

Book Review: Islamic Political Discourse in the Reform Era

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Berebut Wacana: Pergulatan Wacana Umat Islam Indonesia Era Reformasi
[Islam in Indonesia: The Contest for Society, Ideas, and Values]

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Introduction

The connection between the state and Islam is a dynamic and important theme in Indonesian political discourse, a situation inseparable from some Muslims' aspirations for Islam to become the ideology (foundation) of the state. In the important political events that have occurred, such polemics have often emerged and become sources of serious political tensions.

Carol Kersten's book, an Indonesian-language translation of *Islam in Indonesia: The Contest for Society, Ideas, and Values* (2015), examines the contestations of discourses and actors during Indonesia's Reform Era within the relationship of the state and religion (Islam). This book comprehensively explains how two groups—progressive Muslims and conservative (reactionary) Muslims—have continued their predecessors' struggles. It focuses specifically on the first group, as well as the diverse sub-discourses included therein.

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Progressive Muslims and Conservative Muslims

The term progressive Muslims is used as a new category to describe the groups that have promoted the substantive values of Islam in social and national life, including democracy, socio-economic justice, human rights, equality, etc. Conservative Muslims, meanwhile, are described as those seeking the formalisation of Islamic sharia (law), either in the form of the state itself or through the passage of Islamic/laws.

This new terminology is quite refreshing, as Kersten has attempted to avoid the classical categorisations that may upset certain parties, including the labels “fundamentalist”, “radical”, “puritan”, “secular”, “liberal”, and “moderate”, all of which have shifted in meaning and become encumbered by insinuating interpretations. Nonetheless, it is possible that Kersten’s categories may ultimately not be satisfactory, as such simplification cannot easily be avoided with such categorisations.

One of the most important contributions of this book is its mapping of how thoughts regarding Islamic reform emerged in the 1970s, supported by such leading figures as Nurcholish Madjid, Abdurrahman Wahid, Amien Rais, Syafii Maarif, and Ahmad Wahib. Using different emphases and slogans, these figures were on the frontlines, rejecting the formalisation of Islamic sharia and believing that the Quran does not specify any specific concept or model of nation. For these figures, the Pancasila, as the national ideology of Indonesia, in no way contradicted with Islam. They viewed Pancasila as the most appropriate means of overcoming the dichotomy of integralism vs. separation of religion and state.

Nurcholish Madjid, for example, motored a ‘renewal movement’ (*gerakan pembaruan*) using the famous slogan “Islam Yes, Partai Islam No” (Islam Yes, Islamic Parties No). This slogan was part of his discourse of secularism, which remains debated even today. Abdurrahman Wahid promoted an “indigenisation of Islam” (*pribumisasi Islam*). Meanwhile, the Muhammadiyah leaders Amien

Rais and Syafii Maarif emphasised an Islamic ethos, social justice, democracy, and egalitarian society in their works. Abdurrahman Wahid, quoting a Nahdlatul Ulama fatwa in his *Ilusi Negara Islam* [The Illusion of the Islamic State] (Wahid, 2009) argued that the concept of Islamic government (*Khilafah Islamiyah*) had no theological basis in the Quran or in the Hadiths.

It is the thought of these figures that were inherited by progressive Muslims in subsequent generations, who also offered not only more sophisticated arguments but also sharp criticism. In the Reform Era, the heirs of these thinkers were the ones who promoted ideas of secularism, liberalism, and pluralism. Over these three concepts, they have fought fiercely with their opponents, i.e. conservative Muslims.

Progressive Muslims have spread throughout various educational institutions, think tanks, non-governmental organisations, and—no less importantly—the two largest Islamic organisations in Indonesia: Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. Educational institutions, including the numerous State Islamic Universities—particularly Syarif Hidayatullah in Jakarta and Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta—have promoted progressive ideals through the “Ciputat School” (including thinkers as Harun Nasution, Quraish Shihab, Azyumardi Azra, Komaruddin Hidayat, and Fachry Ali) and the “Yogyakarta School” (including thinkers such as Mukti Ali and members of Limited Group such as Dawam Rahardjo, Ahmad Syafii Maarif, and Ahmad Wahib). The “Yogyakarta School” has also been supported by such intellectuals as Kuntowijoyo, Moeslim Abdurrahman, Abdul Munir Mulkhan, and M. Amin Abdullah. These two schools of thought have also produced many younger progressive thinkers, who now occupy strategic positions both in various universities and in general society.

