When Indonesia Meets the Middle East: Thoughts on Center-Periphery Relations

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Indonesia is the fourth-most populous nation, with its fast-growing economy, membership in the G20, acting as the de facto leader of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and playing a growing role in the international arena. It is also home to the world's largest Muslim population, though it is still sometimes portrayed as a country at the periphery of the Muslim world. Hence this article aims to look into the complexity of the contemporary meeting between Indonesia and the Middle East, the age-old center of the Muslim world. At the end, the following questions are discussed: Will emerging significant voices in the Arab world ask for a better future, as has been also manifested by the normalizing of relations between Israel and a number of Arab countries, and offer new opportunities for Indonesia to recast its position in the Muslim world? And will this nascent development also move Indonesia toward formal relations with Israel?

Earliest accounts of Muslim populations in the Indonesian archipelago date back to the late thirteenth century, but it was not until the eighteenth century that Middle Eastern Islam began to have a significant cultural impact in the archipelago. During the succeeding century, the globalization of ideas from the Middle East accelerated, owing to various technological developments. Steamships, trains, and the Suez Canal, wrote anthropologist Clifford Geertz, "suddenly shrank the world to domestic dimensions."[1] A complex of cross-regional cultural brokers were involved in the transmission of ideas concerning Islam, including Indonesian pilgrims who journeyed to hajj in Mecca, as well as many knowledge seekers who traveled west to study in religious learning centers in the Middle East, mainly Mecca and Medina, and, since the late nineteenth century, a growing number who headed to Cairo to study at Al-Azhar University in particular. An important role was also played by the Arab community in Indonesia, predominantly Hadhrami Yemeni descendants who functioned as transregional agents.[2] This entire historical process led Muslims in Indonesia, a country that underwent a long colonial history under Dutch rule, to consider the Muslims of the Middle East a model of religious pietism and to embrace both religious and emotional affiliation with the birthplace of Islamic civilization.

Some Pertinent Milestones in Indonesian Islam

An early significant milestone related to the impact of the Middle East on Islam in Indonesia is the chapter of the Wahhabi-inspired Padri movement. It burst violently onto the scene at the turn of the nineteenth century in Minangkabau, West Sumatra, inspired by the puritan, militant, and revivalist spirit of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792) of Arabia. The movement engaged in *jihad* against the traditional *adat*, the local customary order, denouncing it as *jahili*, a derogatory term referring to the godless period that prevailed in pre-Islamic Arabia. The Padri movement imposed *sharia* and Islamic codes of behavior in the territory under its control. Although the movement met defeat in the late 1830s, the lasting legacy of this stormy chapter involved the introduction of Wahhabi-inspired concepts in many parts of Indonesia.[3] Hence the spread of terminology such as *jihad* (holy war), *shirk* (polytheism), *kufr* (infidelity), and *takfir* (excommunication of an individual from the *ummah*), which has come to be shared by radical Muslims worldwide.

The second milestone involves the influence of the modernist reformer from Egypt, Muhammad 'Abduh (1849–1905). His legacy has shaped Islamic thought in Indonesia via the Muhammadiyah, which was established in 1912 and for decades has been the second-largest organization in Indonesia. During its breakthrough years in the early twentieth century, this Islamic modernist movement carried out a comprehensive reformist mission, adjusting Islamic teachings to Indonesia's particular circumstances and purifying Islam from non-Islamic impacts, known as *bid'ah*, that had prevailed among Muslims who followed the customary traditionalism of *adat*. The *ijtihad*, or individual, independent interpretation, as opposed to *taqlid*, the traditional uncritical acceptance of the authority of great masters of the past, has been suggested as a prominent theological approach for the reformist agenda. Muhammadiyah also conducted diverse reformist programs, including modernizing education and improving training and education for women. This vibrant reformist endeavor seriously challenged the local traditionalist order and therefore led to fierce conflicts between the Kaum Muda ("young group") and the Kaum Tua ("old group").[4] Prior to the Second World War, this modernist reform movement was considered to be "the intellectual import from the Middle East with the greatest impact on public Islam in Southeast Asia."[5]

The third milestone is tied up with the political intricacy of President Suharto's New Order (1966–98) and puts the distinctive character of Indonesia's Islam in a wider perspective. The global trend of Islamic revival that originated in the Middle East at the end of the 1960s reached Indonesia a few years later. It was also rooted in local developments, such as rapid urbanization, that involved the growth of an urban Muslim middle class and enabled mass access to education. In reaction, many Muslims turned to more orthodox observance. However, whereas the Islamic revival in the Middle East

and elsewhere also contributed to the rise of political Islam and radicalism, in Indonesia it was marked, in contrast, by a high degree of tolerance and exposed Muslims to progressive ideas. According to Robert W. Hefner, unlike some of its Middle Eastern counterparts, a key feature of this Muslim revival in Indonesia "has been the emergence of an intellectually vital and politically influential community of liberal, or . . . 'civil pluralist' Muslims."[6] Neo-modernism, a progressive, liberal movement of Islamic thought, was interwoven in this development. It emerged in Indonesia around 1970 among the younger generation of intellectuals, who sought to connect Islamic doctrine and thought with basic liberal themes in order to bridge the gap between the national, secular-oriented worldview, including an agenda for modernization and development, and the Islamic worldview. They also argued that the divine values should not be mixed with profane state matters and that Islam should underscore moral, not political, values. Hence, the neo-modernists called for "political Islam" to be replaced by "cultural Islam." The movement also described Pancasila ("The Five Principles"), the established Indonesian state ideology, as the best political formula because it assured interreligious harmony. They deemed a reconciliation between Islam and the political system to be important so that reform theology could suit modern circumstances and local particularities. For that purpose, and in order to contextualize Islamic teaching to the modern era, they suggested following *ijtihad*, a theological practice whose contemporary roots connect to 'Abduh's legacy. Not surprisingly, the Suharto regime supported neo-modernist thought, considering it functional for its own interests in opposing political Islam, which the regime regarded with suspicion and hostility, since that sort of radicalism might threaten the secular state foundation; the new movement also granted religious legitimacy to the Pancasila and to the regime's national agenda.

