ISLAM AS A POLITICAL FORCE IN INDONESIA

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INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian archipelago is the world's largest insular complex including over 3,000 islands stretched across a distance of some 3,400 miles of ocean. The major islands are Java, Andalas or Summatra, Sulawesi or Celebes, and Kalimantan or Borneo.[1]

By population, Indonesia is the fifth largest country in the world. Approximately one hundred and twenty-eight million people live in the archipelago. Among them about 90 per cent of Indonesia's population are Muslim nation. This article focuses on the role of Islam in the politics of Indonesia.

Muslim traders began to introduce their faith to Indonesia as early as the seventh century. However, it was not until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when a number of kingdoms were established in coastal areas, that Islam began to make a strong impact on the islands. Coastal merchant-lords whose coffers were filled by profits from the expanding Java Sea spice trade, were able to successfully challenge the Hundu Kings of the interior. From this time Islam has been the dominant, state sponsored religion in Java, much of Sumatra, and in portions of many of the other islands of Indonesia.[2]

Both commercial and political motives have been cited to account for the initial conversions of the native merchant-lords to Islam. Thus, it has been observed that the universalistic Islamic faith facilitated the emancipation of converted native traders from the particularistic traditions of their natal communities and created useful bonds with international Muslim merchant community. Further, native traders found in Islam a positive outlook on trade missing in the Hinduism of the inland, agriculturally based Javanese

kingdoms. Moreover, Islam held all humanity, as creation of ALLAH, to be spiritually equal. For the merchants, who enjoyed a low status in the hierarchical Hindu would, Islam formed an attractive alternative view of human society. The importance of equality served as an ideological justification for the revolt of powerful merchants against the god-kings of the interior.

The conversion of the kings of the interior to Islam was superficial, and it has been seen as a political expedient in the face of pressures from the Muslim coastal states. To this day enthusiasm for pure Islam is associated with coastal regions and with the merchant communities that have remained in closer contact with the international community of the faithful.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, increasingly frequent contacts between Indonesia and the Near East speeded the growth and spread of Sunni orthopraxy in the archipelago. This development occurred despite the fact that the Dutch authorities saw the invigoration of Islam as a threat to their control and pursued a policy of containment and vigilance against threats of insurrection from Muslim quarters.

The colonial government sought to counter balance the dreaded influence of disapproving Muslim scholars and mystics by supporting adat chiefs, village heads and natives in the Civil Services. Those Muslim Bureaucrats suspected of favouring strict Islam over customary law and loyalty to the Dutch crown were excluded after 1889 from posts in non Muslim areas of the archipelago, lest they undertake Muslim missionary work in those areas.[3]

Despite the colonial government's repressive actions, Indonesian Muslims did strengthen their contacts with the international Muslim community throughout the nineteenth century, and developed a heightened appreciation of orthopraxy. It was further stimulated by the migration of

numbers of Hadhramant Arabs to the colony in the later part of the nineteenth century.

Islam has played a major role in the development of Indonesian nationalism. Throughout the nineteenth century Muslim teachers inspired sporadic and usually localized revolts against the Dutch 'unbelievers' (Kafirs) whose role they considered illegitimate. These outbreaks reinforced Dutch apprehension concerning the dangerous potential of Indonesian Islam, and were taken as justification for the colonial government's repressive policies. These policies, however, did not stem the tide of Muslim-led resistance. In the late nineteenth century a protonationalist consciousness took shape around Islam since it formed a common bond among natives from many different ethnic backgrounds.[4] After the turn of the century Indonesian nationalism was given its first concrete organizational expression in a Muslim organization, the Sarekat Islam i.e., the Muslim Union, founded in 1912.[5] Some nine years later a communist faction, which had emerged within the Sarekat Islam split off from the parent body and formed the first secular nationalist organization. So-called 'religious' and 'secular' wing of the nationalist movement developed separately from that time on through a variety of organizations. In the independent nation of Indonesia, Muslim and secular parties continued to articulate the divergent interests of the two movements.

