

When governments try to look more Islamic (part 1 of 2)

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This is the original draft, submitted to The Jakarta Post in late May and published in the Post on 6 June 2008 with some cuts. For access of the published version, visit the author's blog at <http://blogs.arts.unimelb.edu.au/arielh/2008/06/07/politics-of-islamization-in-indonesia-1/>

The use and abuse of Islamic politics by Suharto government (1966-1998) and his immediate successor in transition BJ Habibie (1998-1999) have had more damaging consequences than generally noted. In 2004 when completing my book *State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia* (Routledge 2006), I raised the issue but did not give enough emphasis. The book focuses on the impacts of the 1966 massacres and subsequent anti-communist witch-hunt upon public life in the 1990s.

The book mentions in passing the impact of that murky past has also been partly responsible for other inter-ethnic conflicts across the nation in the 2000s with no reference to 1965 or anti-communism. Since then it has become increasingly clear that further study is needed to examine how and the extent to which the same past has been responsible for the politics of religion since the 2000s.

After more than a decade of repressing political Islam, Suharto found himself in a radically changing political climate. He was increasingly alienated from the military as an institution, and Islam was on the rise at home and globally. He was cognizant that further repression would only backfire, if not suicidal. In a spectacular political U-turn, in 1990 he hurriedly Islamized himself and his government apparatus in a wide ranging policies and actions.

To build his Islamic credential from scratch, that year he went to Mecca for the first time for pilgrimage, and returned as a haj. In the same year he sponsored the founding of ICMI (Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia or Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals), embracing a wide range of important figures among Islam-oriented social organizations, professionals, academics, political activists who may not necessarily agree with each other on a number of issues. Far from feeling manipulated by the government, as some critics argued back then, these Muslim intellectuals saw the invitation to collaborate with the regime as the first opportunity in many decades to gain due recognition. It appeared to be a golden opportunity to compensate what had been denied or repressed, namely Islam as an important moral, intellectual, and political power to be reckoned with.

Only months before the founding of ICMI, Islamic political prisoners were released *en masse* well before their time was up. In direct contradiction to its own policy of not issuing any new permit to print media company, the government supported the publication of the first since 1966 and an overtly Islamic daily *Republika*. The ban of the wearing of jilbab was lifted also in the same year. Since then Suharto's eldest daughter appeared in public wearing veil. The number of new mosques soared, and the parliament house was described by locals as remarkably "green-ized".

Until then it had been difficult for pious Moslems to express their identity and religious piety, due to the vigorous stigmatization of Islam politics as “extreme right”. From 1990 the situation has been completely the reverse: one should be careful not to be seen as anti-Islam. Indonesian courts were busy prosecuting individuals who have made public statements deemed disrespectful of Islam. The banning of the country’s first and commercially most successful tabloid *Monitor*, and subsequently the prosecution of its editor Arswendo Atmowiloto were one of the first and most eventful in a long series of similar cases. Violent attacks against houses of worship belonging to the religious minority were regular, despite criticism and attempts among the moderate Muslims to stop it.

More consequential than all of those mentioned above was Suharto’s decision to make a dangerous liaison with the more violent-inclined segments within the diverse Muslim communities. His short-term intention was probably to mobilize the latter to counter the pro-democracy movement that put greater pressure on his resignation. But perhaps more than he could anticipate, care, or control, the effects of this move was immense and refractory. None of the above saved Suharto from losing his grip of state power. Reluctantly he transferred his presidency to vice-president Habibie who soon become the next target of attacks from pro-reformasi movement.

Seriously lacking legitimacy in public, Habibie and the few surviving generals continued what Suharto had initiated, only this time in a larger scale and more aggressive fashion. New state-sponsored militias were officially trained and deployed to confront physically the agitated pro-reformasi activists. These militias did not only act in defence of the new president and surviving generals, but also in the name of Islam. Being anti-Habibie was declared to be the same as anti-Islam according to their slogans and banners. Like in Suharto’s case, these militias did not help rescue Habibie’s presidential seat. Worse still they inadvertently aggravated the politicization of religious faith to a level unprecedented in the history of this country.

In light of the above, in an opinion column for another major publisher in Indonesia last April I made a speculation of why the current government felt it necessary to block access in the country to major websites that broadcast the controversial Dutch film *Fitna*. The film was so badly produced that it barely had any value to be commented at all, except for the reactions it has stirred.

It appears that the government’s displayed over-reaction to the distasteful video provocation was meant to attain the same effects as the president’s well-covered viewing of the film *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*. Likewise, one can see the clumsy indecisiveness of the government over the siege civil rights of the Islamic sect Ahmadiyah.

Ayat-Ayat Cinta has been widely noted as Indonesia’s most “Islamic” (whatever it means) feature film. Its commercial success is unprecedented in the country, by far defeating any Hollywood blockbusters that have flooded the country since 1966. It tells a love story of a pious Moslem evolving into a happy and justifiable polygamous marriage. Instead of viewing the film as an occasion of private entertainment, the president arrived in one of the busiest cinemas in the capital city, bringing with him a large entourage of 107 high-ranking politicians, 53 foreign diplomats, artists, and of course journalists. The latter did not fail to do the expected: prepare reports in the

national media the next day to the effect that the President, like many female viewers before him, shed tears, feeling touched by the storyline.

Are those merely a ploy, following the steps of the previous governments, to enhance the Islamic credentials of those in power? If so, one notes one important difference. Unlike its predecessors that had no hesitation from the outset to adopt violent means to achieve the similar ends, the current government has yet restricted its project of building a pro-Islamic image in cultural and technological spheres.

But before taking a sigh of relief, one needs to see how long this government has condoned the illegal act of violence by various militia groups in the name of religion. How much longer will it continue? Not only have this government and its law enforcers give impunity to the fairly small but militant groups to go on the rampage. More worrying is the government has even taken steps to seriously consider banning Ahmadiyah on the pressures of the other social groups.

More than could be imagined in 1998, by now *reformasi* has become markedly Islamization, as much as democratization, of Indonesia. Although they can be compatible and have overlap, the two are not necessarily one and the same thing, as there can be more than two streams of Islam, multiple forms of Islamization, and heterogeneous communities of Muslim. The state is expected to play a critical role in striking a good balance and maintain wealth of this nation's plurality.

A weak state would allow fear to reign in public space, especially among the minority, because it also suffers from the very same fear of the risk of acting independently according to the rule of law. In a small way, such rule by fear is well illustrated by the fate of my own April opinion column about the above in Indonesian. The essay was submitted to a major Indonesian media by invitation for a specific space already allocated in the paper. Hours before the paper went to press, I received a letter from the editor advising me that the column could not be published, as it was deemed "risky".

Interestingly, while the column never sees the light of the day, it has appeared online on the same media's website. Indonesian constitution stipulates freedom of expression, but to date such freedom can only take refuge on the internet. Today the internet is the only public space where hundreds of thousands Indonesians can and have actually declared themselves to be religiously "liberal", "atheist", or "agnostic" in their profiles on cyber social network such as Facebook.

(to be continued)