However, a zealous Islamic militancy did nonetheless gain a foothold in the Indonesian context. When it comes to Islamic militant ideologies, the Middle Eastern impact is dominant. These ideologies spread to Indonesia through diverse conduits, for example, students and migrant workers who encountered Islamist radicalism during stays in the Middle East and elsewhere. Modern technology also makes these ideas more accessible by facilitating radical networking. Militant ideas have also been disseminated by local actors, including certain *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) that promote fanatical doctrines, as well as the dissemination of radical texts. As a result, Indonesian radicals share ideologies, rhetoric, global *jihadi* collective memories, organizational structures, and operational and strategic thought with their counterparts worldwide.[7] Nevertheless, the narrative of Islamic radicalism in Indonesia is not a mere replica of global radicalism. Local narratives, in particular those of the Darul Islam movement (DI), also play a role. DI's armed struggle was a combination of several regional rebellions against the Indonesian central government in the period 1948–62, with the goal of establishing Indonesia as an Islamic state. DI's jihadism was not based on contemporary Middle Eastern sources, but rather on interpretations of centuries-old classical jurisprudence (*fiqh*) texts.[8] DI's ideological traces led to the militant groups of

the post-Suharto era, known as the Reformasi era.[9] Ultimately, it is vital to rely on both local and global lenses to understand jihadism in Indonesia.

To sum up this short historical review, decades of influence from the Middle East have had considerable impact.[10] Of significance is a strengthening of orthodox outlines, namely the "Great Tradition" of Islam as distinguished from the "Little Tradition" that includes local customs that continue to affect daily life, particularly in rural areas. Actually, one cannot overlook the spread of religious conservatism: increased observance of praying, fasting during Ramadan, paying *Zakat* and making *hajj*, consuming religiously approved food (*halal*), and greater visibility of Islam in the public sphere, including a growing number of mosques and religious schools, Islamic *dakwah* (*da'wah* in Arabic) activity, and more veiling by women. The greater conservative impacts have also been depicted as "santri-ization" or "santrification," that is, the accelerated transition of syncretic Muslims, the *abangan*, to the category of *santri* or pious orthodox Muslims.

This entire process has also undergirded the spread of pan-Islamic sentiments among Indonesian Muslims, who are exposed to many of the stormy political narratives of the Arab world and its political pulse. The earliest roots of Indonesia's policy toward Israel should be largely understood in this context, along with strong national anticolonial sentiments, with roots stretching back to the Indonesian War of Independence against the Dutch (1945–49) and Indonesia's significant role in the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1950s. Notably, religious sentiments among the dominant Muslim majority still constitute a highly significant domestic consideration affecting Indonesian foreign policy toward Israel, since for many Indonesian Muslims, the Palestinian struggle is perceived as the struggle for Islam.[11]

The Arab Middle East Views Indonesia

While for Indonesian Muslims the Arab Middle East is a place of religious inspiration, the reverse perspective is quite different. Most Middle Easterners—like most people worldwide—have little or no knowledge about Indonesia as a complex society, polity, and culture. For the Muslim-majority Arab world, the sharp asymmetry is particularly acute because for centuries Islamic ideas spread from the Middle East to Indonesia, while very little, if anything, flowed in the opposite direction. Presumably, generations of Indonesian Muslims who moved to the Middle East, mainly for pilgrimage or study, did not seem to pique much curiosity among Middle Easterners about the homeland of these strangers, as is often the case in encounters between "centers" and "peripheries." A systematic examination of Middle East–based media outlets, mainly in Arabic, during the first decade of this century, for example, indicates that Indonesia's experience in building democracy has attracted very little attention in the Middle East,

except in some very limited progressive, reformist circles, especially in Egypt.[12] But this disregard is not limited to the sensitive issue of democracy, given the fact that the majority of Arab countries have been ruled by authoritarian regimes; in addition, in-depth discussions on any topic concerning Indonesia have been very rare and mostly translated from world media. It was nearly impossible to identify in the media of the Middle East local experts informed about Indonesian matters, though some research institutions in Egypt have developed a certain interest in Southeast Asia.[13] Another illuminating case that attests to the exotic "strangeness" of Indonesian matters, even among educated circles, is that of Islamic liberalism in Indonesia, which has not captured real attention in Middle Eastern discourse. Not only has historical neo-modernist thought been ignored, but so has its current successor, known as Liberal Islam, which emerged during the Reformasi era and attempts to reconcile Islamic doctrine, belief, and knowledge with modern liberal themes. Actually, Liberal Islam has become increasingly controversial, facing opposition at home given the growing tide of Islamic conservatism. However, any genuine consideration of contemporary Islamic discourse in Indonesia should not overlook this liberalism, especially because its texts can be easily accessed through digital media, including in English. Perhaps it is the very marginal presence of liberal Islamic thought in the Middle East that explains this disinterest in Indonesian liberalism, even though several Egyptian thinkers have inspired liberal Islamic circles in Indonesia.[14] However, when one surveys Arabic media, one soon notices that references to Indonesia are often made, for example in order to highlight the tremendous size of the Islamic world and its strong voice, using phrases such as *min Indunesia sarqan hata al-maghreb gharban* ("from Indonesia eastward to Maghreb westward"). Indonesia's name is also often mentioned to demonstrate massive Islamic solidarity. In such cases, a phrase such as *akbar dawla Islamiyya* ("the largest Islamic country"), also commonly circulated in world media, is used. Sometimes someone might get the impression that Indonesia is portrayed as an abstract, faraway land, merely a metaphor rather than a multifaceted, vivid reality in its own right.

