by sharing information about what other actors in the field have learned and promoting new initiatives.

The objective of the bulletin was to provide what friendship provides, yet within the scope of a large-scale publication. Some national newspapers have begun to do just this. *KOMPAS*,[16] for example, an influential national newspaper with the largest circulation in the country, has created a section called "Muda" that is dedicated to youth. Lifestyle and occasionally political and multiculturalism-related articles are presented in youth-friendly language, along with graphics. The newspaper also routinely holds events that feature music groups and popular youth idols, and that emphasize the role of youth as agents of change, or in the newspaper's terms, "the power of white and grey."[17] This is an effective way of engaging youth in the issue of pluralism. This strategy reflects an understanding that while some people follow what they think is right, many more will follow what is convenient and makes them feel that they belong.

In this context, another strategy that we have attempted with students is the one-on-one approach. We employ an established friendship to discuss the idea of freedom, that every individual has the right to freely determine his/her future, dress, partner, and so on. In these discussions, rather than cite scriptural verses and compare them with fundamentalist interpretations, we mainly use secular arguments. However, in dialogues with highly religious people, the inability to cite verses can be a disadvantage. One of the strengths of the one-on-one approach is that friendship can ease the persuasion process, as individuals do not generally open themselves to the ideas of people they do not trust. Friendship involves trust, and trust serves to "open the mind."

Fundamentalist groups rely on a similar strategy, offering security, acceptance, friendship and solidarity. In employing the personal approach as a counter-fundamentalist strategy, we provide what fundamentalist groups do, though on a much smaller scale, and toward an opposite end. For example, a friend of one of the authors of this paper was a Christian and attended a church whose priest opposed the idea of pluralism, likening it to relativism, which implies that every religion is similar in truth. This was a controversial issue at the time, as a doctrine opposing pluralism had just been published by Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI or Indonesian Council of Islamic Clerics). The doctrine was perceived to be responsible for religious violence and for distorting the essence of pluralism, which is not about denying differences, but rather accepting and respecting their existence.

The author held some informal but in-depth conversations with the young man in question. There were arguments and debates, but the friendship between them was maintained. After some months, the young man came to accept pluralism and diversity, and started to build the courage to question what he had once believed: the doctrine, the authority, and more. While this is merely one case, it serves as a useful example of the effect of friendship. Arguments may reach the individual's mind, but friendship allows the heart to be touched, and what touches the heart can change the mind.

The personal approach is admittedly limited in scope. It can only be attempted with individuals with whom we have close relations, and it can be somewhat time consuming. It might not be a very popular strategy among activists, but because friendship is an important aspect of student life, it can be effectively leveraged to promote acceptance and respect for diversity.

Conclusion

In the future, religious fundamentalisms will pose the most likely threat to women's rights and pluralism in Indonesia. In this case study of religious revivalism in the post-Soeharto era, the impacts of patriarchal culture and socio-political turbulence on women's rights is already evident. In this context, a challenge for human rights organizations is to reach lay people and to communicate as they do. We must advocate for more inclusive network building, which provides both friendship and accessible information, and we must also make an effort to engage more concertedly with young people. Young people have great power, and the effort to reach them is worthwhile. Fundamentalist groups have worked to project a modern and youth-friendly image; human rights movements may consider using a similar strategy.

Endnotes:

[1] The "New Order" refers to Soeharto's presidency (1967-1998) while "Old Order" refers to Soekarno's (1945-1967). The word "new" is applied because Soeharto committed to lead Indonesia "in a new way" based on *Pancasila* ("The Five Principles") and the 1945 Constitution, two fundamentals that he claimed had been discredited by Soekarno.

[2] *Syariah* is the Bahasa Indonesia term for *sharia*, generally referring to "Islamic law." While precise definitions are fairly complex, many scholars make a distinction between *sharia* as God's law and *fiqh* as the human effort to derive that law from the principle sources.