Alongside the explicitly political Muslim nationalist organizations there developed in the last decades of colonial rule a wide array of vigorous Muslim social organizations that played an important part in the development in Indonesia not only of modernist religious thinking but also of modern form of voluntary association. The most important of them was the Muhammadiyah founded in 1912.

During the Japanese occupation of the islands from 1942 to 1945, the Muslim nationalists enjoyed a degree of government support not experienced under the Dutch.

The Japanese, at least initially, promoted the strengthening of Muslim leadership. Thus, most notably, they sponsored the formation of an organization, the Masjumi, that united Indonesian Muslims, both conservative and modernist, in a single, national-level organization. During the war for independence that followed the occupation of Masjumi was transformed into a political party. After independence was won the Masjumi split into two separate modernist and conservative parties, the Masjumi and the Nahdlatul-ulama.[6]

In the last months of the occupation when the Japanese officially sponsored preparations for Indonesian independence, they drew together a committee of Indonesian Muslim nationalists and secular nationalists to formulate a constitution for the new nation. Muslim nationalists argued for the formation of an Islamic state, whereas the secular nationalists argued for a state in which religious and state affairs would be kept separate.[7] An early vote on the issue taken in the committee's first session on May 29, 1945, supported the nation of a state 'based on nationalism' (dasar Kebang sean) rather than upon Islam (dasar Islam). The Muslim nationalists, who prompted the committee to consider the issue further in a small sub committee, did not accept this. It was deemed essential to find a basis for consensus, and not merely settle such a basic issue with a majority vote. The result was the formulation of a compromise known as Jakarta Charter, it embodied proposals from both Muslims and secular nationalists. The proposals woven together in the Jakarta Charter included from the secular nationalist side a commitment to five basis principles of national life, belief in God, humanitarianism, national unity, democracy and social justice. These five principles were made famous as the 'Panca Sila' in a speech before the Investigating Committee on July 16, 1945, by secular nationalist leader and later president of the Republic of Indonesia, Sukarno.[8]

The elements of the Jakarta Charter by Muslim nationalists included the imposition of on obligation upon the Muslims to follow Islamic law (Shariah Islam). Muslim

nationalists won further concessions from secularists, that along with the obligation of Muslims to follow the laws of the faith there was a guarantee of freedom for adherents of other religions to practice their faith. It was also specified that the president of the state should be a Muslim.

In a brief meeting of national leaders convened just one day after independence i.e. on August 17, 1945 the difficult compromise on the place of Islam in the state was altered, with enormous consequences for the future social and political life of the nation. The national leaders, constituting a 'Preparatory Committee for Indonesian Independence' agreed to remove from the constitution the problematic words obliging Muslims to carry out Muslim law and the stipulation in the constitution that the president should be a Muslim. These altered documents became to be known as the Preamble and Constitution of 1945.

Uncertainly concerning the place of Islam in the state arose from the fact that the 1945 constitution and its preamble were technically provisional, pending consideration by a properly elected parliament. Thus the 1945 constitution and preamble did not foreclose the possibility of the future institution of an Islamic state through legislative means. Strict Muslims continued to harbor hopes of founding an Islamic state once the Islamic parties had a chance to demonstrate their strength at the polls whereas secularists on the other hand, changed to the 1945 constitution. Regardless of the eventual outcome of electoral contests and new legislation, however, a strong Islamic imprint on the governments administration of religious affairs was assured by the foundation an January 3, 1946 of a Ministry of Religion dominated by Muslims.[9]

In 1955, a general election was held for the first time in Indonesia. It had long been assumed that Muslim parties would easily win since roughly 90% of the nation appeared as Muslims in census data but these expectations were not fulfilled. The four leading Muslim parties were able to win no more than 43.5% of the vote.[10] The impact

of this poor electoral result was felt in the constituent Assembly that was charged with the task of framing a new constitution. Once again the Islamic State issue vexed discussions aimed at framing a constitution, this time to the extent that the parliamentary system eventually broke down entirely.