Scholars have commented on this perception of Indonesia from a wider perspective, including the Muslim "center" in the Middle East. Azyumardi Azra, a major Indonesian scholar, claims that since the Malay-Indonesian world is situated at the Muslim world's periphery, there is still a tendency among Western scholars to exclude it from discussion of Islam. Moreover, it is assumed that the region has no single, stable core of Islamic tradition.[15] While noting the existence of misperception and mythologizing about Islam and Muslims among outside observers, he particularly addresses an alleged myth that specifically relates to Southeast Asian Islam: the "myth of *abangan*," that is, the syncretic. Azra draws the lines of this myth to anthropologist Clifford Geertz's term "religion of Java" from the late 1960s. According to Azra, the claim that the majority of Java's Muslims are *abangan*, as distinguished from *santri*, indicates a refusal to recognize the "Islamicity" of Islam in Java, and

by extension in the entire Indonesian archipelago and other parts of Southeast Asia. Southeast Asian Islam has likewise often been perceived as marginal and peripheral vis-à-vis Middle Eastern Islam. As such, it is viewed as an obscure phenomenon and only a "thin veneer of symbols attached to a supposedly solid core of animistic and Hindu-Buddhist meaning."[16] Consequently, Islam is wrongly considered to have had no significant impact on Southeast Asian culture. While it is true that Southeast Asian Islam is among the least Arabicized forms of Islam, one should not be misled by the *abangan* myth. Though preexisting local beliefs and practices resisted the process of Islamization, a pure and orthodox form of Islam steadily penetrated deeply into the region.[17] Moreover, though Indonesian Muslims live far away from Mecca and Medina, in terms of faith and practice they are no less Islamic.[18] Yet, Indonesian Islam is much less rigid compared to Middle Eastern Islam, and thus it has the special distinction that it "provides fertile ground for democracy to take roots."[19] Referring to hopes of seeing Indonesia serve as a model for Muslim countries, he believes that Indonesia should provide an active model of compatibility between Islam and democracy, though it will be difficult to realize because Arab Muslim countries tend to underestimate the importance of Indonesia's Islam and to consider it not "real Islam."[20]

Skepticism about Indonesia's ability to influence central Muslim societies has also been expressed by certain Indonesian politicians due to Indonesia's peripheral position in the Muslim world.[21] Similarly, a few Western observers doubt Indonesia's ability to spread a message about the compatibility of Islam and democracy to the Middle East, since Indonesian Islam was never taken seriously by the rest of the Muslim world, the Middle East in particular. Egyptian sociologist Mona Abaza offers an intriguing insight into the interactions between the Middle East and Southeast Asia. According to her, the Middle East and Southeast Asia are sometimes viewed in a simplistic, dichotomized manner, according to which a "pure," orthodox, and scripturalist Islam flows from the Middle East toward an allegedly heterodox, syncretic, and lax Southeast Asian Islam. She adds: "It is possible to argue that the dichotomy focuses on the tension between a harsh 'Arab' style of imported Islam and a local brand of 'lived Islam,' which is constantly being threatened by the 'Arab' import. 'Arabized' mannerisms, clothing, the emphasis on gender segregation and the adoption of different eating customs brought by Middle Eastern travelers, students and pilgrims are often perceived as counter to local Southeast Asian customs, so much so that they in fact constitute a 'counter culture.'"[22]

Confronting Extremism in Indonesia

The distinctive character of Indonesia as a multicultural society, a secular-oriented polity, a habitat for a tolerant brand of Islam, and a country moving toward democratic consolidation is based on its long-standing tradition of pluralism, anchored in local Hindu-Buddhist cultures. According to anthropologist Robert W. Hefner, people of

the Indonesian archipelago have long grappled with what social theorists today often regard as a uniquely modern issue—cultural pluralism. For centuries, intellectual and organizational pluralism has been a distinctive feature of Indonesian Islam.[23] Local pluralistic tradition was even incorporated into the state ideology. Despite strong opposition from Islamists, in 1945 Indonesia adopted a secular-oriented ideology, the Pancasila, often described as religiously neutral. Its first principle, "Belief in the One and Only God," treats all five recognized religions equally: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, and Buddhism; about six decades later, Confucianism was also recognized as an official religion. Accordingly, the 1945 Constitution avoided establishing Islam as the state religion, and a short statement known as the "seven words," requiring Muslims to observe *sharia*, was removed at the last moment from the Constitution's preamble, the Jakarta Charter (*Piagam Jakarta*). Although the modern egalitarian concept of religious pluralism was then still new in global discourse, its elements can be found in state foundations; Article 29 of the Indonesian Constitution, for instance, does not refer to any particular belief, but rather "deals with religious pluralism, autonomy and freedom of religion."[24] The state forefathers also coined the national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* ("unity in diversity"), as the guiding principle for the highly diverse society. The authoritarian regime intensively campaigned for strengthening Pancasila as part of its agenda. In fact, the Indonesian Muslim mainstream has internalized the secular-oriented axioms that were imposed by the state, including the separation of state from religion.