[3] "Decentralization in Indonesia since 1999: An Overview," Embassy of Indonesia in Ottawa website, undated; "Decentralization in Indonesia," article on World Bank website, excerpted from Decentralization in Indonesia chapter of *East Asia Decentralizes: Making Local Government Work*, (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2005).

[4] *Jilbab* mainly means covering the hair. However, in the Indonesian context, the definition of *jilbab* is more varied. There is *jilbab* that covers only the hair, wide *jilbab* (used by many PKS activists, this covers the hair as well as the body), stylist *jilbab* (which may be part of one's fashion), etc. "*Kewajiban Berjilbab*" (English title: "Obligation of Wearing *Jilbab*") *Tempo 08/XXXVII/14-20*, Apr. 2008.

[5] In the 1999 election, the PK obtained only 1.4% of the vote, which excluded it from participating in the following election. Subsequently reformulated as the PKS, the new party won 7.3% of the vote in the 2004 election and 7.8% in the 2009 election. The unremarkable increase between 2004 and 2009 election can be attributed not to the failure of the party itself, but rather to the growing popularity of the Democrat Party, which secured 20% of the vote.

[6] R. William Liddle and Saiful Mujani, "Islamist Parties and Democracy: The Indonesian Case," unpublished paper. Cited in Muhtadi Burhanuddin, "Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: Analysing the Islamist Activism of Indonesia's Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) from a Social Movement Theory Perspective," sub-thesis, Australian National University, 2008.

[7] Yon Machmudi, "Islamising Indonesia: The Rise of Jemaah Tarbiyah and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS)," PhD dissertation, Australian National University, 2006. Cited in Burhanuddin. *op. cit.*

[8] These advertisements can be viewed on the Youtube website by searching for the keywords "*iklan* PKS" (PKS advertisement).

[9] *Dakwah* is a Bahasa Indonesia word of Arabic origin, literally meaning "to call" to Islam or "to preach."

[10] Burhanuddin, *op. cit.*

[11] Fera Relasyah and Dian P. Putera, "*Kelompok Cipayung Kian Terpojok: Aktivis KAMMI Kuasai Senat Kampus*" (English: "Cipayung Group Loses Power: KAMMI Activists Occupy Campus Senate") *Monitor Indonesia* 6, 6-12 Aug. 2008.

[12] This issue was also highlighted in a survey conducted by the Center for Islamic and Society Studies. Abdul Khalik, "Most Islamic studies teachers oppose pluralism, survey finds," *The Jakarta Post*, 26 Nov. 2008.

[13] *Aurat* refers to the parts of a woman's body that are considered to have the potency to raise men's sexual passions.

[14] The Anti-Pornography Bill passed in 2008 in Indonesia bans acts, images, gestures, public performances or talks deemed to be pornographic. Abdul Khalik, "Porn bill passed despite protests," *The Jakarta Post*, 31 Oct. 2008.

[15] The Banten city of Tangerang's Anti-Prostitution By-Law (No. 8/2005) prohibits any person who appears suspicious from hanging around in streets, playing fields, hotels or dormitories, residential areas, coffee shops, amusement centres or theatres, street corners or other public places, and criminalizes public intimacy (or intimacy in any places visible to the public) that might arouse sexual excitement. A woman may also be arrested on the grounds that her appearance raises suspicion of being a prostitute. See Eve Warburton, "No Longer a Choice," *Inside Indonesia*, Apr.-June 2007; "No thighs in 'moral municipality'," *The Jakarta Post*, 4 Mar. 2006; "Sex workers driven of Tangerang streets [sic]," *The Jakarta Post*, 12 Dec. 2006. "Tangerang Morality Building," *Indonesia Matters*, 18 Mar. 2006.

[16] During the campaign for the rejection of the Anti-Pornography Act, *KOMPAS* was vocal in shaping public opinion until the day that fundamentalist groups demonstrated at its office.

[17] White and grey are the colours of student uniforms in Indonesia.

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