Think tanks and non-governmental organisations identified by Kersten as progressive Muslim include the Institute for Economic and Social Research, Education, and Enlightenment (Lembaga Penelitian, Pendidikan dan Penerangan Ekonomi dan Sosial,

LP3ES), the Paramadina Foundation, the Institute for Religious and Philosophical Study (Lembaga Studi Agama dan Filsafat, LSAF), the Institute for Islamic and Social Studies (Lembaga Kajian Islam dan Sosial, LKiS), the Association for the Development of Boarding Schools and Society (Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat, P3M), the Institute for Human Resources Research and Development (Lembaga Kajian dan Pengembangan Sumber Daya Manusia, Lakpesdam), the Institute for Boarding Schools and Human Resources Research (Lembaga Kajian Pesantren dan Sumber Daya Manusia, LKPSM), the Fahmina Institute, the Freedom Institute, the Indonesia Institute, the Reform Institute, the Centre for Islamic and State Studies (Pusat Studi Islam dan Kenegaraan, PSIK), the International Center for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP), the Maarif Institute for Culture and Humanity, the Wahid Institute, and (no less importantly) the Network of Young Muhammadiyah Intellectuals (Jaringan Intelektual Muda Muhammadiyah, JIMM) and the Liberal Islamic Networks (Jaringan Islam Liberal, JIL).

Meanwhile, among conservative Muslims, the heirs of Mohammad Natsir and Muhammad Rasyidi have included various members of the Indonesian Council for Islamic Proselytisation (Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia, DDII). This body was established as an alternative to the Masyumi Party, which had been disbanded by Sukarno and prohibited from reforming by Soeharto. Prominent thinkers since Natsir have included Imaduddin Abdulrahim and Endang Saefuddin Anshari. Interestingly, according to Kersten, where Islamic educational institutions run by the state have become bastions of progressive thought, secular universities such as the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB) and Bogor Agricultural University (IPB) have become the basis of the proselytisation movement.

Compared to progressive Muslims, Kersten does not give much attention to institutions of conservative Muslims. These include, for example, the Indonesian Committee for Solidarity with the Islamic World (Komite Indonesia untuk Solidaritas dengan

Dunia Islam, KISDI), once led by Ahmad Sumargono, and the Indonesian Muslim Students' Action Union (Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia, KAMMI). One main figure in DDII, and vocal critic of progressive Muslims, is Adian Husaini, who was also active in Muhammadiyah. Husaini also joined the Institute for Islamic Research and Study (Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengkajian Islam, LPPI) established by Mohammed Amin Djamaluddin.

Kersten also categorises Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) as part of conservative Islam, mentioning such people as Farid Wadjudi, Shiddiq al-Jawi, Ismail Yusanto, Rokhmat S. Labib, Hafidz Abdurrahman, and Fahmi Amhar. The Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS), despite having recently shifted its position and taking a more inclusive approach, is similarly identified as having infiltrated Muhammadiyah-run mosques, schools, and campuses, and made them more conservative.

Finally, although both NU and Muhammadiyah are popularly known as “moderate” Islamic organisations, they include within them conservative factions. In other words, neither organisation is monolithic.

Looking Back

The discourses of political Islam in Indonesia can be traced back through history. In the 1940s, Sukarno debated Mohammad Natsir regarding the topic in *Panji Islam*.² Sukarno supported the separation of religion and the state, while Natsir did not. It may be said that Sukarno represented a secular nationalist ideology, while Natsir represented a religious nationalist ideology. Both may be identified as “nationalist” because, despite coming from opposite positions, they both supported and fought for Indonesia becoming independent nation-state.

Referring to the experiences of Turkey under Kemal Attaturk and the democratic countries of Europe, all of which formally

² See, among others, Suhelmi (2012).

separated religion and the state, Sukarno firmly believed that integrating the two would transform religion into a tool of power, a tool of the political elite. The integration of religion and the state, he argued, would betray democracy and create a “Caesaro-papist” government with absolute power. Sukarno argued that democracy was necessary for the Indonesian archipelago, recognising that a nation-state would unite diverse ethnic groups, religions, and regional cultures.

Meanwhile, Natsir, who was famed as a Muslim reformist, believed that Islam offered a comprehensive way of life (*kaffah*) and thus needed to be integrated into the nation-state. As a multi-dimensional ideology, he argued, Islam provides guidance for the world (*duniawi*), the afterlife (*ukhrawi*), and all contained therein. Natsir argued that secularist thought, including the separation of religion and the state, was opposed to Islamic principles. Rather, he argued, Islam should serve as the basis of the Indonesian state—especially since most of its residents are Muslim. Furthermore, the state should enforce Islamic sharia.

The debate between Sukarno and Natsir continued to resonate through the independence era, and even into the present day. In the meetings of the Investigating Committee for Preparatory Work for Independence (BPUPKI), and subsequently the Preparatory Committee for Indonesian Independence (PPKI), the nationalists—represented by such figures as Sukarno, Hatta, Soepomo, Rajiman, and Yamin—entered lengthy debates with Muslim groups—as represented by people such as Ki Bagus Hadikusumo, Kahar Muzakir, KH. Wahid Hasjim, and KH. Ahmad Sanusi. Several writers have described these debates, the substance of which was similar to the debate discussed above, as “tense and heated”.