The democratic transition has changed the political ground rules. Its earlier stages unleashed zealous visions, pent-up intersectarian tensions, and separatist aspirations. Political Islam's adherents hoped to use the new opportunities that had been opened for them to challenge the basic axioms of Indonesian polity, including Pancasila, either by parliamentary activity through emerging Islamic parties or by nonparliamentary means, hoping to advance the Islamic state's vision of abiding by *sharia*. Despite political turmoil and disorder, the Muslim mainstream civil society has provided a bulwark to guard the state, the national axioms, and Indonesian democracy. The first democratic elections of 1999 also proved that the majority of voters support political parties committed to a secular, national-oriented ideology. This approach was also manifested during intensive political debate on *sharia* between 1999 and 2002, when the Islamist activists tried to revive their long-suppressed ambition to make Islam the foundation of the state (*dasar negara*) by amending the Constitution's preamble. Yet a majority of political parties successfully resisted it. Consequently, the debate shifted to *sharia*'s status in the body of the Constitution, when pro-*sharia* groups pursued the insertion of the "seven words" into Article 29 as a way to give Islamic law a significant role in Indonesian society. The parliament rejected this attempt, and the two largest Muslim organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, backed the parliament's position. After that failure at the national level, pro-*sharia* groups turned to efforts to introduce Islamic law at local levels, in a move known as *perda syariah*

(*peraturan daerah syaria*; *sharia* bylaws). They have had some success by promoting local *sharia*-inspired laws that include, for example, ordering Islamic dress code and banning practices considered to deviate from Islam. Their opponents view these as *sharia*-inspired intolerance against religious minorities, and the government has in fact faced direct criticism for not being decisive enough in suppressing this religious intolerance.

A brief examination of two cases of reaction by zealous Islamists in Reformasi Indonesia highlights some of the difficulties Indonesia faces. The first case centers on the early years of the democratic transition; it is the story of Laskar Jihad (LJ), a movement dominated by its charismatic leader Ja'far Umar Thalib. The events took place mainly in the period 2000–2002 and were tightly connected with the violent interreligious conflict in the Maluku Islands (1999–2002), while the issues at stake involved the transformation of religious ideologies and the blurred border between devout puritanism and sheer jihadism.

The LJ can barely be separated from the biography of its founder and leader, Thalib, of Hadhrami-Arab descent and heavily burdened by Wahhabi-Salafi or Salafi ideological baggage, including study at the Jakarta-based, Saudi-financed higher education institution LIPIA (Islamic and Arabic College of Indonesia); Islamic studies in Lahore; participation in the war in Afghanistan against Russia; teaching in a Salafi school; and study in Yemen.[25] This journey led Thalib in 1994 to establish a *pesantren* in Indonesia, known as Jama'ah Ihya al-Sunnah (Association for Revitalizing the Sunnah). This community advocated strict Islamic pietism, called for a return to the model of *al-Salaf al-Salih* for personal salvation, avoided Islamic political aspects, and was largely involved with *da'wa* activity. In early 1998, on the eve of Suharto's downfall, the community started to shift toward political activism, at the moment when Thalib established the radical Islamic organization Forum Komunikasi Ahlus Sunnah wal-Jama'ah (FKAWJ, "Communication Forum of the Followers of the Sunnah"). Its members would become the backbone of the LJ militia, established in early 2000, as a response to the violent conflict in Maluku between Christians and Muslims that had erupted earlier in 1999. Thalib appointed himself commander-in-chief of the militia. Based on *fatwas* that FKAWJ received from seven Saudi Salafi *muftis*, he declared *jihad* against the Christians in Maluku for alleged attacks on Muslims. LJ reportedly sent as many as several thousand fighters to Maluku in the period 2000–2002. Certainly, it aggravated the local conflict. Not surprisingly, LJ rhetoric echoed in the way that global militants denounce their enemies everywhere, such as Zionists (*Zionis*), Crusaders (*Salibis*), Christians/the West, and *kafirs* ("infidels"). This military involvement was at its core an act of defiance against President Abdurrahman Wahid's government, including its efforts to settle the conflict peacefully. However, while the LJ's involvement helped Muslims to tip the

fighting balance in their favor, dissatisfaction soon emerged among local Muslims, since the LJ's strict Islamic approach stood in opposition to their own way of life. Early in 2002, Christian and Muslim leaders in Maluku signed a peace accord, but Thalib strongly opposed it. The authorities arrested him on charges of incitement to violence. While his case was still unresolved, the LJ dissolved itself in late 2002. This unexpected move was also attributed to an internal conflict within the Salafi movement between the "purists," who maintained that the immediate goal must be education (*tarbiyah*) and purification (*tasfiyah*), and to those who focused on *jihad*.[26] The majority of LJ members were said to return home, but Thalib, who died in 2019, remained involved for years to come in promoting interreligious hatred and intolerance.[27]