The crises was resolved on July 5, 1959, when President Sukarno, acting on the basis of a Cabinet decision, reestablished by decree the old 1945 constitution and replaced the so-called 'Liberal' democratic system of 1949-59 with what became know as the system of 'guided democracy'. With the 1945 constitution, which put greater powers in the hands of the President then he held previously, the pluralist Panca Sila of the constitution's Preamble became firmly established and the possibility of using the constitution to form the basis of an Islamic state was closed for the time being. Muslim aspirations were further curtailed by the banning in 1960 of the strongest party advocate of the Islamic state concept, the Masjumi, which had been implicated in PREI-PERMESTA regional separatist rebellion. The other leading Muslim party, the Nahdlatul-ullama, which was more sympathetic to syncretism and found favour with the president, survived and was allowed to control the Ministry of Religion.

After General Suharto suppressed the attempted Communist coup of September 30, 1965, and replaced Sukarno as head of state, the general's New Order government took over and extended the religious policies of the Old Order. The Panca Sila assumed new importance as an anticommunist state philosophy. The New order government demonstrated the value it saw in it as a bulwark against 'atheistic communism' by extending new levels of concrete support to the recognized religions. Thus the recognized religions received government funding for new publication and building programs and for a variety of projects aimed at religious renewal and missionization, including the Muslim da'wah (mission) program.

In the immediate post-coup period the New Order government also insisted, through information campaigns and direct personal inquiries, that every citizen actively demonstrate a commitment to one religion. Failure to respond was taken as sign of atheism, and hence of communists sympathies. In such cases severe penalties were applied. Since there was, as yet no definition of religion in national law Sukarno's Presidential Decision No. 1, 1965 (later made law by the Suharto govt.) which recognized six religions (Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hindusim, Buddhism and Confucianism) was taken as a guide to what constituted an acceptable faith. So it was that all those religions enjoyed a tremendous revival in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

While strict Muslims had been among the most enthusiastic fighters against Communism and the remnants of the old Order in the first years after the attempted coup, they were soon disappointed in their treatment by the New Order government. The New Order interpretation of the Panca Sila emerged as the pluralist view supported by the secular nationalists. Rejection of the notion that the Jakarta Charter provided the basis of interpretation for the Panca Sila and 1945 constitution, was demonstrated in the repeated insistence by government officials, that the Panca Sila be applied 'in a pure and consequent manner'.[11]

In concrete ways, too, strict Muslim political revitalization was circumscribed by the New Order government. The New Order's containment policy toward strict Islam became manifest when the banned modernist party, the Masjumi, was not allowed to revive with its old name and key leaders. Rather, the New Order government sponsored the reconstitution of the Masjumi under the name Parmusi in 1968. Then, the government formed its own political party under the name GOLKAR, to contest elections. The GOLKAR won the 1971 and 1977 elections with a majority. The Muslim parties were than drawn into a single, new government-designed party under the name

"United Development Pantg" (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, or PPP).

Beginning in the 1982 election PPP went through a depression. Part of the decline as a Muslim party was due to its internal schism. The two largest factions within the PPP in the 1982 election were the Muslim Indonesia (MI) and the largest Muslim Organization, the Nahdlatual Ulama (NU), the Muslim scholar league. The two factions disagreed over the selection of conditions for the PPP State. The matter came to a head when the Suharto government approved the list of candidates submitted by the Muslim Indonesia (MI). This led to charges by the NU that the government and the MI were working in concert to destroy the NU. In 1984 the NU decided to with draw from politics by no longer participating in the parliamentary elections.

The NU is Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, claiming to have the support of 20 million who are primarily rural villagers in East Java its electoral influence has been estimated at about one third of Indonesia's voting public.[12]

As a religious and political force, it has been courted by Suharto, who addressed its November 1989 congress, held every five years and attended by more than 3,000 delegates from all twenty six provinces. Instead of issuing warnings about religious extremism, government officials, following the tone of Suharto, praised the Ulama, the Muslim scholars, for their early endorsement of the state ideology, pancasila. Two overriding reasons served to explain Suharto's deliberate attempts to woo the Muslim organization: his intent to seek reelection in 1993, and evident signs of Muslim religious revival.