To overcome such tensions, Sukarno then offered Pancasila as the ideological foundation of the Indonesian state; it was subsequently approved by the majority of BPUPKI’s members. However, representatives of Muslim groups asked that the first principle (“Belief in the One and Only God”) include the clause

“... dengan kewajiban menjalankan syari’at Islam bagi pemeluk-pemeluknya” (... with the requirement to follow Islamic sharia for the faithful). This clause was ultimately included in the Jakarta Charter on 22 June 1945 and formulated for the preamble to the 1945 Constitution.

However, the nationalists saw the Jakarta Charter as having the potential to become a “thorn in the side” of Indonesian unity and the ongoing struggle for independence. Similarly, non-Muslim groups, including Protestants and Catholics, felt unhappy with the inclusion of these seven words.

In his autobiography, *Memoir* (Hatta, 1979),³ Muhammad Hatta told how he actively approached Islamic leaders such as Ki Bagus Hadikusumo, KH. Wahid Hasyim, Mr. Kasman Singodimedjo, and Mr. Teuku Hasan and sought for these “seven words” to be removed. As he wrote, “At the time, we recognised that the spirit of the Jakarta Charter would not disappear by replacing the clause ‘with the requirement to follow Islamic sharia for the faithful’ with the clause ‘Belief in the One and Only God’”. These “seven words” were ultimately and unanimously removed from the preamble and body of the 1945 Constitution. This historical moment occurred during the PPKI meeting of 18 August 1945.

However, heated debate again emerged in the Constituent Assembly that was mandated to prepare a new constitution to replace the temporary constitution of 1950. The marathon meeting ended with a dead lock. Although the assembly was able to agree upon many things, it was forced to vote on the basis of the state—i.e. Pancasila or Islam. Ultimately, 263 members of the assembly agreed with the president’s proposal to return to the 1945 Constitution as formulated on 18 August 1945; 203 opposed, including representatives of Islamic groups that wanted the “seven words” of the Jakarta Charter to be restored. This vote, thus, was unable to

³ Republished in 2011 with the title *Untuk Negeriku: Sebuah Otobiografi* [For My Country: An Autobiography] (three volumes) by Kompas. See the third volume, *Menuju Gerbang Kemerdekaan* [Towards the Gates of Independence], p. 97.

achieve the necessary quorum (2/3 of all present members). This was one of Sukarno's reasons for ultimately issuing the Presidential Decree of 5 July 1959 (Maarif, 2006, p.183).

During the New Order, when the authoritarian and militaristic Soeharto was in power, this discursive contestation was no longer evident (at least at the surface), as the ruling regime gave no space for groups branded "extreme left" and "extreme right" to articulate their own politics. De-ideologisation occurred systematically. Meanwhile, Soeharto's resignation in 1998 offered greater political freedom, but this occurred asymmetrically. While Islamic groups have been free in their activities and political articulations, this has not been true for leftist groups, whose ideology remains formally forbidden, see among others Suhelmi (2006).

The New Face of Islamic Political Articulation in the Reform Era

Kersten's study underscores the conclusion reached by several political scientists: the discursive and ideological contestations in Indonesia, particularly as related to the relationship between religion and the state, are not only occurring between secular nationalists and Islamic nationalists, but also among Muslims. This has occurred because Indonesian Islam is not a uniform or monolithic entity, but multi-vocal, particularly in its social and political articulation.⁴ Political transformations have enabled various political articulations to surface, while information technology and social media have eased these political articulations' integration into public space.

Interestingly, Muslims' discursive contestations in the Reform Era have not focused on formalising Islamic sharia by changing Indonesia's ideological foundation (Pancasila) or Constitution. Rather, they have attempted to enter through the "back door", using sharia bylaws and co-opting local political dynamics and electoral politics. Facing this situation, the (central) government has serious

⁴ For comparison, see, for example Anwar, 2006; Hilmy, 2009; Munawar-Rachman, 2010; and Boy ZTF (2017).

anxieties, which it has never dealt with before.

Borrowing Sugata Bose and Kris Manjapara's *circulation of ideas* as well as Edward Said's *travelling theory*, Kersten shows the links and intersections between Indonesia's Muslim thinkers and global intellectuals, both within and without the West, both within and without the Muslim world (see Kersten, 2018, p. xviii).

Another strength of the book comes from the author's ability to explain, in detail, the possibility that groups may express different views at one moment but share similar views at another moment. As such, this book can reveal the diverse discourses and political articulations of Muslim groups in specific detail, without falling into the traps of oversimplification and monolithism.

Kersten also clearly presents diverse discourses and actors. He not only identifies the various institutions involved in the discursive contestations he explores, but also provides biographies of important figures. In detail, he explores their thought, the philosophies that inspired them, and even the criticism of them.

The greatest shortcoming of this book, as mentioned earlier, is its limited examination of conservative Islam and Islamic groups, especially in comparison to its study of progressive Islam. Nonetheless, this book offers an important reference for understanding the discourses of political Islam in Reform Era Indonesia.

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