The second example, the "Ahok case," demonstrates that Indonesia continues to face hard-line Islamists. The scene in this case was not an outer island or territorial peripheries but rather Jakarta's heart, which meant that fervent Islamists received maximal media coverage, enabling them to mobilize masses and even providing an opportunity for them to catch the interest of certain mainstream politicians. It was a harsh stress test for Indonesia's national values and democracy, and its direct impact reached into the presidential race of 2019. The matter began with an edited transcript and video of a speech in September 2016 by the skillful and popular Jakarta governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (known as Ahok), a Christian of Chinese descent. Allegedly, he was seen in this video criticizing a specific Quran verse, and the video soon went viral. Hard-line Islamic groups were quick to react, since they had previously been hostile to the mere fact of a non-Muslim serving as governor of the capital city, and the next gubernatorial elections of April 2017 were approaching. Ahok's apology and his explanation that he never intended to insult Islam or the Quran were of no use as matters got worse. Ahok was reported to the police for alleged religious defamation, and the first mass protest rally occurred on Friday, November 4. Protestors demanded that Ahok be prosecuted for blasphemy. The next day a worried Indonesian commentator wrote, "We woke up to the disturbing reality that we haven't progressed very far from nativism and tribalism. The Nov. 4 rally has exposed some of the ugliest parts of our politics, where skin color, ethnicity and faith become weapons to attack political rivals."[28] A few days later, a young Muslim scholar wrote: "We did not see any meaningful and intense contestation opposing the Nov. 4 protest. . . . We did not witness a similar collective action that supported pluralism on the same day. . . . Letting the protest go unchallenged could be a bad sign for the project of pluralism."[29] Though the police had already designated Ahok as being suspected of blasphemy and prosecutors confirmed that the case could go to trial, an even greater mass demonstration of hatred took place when a larger gathering flocked into Central Jakarta to attend what was called by the hard-line coalition "Actions in Defense of Islam" (Aksi Bela Islam). The flaming rhetoric, replete with religious and sectarian overtones, also targeted President Jokowi; Ahok was considered to be his strong

political ally. In this fraught political atmosphere, Ahok was brought to trial and in May 2017 was sentenced to two years in prison, having been defeated a month earlier in the gubernatorial election by a Muslim candidate, Anies Baswedan. His defeat was largely understood as indicating a shift toward identity politics (*politik identitas*). The hard-line groups refused to stop, hoping to leverage their success, while the presidential elections of 2019 were approaching. They even strengthened cooperation, hoping to secure the electoral victory of Prabowo Subianto, who bitterly opposed the incumbent president. They clamored that only "observant Muslims" should be chosen for all elected offices—especially the presidency—adding that Jokowi's government policies were disadvantaging the interests of Indonesian Muslims.[30] To their disappointment, Jokowi won and secured his second tenure of five years.

Echoes of ideas that originated in the Middle East were clearly in evidence in the Ahok affair. Of particular significance was the role of the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI), and especially its charismatic, populist leader, Muhammad Rizieq Shihab (hereafter, Rizieq). He founded FPI in 1998, shortly after Suharto's downfall. His Salafi trajectory also included graduation from LIPIA and study in Riyadh. FPI members soon fashioned themselves as a self-appointed moral police, raiding bars and intimidating religious minorities. Rizieq had remained a marginal figure for years. It was the role he played in leading the campaign against Ahok that gave him widespread exposure, made him a hero of street politics, and tempted certain politicians to mingle with him. In 2017, he fled from Indonesia to Saudi Arabia, trying to escape criminal charges that were brought against him.[31]

Claimed Arabization

The anthropologist Robert W. Hefner notes that it is reform-minded Muslims, not secular nationalists, as usual, who have proved to be the largest audience for democratic and pluralistic ideals in Indonesia. A highly significant factor that facilitated the democratic transition was the essential role played by what he coined "civil pluralist" Muslims. According to him, they "deny the necessity of a formally established Islamic state, emphasize that it is the spirit and not the letter of Islamic law (*shari'ah*) to which Muslims must attend, stress the need for programmes to elevate the status of women, and insist that the Muslim world's most urgent task is to develop moral tools to respond to the challenge of modern pluralism."[32] No wonder Muslim leaders and activists in Reformasi Indonesia have been alarmed by the growing religious influence from the Middle East, or what is sometimes described as the "Arabization" of Indonesia's Islam; even a decade earlier, at the end of the Suharto era, certain indicators were already evident. According to anthropologist Martin van Bruinessen, in that period the concept of *ghazwul fikri* ("invasion of ideas") was in discussion among Muslims in Indonesia and initially referred to various forms

of alleged Western cultural invasion. Yet while the term was borrowed from Middle Eastern Islamist sources, in Indonesia it has been adapted to the local context by many Muslims concerned by the perceived effort to Arabize Indonesian Islam and to eliminate local practices and liberal interpretations of the religion. While embracing the concept of a "cultural Islam," they have also been worried by what they consider an Arab-style "political Islam."[33]

No doubt, the Islamist street politics of recent years, compounded by the rise of identity politics, has amplified the fears of the perceived Arabization. Particular concern and suspicion are directed at Saudi Arabia, due to its history of promoting Wahhabi/Salafi ideology, which is viewed as being in opposition to the tolerant nature of Indonesia's Islam. In addition it has advantages in soft-power diplomacy, enjoys financial resources, and benefits from local channels of influence.[34] Yet while Saudi Wahhabi/Salafi tenets have increased their influence in Indonesia, political scientist Fred R. von der Mehden assumes they face significant impediments in the Indonesian context, including the tradition of syncretism and attempts by the Indonesian mass organizations Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah to weaken Salafi influences.[35] Saudi king Salman's visit to Indonesia in early 2017, the first by a Saudi monarch, also offered an opportunity for concerns to be expressed. It was Yahya Cholil Staquf, then the secretary-general of the NU, who said at the visit's outset that the Saudi king should make a clear statement denouncing radicalism, otherwise "his visit [would] be easily perceived as more support to radical Islamic movements in Indonesia, as it is already a common public understanding that those radical movements take theological reference from Saudi Wahhabism and have been enjoying various kinds of support from Saudi Arabia."[36] In addition, a Ministry of Religious Affairs official declared: "We are concerned about some alumni from LIPIA who are big fans of khilafah."[37] During his visit the Saudi king stressed the importance of building dialogue and communication between religions and cultures to enhance tolerance and stated that extremists from all religions must be confronted. Nonetheless, adherents of tolerant and inclusive ideas in Indonesia seem to be worried still about Wahhabi influence.