Despite the internal factionalism, PPP stands for the promotion of Islam. As younger Muslims in Indonesia have become more aware of socio-economic issues, the PPP likewise has shifted its emphasis by articulating issues such as case for the poor and by demanding a ban on gambling, which has been flourishing in urban areas. All these have

been interpreted as the party's strategy to gain recruits and supporters for electoral contests. Today, there is a rising interest younger Indonesians regarding religious practices and more 'cultural awareness' causing Suharto and his government to pay attention to the vast majority of Indonesia's Muslim population.

In the long term, however, the most significant feature of the changing status of Islam has been the impressive spread of its educational institutions founded from the state budget—including the new IAIN (Institute Agama Islam Negtri) at the tertiary level—which are now sending substantial numbers of their graduates into various offices within the bureaucracy both secular and Islamic. At the local level, Islamic organizations feel they are making real progress in the spread of the faith. The visible manifestations of Islamic belief, such as participation in the Friday mosque service, in daily prayers and the use of verses from the Quran in open public meetings are far more prominent today.

At the regional levels, in particular, the authorities have learnt to come to terms with the more strong Muslim groups in society. The most striking feature of Islam under the New Order is that despite all the efforts of the state apparatus to control the Muslims as a political force or a potential source of opposition to the regime, their solidarity and mass backing has remained remarkably intact. Islam remains a potentially powerful force, the mosque and their Friday sermons not easy to control under the New Order's ideological dragnet. More recently, with signs of a greater fervency among Muslim adherents such as in mosque attendance and the wearing of the veil by Muslim women, the government has attempted to appease this potential opposition by providing support to Muslim associations. On the purely religious plane, moreover Islam has been growing stronger across almost the entire archipelago than at any previous time in its centuries—long history.

CONCLUSION

The position of Islam in Southeast Asia is one of competition and compromise with other traditions. Historically, the region has been among the later to be influenced by the Muslim faith. Brought by Arab traders and Sufi mystics, Islam become a major force in the region only in the mid-fifteenth century with the conversion of merchant communities.

In Indonesia, despite the vast majority of the population being Muslim, the leaders of the nation have consistently rejected the idea of an Islamic state. In fact, the Republic of Indonesia is officially based on what is known as pancasila or five Principles. This seemingly anomalous situation is due to many factors e.g. the syncretic nature of Islam in the archipelago and the colonial history of the country.

Although the first major national independence movement gathered around the Sarekat Islam founded by the Santri, (more orthodox Muslims) the movement rapidly developed secular tendencies and failed to achieve its religious political goals. Thus, the leadership of the Indonesian nationalist movement passed almost entirely to the secular Western-educated and political-oriented elite. Nevertheless, Islam retained a major political role in the country.

With the achievement of independence, political Islam began to struggle with secular authorities about the philosophical basis of the constitution of the country. The decision to adopt Pancasila as the state ideology was a defeat for those Muslim's who advocated the creation of an Islamic State. Former President Sukarno, supported by the communist party was able to underwent Muslim political power and banned the largest Muslim party in the early 1960s.

Current President Suharto's regime, after having played Islam against communism, has proved to be as wary of Islamic political domination as Sukarno. His government has fostered a strictly secularist policy. At the same time, non Islamic forces, responding to fear of an Islamic States, have formed a united front, stimulating a limited revival of Hindusim, Buddhism and Javanese mysticism of Islam in the country's political scene.

Recently, however Islam has shown a remarkable revival, as indicated by the construction of a large number of mosques, schools, and associates sponsoring a wide range of social, cultural and religious activities. The Santri seem to have considerably increased their strength by recruiting new, younger leaders from the urban sector, and adopting programs which combine, in the classical revivalist manner, modernization with Islamic orthodoxy. If properly reformulated and reintroduced in the Indonesia political arena, the message of an Islamic moral order; infused with the vital elements of social democracy, may eventually offer an appealing alternative to Western and Marxist models of development.

Islam's resurgence in Indonesia is demonstrated in the increase of pesantran schools which involves both Islamic and secular subjects and produces an Islamic counter to Western concepts of modernization and development.

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