In addition, there are concerns, shared by both government and the leading Muslim civil society organizations, that the shock waves of increasing religious extremism, instability, intersectarian violence, and terror in the Middle East might reach Indonesia. After all, Indonesia's own stability and prosperity depend largely on the maintenance of religious harmony and tolerance within the highly diverse fabric of its society. The participation of several hundred Indonesian militants in the fighting in Iraq and Syria, mainly in the ranks of the Islamic State (ISIS), with an even larger number considered to be ISIS sympathizers, has further fueled concerns.

Guarding Indonesia's Characteristics and National Values

And yet, despite it all, Indonesia is not a threatened, defensive polity under siege, but rather engaged, responsive, and proactive. Indeed, during the Ahok case one could have occasionally wondered about a certain government avoidance of assertive steps against the extremist, hard-line groups that directly challenged the founding values of the state. A number of explanatory insights could be suggested, including the dilemma always faced by democracies related to limiting freedom of expression, as well as using force against citizens. Perhaps this dilemma is particularly fraught in Indonesia, given the long shadow of its authoritarian past. It is also an intricate challenge to struggle against those who claim to carry the banner of Islam in a country populated mainly by Muslims. Nonetheless, the government has begun to respond actively, often through programs designed to elevate national values, including promoting Pancasila, the national motto of "Unity in Diversity," and the 1945 Constitution. It also has increasingly cooperated with the NU and Muhammadiya to combat extremism and begun taking concrete actions against hard-liners who were involved in orchestrating the massive show of bigotry and intolerance. In July 2017, the government banned Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), the local branch of the transnational Islamist movement Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami that strongly embraces a vision of establishing *Khilafah Islamiyah* (Islamic caliphate); the move was justified by the state's condemnation of organizations deemed to threaten national unity and, in this particular case, for promoting an ideology counter to Pancasila, which is deemed the essential cement of Indonesian national unity.[38]

The government appears to face a greater dilemma in how to deal with FPI; whereas the HTI has lacked a local identity, FPI is considered local, although conceptual influences and crosscurrents from across the Middle East cannot be overlooked. Moreover, FPI was at first careful not to cross red lines. So, in 2013 it unveiled its ideological goal, establishing the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) under Islamic (*sharia*) law (NKRI Bersyariah). It argued that *sharia* is compatible with the Indonesian state since the Pancasila was derived from the Jakarta Charter, and the state principles mandated all Indonesian Muslims to observe the *sharia*. Therefore, Indonesia, which had arguably strayed from Islamic and toward secularist principles, should return to Islamic foundations by returning to the original interpretation of the Jakarta Charter.[39] But in 2017, things looked more complicated for FPI when its leader fled from Indonesia to Saudi Arabia, escaping criminal charges. Shortly after his return in late 2020, pledging to lead a "moral revolution," he was arrested for breaching coronavirus restrictions and was sent to jail. Around this time the authorities outlawed FPI, accusing it of vigilantism and links to terrorism.

But much more intriguing for our discussion are the proactive, assertive Indonesian moves to go globally that implicitly call for a revisiting of Indonesia's historic position within the context of center-periphery relations in the Muslim world.

Trials to Encourage Democracy in the Muslim World

The Asia-Pacific region has been the cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policy, with relationships in the Middle East achieving only secondary importance. Nevertheless, Indonesia has worked for years to cultivate relations with Arab countries. The administration of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–14) signified greater interest in Middle Eastern affairs, seemingly tied to a rising self-confidence in building democracy after passing the crucial test of conducting Indonesia's second democratic elections in 2004. This development also affected foreign policy, with an evolving ambition to become involved in the Middle East, including in conflict resolution and peacemaking. Diverse incentives joined together: the hope to consolidate Indonesia's international position by responding positively to the West's expectations of its democracy as a model for the Muslim world; combating growing Islamophobia by showing that democracy, modernization, and development are compatible with Islam; and joining efforts to tamp down the flames of conflict and religious extremism in the Middle East so as to reduce the risk of spillover to the archipelago. Perhaps this ambition was also affected by the formative guiding foreign policy principle "independence and activism" (*bebas dan aktif*) that calls for adjusting foreign policy to fit changing circumstances. To support its claim to a greater role in Middle Eastern affairs, Indonesia emphasized its track record of supporting conflict resolution in its region and its democratic credentials of peacefully solving local conflicts. Top leaders repeatedly stressed the reformist mission of showing that democracy, Islam, and modernity go hand in hand, and also of advancing democracy in the Muslim world as well as in Asia. To incorporate democratic identity into the foreign policy agenda, in 2008 Indonesia established, with Australia's cooperation, the Bali Democracy Forum (BDF). This was followed by the establishment of the Institute for Peace and Democracy (IPD) to support BDF's goals. Even prior to the Arab Spring, Indonesia extended invitations to several Arab democracy activists to attend BDF meetings. Somewhat surprisingly, soon after the Arab Spring's outbreak, both Egypt and Tunisia asked Indonesia, not Turkey—at that point the principal model of a Muslim-majority democratic country—to assist them in their democratic transition. IPD was soon involved in convening several workshops on this issue with Egyptian delegates. In April 2012, when the Islamist Ennahda Party was still in power in Tunisia, and even though Indonesia's democratic model was secular oriented, several Tunisian officials joined the meetings. Since 2013, and after the political turmoil in Egypt, cooperation on building democracy between Indonesia and Middle Eastern countries has been limited to Tunisia. This cooperation, somewhat hidden from world media attention, has demonstrated shared efforts to also promote interfaith dialogue and religious harmony.[40] However, democratic transition in Tunisia, the single surviving hope of the Arab Spring, has constantly faced major obstacles. Now its future has become murky; in July 2021, the Tunisian president dismissed the prime minister, suspended the parliament, and gave himself both legislative and executive powers. Apparently, Indonesia, an "invested" actor, wishes that Tunisia will soon return to a democratic trajectory.

Promoting the Islamic Voice of Indonesia

Almost two decades ago, Rizal Sukma, a prominent foreign policy expert who also served as foreign affairs adviser to President Jokowi, wrote during the early years of the Reformasi era, that Islam was never adopted as the official framework for foreign policy and did not serve as the basis for conducting its foreign relations. As far as "the Islamic factor" has come into play in foreign policy formulation, it has always been within the context of domestic political considerations; as Sukma stated, "domestic politics set the context for the role and influence of Islam in Indonesia's foreign policy."[41] A few years later, Azyumardi Azra wrote that the Indonesian government has traditionally disregarded Islam as an important factor in its foreign policy.[42]

More than a decade later, the Reformasi era "surprised" again when, in May 2018, President Jokowi launched a campaign to promote the Islamic concept of *wasatiyyah* (*jalan tengah* in Indonesian), meaning "middle way" or moderation. According to the president, his country, as a democracy with the largest Muslim population and as a pluralistic nation (*bangsa yang majemuk*), wanted to show that Islam is the religion of *rahmatan lil alamin*, a mercy to all creation. According to Jokowi, the *wasatiyyah* movement should become a worldwide trend that inspires Muslims to espouse the path of Islamic moderation. Both the NU and Muhammadiyah are key partners in this initiative.[43] The particular timing suggests that internal political considerations played a role: in the lead-up to the presidential elections in April 2019, Jokowi understood that identity politics, used against him by hard-line groups backed by certain mainstream politicians, could be answered by bolstering his own Islamic credentials.

However, a wider view suggests that the trend is framed within a reasonable continuum. In early August 2015, Muhammadiya launched the concept of Islam Berkemajuan ("progressive Islam" or "Islam in progress"), which involves the global expansion of the group's religious and social commitment, including humanitarian missions that aim to promote human rights and conflict resolution and to encourage Muslims to be engaged in a theological reinterpretation that responds to modern needs through *ijtihad*. A few days later, NU launched a campaign on the theme of Islam Nusantara ("Islam of the Archipelago"). The two initiatives share more than a few values, such as *wasatiyyah*, tolerance, pluralism, democracy, peaceful conflict resolution, and interfaith dialogue. They also share the ambition to counter any religious extremism that threatens Indonesian multicultural society, and to promote moderate visions across the Muslim world. Both also correspond with growing national self-confidence and its impacts on foreign policy. The two organizations had even started showing interest in international involvement more than a decade earlier. To this end, they have established "special branches" (Cabang Istimewa) across the Muslim world and in Western countries, in areas where communities of Indonesian Muslim students and migrant workers exist.[44]

However, viewed in terms of center-periphery relations, different historical patterns emerge. Muhammadiya's historical roots lead to the Middle East, while NU is rooted in the local context and the tolerant spirit of Sufi Islam. It was established in 1926 to protect traditionalist Islam—a term which in the Indonesian context implies the local mode of Islam—from the growing strictly religious influences from the Middle East, including the Wahhabi interpretation. Over the years, essential differences between the two organizations have declined significantly. Yet, for the purpose of our discussion, NU's case is particularly illuminating, since it is NU that has proposed a global dissemination of the distinctive local Indonesian characteristics of Islam.

The concept of Islam Nusantara was launched as the theme for NU's National Congress of 2015, attracting great attention. A further step was taken in May 2016, when NU held the International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders with the participation of Sunni Muslim leaders worldwide. Since then, NU has been engaged in a global campaign to promote Islam Nusantara, carried out by a network of diverse affiliated institutions and forums. The campaign has been dominated by Yahya Staquf, until recently NU's secretary-general, and now its chairman. Islam Nusantara is highlighted as an orthodox Muslim concept, adhering to the moderate, tolerant Sunni teachings and values that have been developed in Indonesia through coexistence with preexisting cultures and the state national ideology, Pancasila.

The campaign largely aims at countering extremism, promoting understanding and cooperation between civilizations, advancing peace, and curtailing Islamophobia, including through the delivery of messages of tolerance, human compassion, and interfaith harmony. The Middle East is seen now as an explicit problem. "Certain" governments in this region are accused of deliberately nurturing religious extremism by "weaponizing" sectarian differences and of deriving political legitimacy from specific "problematic interpretations." In their competition for geopolitical and religious supremacy, Saudi Arabia and Iran are accused of ignoring the destructive implications of the politicization of Islam. Importantly, the campaign of Islam Nusantara highlights a call to the Muslim world to reinterpret and recontextualize, through *ijtihad*, those Islamic tenets that have allegedly become obsolete and problematic. Such a move will facilitate replacing hatred, tribal identity, and violence with peace, cooperation, and harmony between civilizations. Indonesian *'ulama* are seen as capable of carrying out this reform since they have practiced *ijtihad* for a long time for the benefit of the majority of Indonesian Muslims.[45]

There are some NU opponents who denounce the concept of Islam Nusantara as *bid'ah*, arguing that its teachings differ from Islam in the Arab world. Observers have also raised questions about promoting a brand of Islam that is strongly anchored in the local Indonesian context. The project may even be controversial, to a certain degree, within the NU itself. Whatever the outcome will be, this initiative can be viewed as

revolutionary; it is one thing to try to encourage democratic transition in the Arab world, but quite another to suggest tolerance and moderation in Islam, evolved in a perceived "far periphery," to the Arab Middle East, the cradle of Muslim civilization, as an answer to extremism.

Conclusion

Indonesia in the Reformasi era is pursuing greater involvement in the Arab Middle East. For sustaining proper credibility, Indonesia points to its cultural, national, and democratic values; a moderate and tolerant Islamic approach; and a successful record of peaceful conflict resolution. Nevertheless, a gap between Indonesia's vision and expectations and real accomplishments remains for various reasons. First, Indonesia is a far-off actor and has not garnered much practical experience in the tangled Middle Eastern political playground, for decades dense with competition between global superpowers and hegemonic local powers. In addition, Indonesia continues to be viewed as somewhat peripheral to the Muslim world, and there is an alleged certain tendency within the Arab Middle East to patronize Indonesian Muslims. When it comes to sociocultural aspects, not to mention the political system and institutions, the differences separating Indonesia from the Arab world are even greater.

But from an Indonesian perspective, there may be a nascent development in the Arab world that can offer new opportunities. An Israeli and an Egyptian-American scholar jointly suggested an insightful distinction, post–Arab Spring, between the already-known "axis of resistance," led by radical elements from both the Shi'a and the Sunni world, and the new "axis of renaissance," led by a number of Persian Gulf countries, with cooperation from Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco. The "axis of renaissance" offers an alternative vision to the Middle East and the Arab world for a new future. This emerging axis now has a significant voice in the region due to its economic, political, and media influence. It also indicates a new agenda for a more tolerant Middle East that opposes ethnic and sectarian politics and adopts a path of modernization. Furthermore, the Abraham Accords, which signify support for further engagement with Israel, encourage this new approach.[46]

Indonesia has much in common with the countries of the "axis of renaissance." Practically, it strives to improve economic cooperation between Indonesia and three Arab monarchies, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Morocco, sharing with them a vision of growth and development. On a deeper level, Indonesia is a Sunni-majority country, the same as the UAE and Morocco, and while Bahrain is a Shi'ite Muslim–majority country, the ruling family is Sunni. The policies of the four countries embrace religious tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and a strong interest in propagating moderate and tolerant Islamic

values, including the Islamic idea of the "middle path," and in countering religious extremism and militancy through "soft power" diplomacy.

Though there is growing cooperation with these three countries that have normalized relations with Israel, Indonesia itself still strictly stipulates that establishing diplomatic relations with Israel depends on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. However, does it bring Indonesia closer to a change in its policy toward Israel? A month after the UAE, Bahrain, and Israel signed the Abraham Accords, a *Jakarta Post* editorial ended by saying: "Diplomacy has always been about finding the right balance among competing interests and the challenge now for Indonesia is how to balance its interest in finding partners to help its people."[47] But is it so simple in Indonesia's case? Shortly after Morocco signed a normalization agreement with Israel, a commentator insightfully remarked: "Morocco's recent partial normalisation of ties with Israel demonstrated that strategic gains could outweigh fears of nationalists and Islamist reprisals in Muslim-majority countries. In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, nationalists and Islamists remain opposed to the Jewish state."[48] For Indonesia, there is a complicated balance of risks and benefits. Domestic risks include a perceived potential for a serious local backlash to a policy change that could be deemed a betrayal of the Palestinian and the Islamic cause. Moreover, Indonesia is a democracy; the government doesn't control public opinion but rather navigates carefully through it. Above all, the government seems to be heavily weighted by an anticolonial legacy. Thus the Palestinian cause strikes not only religious chords but also national emotional ones, and the constitutional commitment to struggle against colonialism remains a leitmotif across Indonesian political opinion concerning the question of establishing diplomatic relations with Israel.

However, is the Indonesian position irrevocable? Limited open diplomatic contacts, which currently do not exist, rather than full formal diplomatic relations could not be excluded in diverse scenarios. Ironically, as long as a substantial movement toward solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through establishment of an independent Palestinian state is not realized, the game changer, from an Indonesian perspective, might be the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. In such a scenario, Indonesia could be the next. Normalizing relations between Saudi Arabia, the hub of the Sunni Muslim world and the center of religious inspiration, may leave hard-core Islamists in Indonesia baffled. In such a case, domestic constraints will be largely diminished and the government will be called upon to cross its own national ideological Rubicon. A change of policy toward Israel might also relocate Indonesia from its perceived peripheral position in the Muslim world to a central one, as a partner to the "axis of renaissance." In other words, normalizing relations with Israel may be a historical opportunity for Indonesia to recast its position in the context of center-periphery relations.

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