

# Student Politics in Indonesia

Robert W. Hefner in a recent article, "Muslim democrats and Islamist violence in post-Soerharto Indonesia," laments the fact that Indonesia's democratic achievements "may never be widely recognized because the movement for a democratic Muslim politics was soon overshadowed by a rash of sectarian violence."<sup>2</sup> The main challenge for Indonesia's moderate and democratic Muslims, according to Hefner, has been the move to pacify the sectarian and authoritarian fringes of the Muslim community. One way to take on this challenge has been for educated Muslims to demonstrate Islam's compatibility with democracy and pluralism and pose as role models for the rest of society. Processes of democratization occur under a variety of conditions and within different segments of society, but students have a history of being on the vanguard of social and political change. Since 1965 students have played a prominent role in the struggle for democratic reforms in Indonesia.

## Plurality in a student association

One example of what a democratic organization might look like in practice can be found among the members of Indonesia's oldest and biggest Islamic student association, the Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam (HMI). HMI was founded in Yogyakarta in 1947 and split in two in 1986 over the issue of whether to give in to the pressure of the regime to replace the Islamic basis of the organization with the national ideology of *Pancasila*. HMI-MPO is the fraction that stood up against the government and as a consequence was forced to go underground for twelve years. HMI-MPO is a cadre-training organization that concentrates on political, religious, and intellectual training of members (cadres) by way of formal training courses and informal discussions. It is well represented in the country with thirty-eight branches spread all over Indonesia. Its Yogyakarta branch is the biggest branch with 3000 active members dispersed over forty-two secretariats (*komisariat*) at different universities and colleges. The sheer number of members gives the branch a certain substance. But the fact that Yogyakarta has a reputation of housing the most liberal, free spirited, and intellectually innovating milieu in the country has also led to the expectation that the Yogyakarta branch should play a leading role in the political and ideological leadership of the organization.

HMI-MPO has a decentralized structure with a high degree of autonomy at the branch level where a great deal of variety exists. Some branches are known for their intellectual or political characters, while others are better known for their religious or Sufi orientations. There is room for a large degree of experimentation and variation on the training courses, and it is generally understood that students join the organization for various reasons. Some are in search of a deepened understanding of Islam, whereas others are attracted by the intellectual discussions, the political leadership training, or the social activities. The training component of the organization has two unstated objectives: to encourage and enable students to reflect on political and religious issues like globalization, neo-capitalism, social injustice, morality, Islamic politics, and religious socialism, and to endow them with the talents to argue their cases and present their viewpoints. The organization aids students to cultivate the art of critical reflection and argumentation, competencies that are difficult to acquire alone within the normative system of education where an authoritarian "yes-man" culture still persists.

The notion that HMI-MPO functions as a forum for academic, political, and religious discussions is not surprising. Indeed one would expect this to be a dominant aspect of a Muslim student organization. However, the idea of HMI-MPO as a place of diversity, and one that challenges the students and gives them a chance to meet and interact with fellow students of different religious or political backgrounds is notable because

**Recently there has been a great deal of talk on the need to accommodate, modify, and pacify the radical elements of Muslim communities. Yet it is not well understood how a process of accommodation should be carried out, or by whom? Student groups, who have long been on the vanguard of social and political change in Indonesia, can serve as a living example of democratic accommodation.<sup>1</sup>**

democratic nature of the organization. You need a difference of opinion (plurality) to create a fertile ground for discussion, and you need respect (and curiosity) for other people's opinions to understand and appreciate the value of diversity.

## Religious mediation

The debate-society aspect of HMI-MPO combines with a religious identity which has been sharpened by the rebellious history of the organization. HMI-MPO has a reputation for being Islamic because it was the only organization out of the two that had the courage to stand up against the regime and defend its Islamic basis and because it still maintains a mild form of gender segregation (female members are not allowed to shake hands or ride bikes with male members). At the same time, it is heir to a theological renewal movement from the 1970s that challenges its members to find their own religious truth and encourages them to rationalize and scrutinize their own religious practices. As one student recounts, "I was shocked at first. One exercise was called "A day without God" and the idea was to encourage us to experience what that felt like and teach us not to take God for granted. The point was that we should always have a reason for what we do. And some of my friends who didn't know how to digest this exercise haven't done their daily prayers ever since. They just swallowed it raw without chewing on it and they keep saying, 'There is no God.'"

Not everybody is up for the intellectual and spiritual challenge. Some members might leave the organization or simply join several organizations simultaneously.

One student who defected from HMI only to return to it a year later explains, "The training course at HMI made me confused. I was urged to join a discussion on God, and afterwards I was confused as to whether God really exists or not, so I left HMI and joined KAMMI. But they turned out to be too extreme and too exclusive. All we ever talked about was religion. Intellectual discussions were not allowed, so after a year I went back to HMI."

It is the combined position towards critical inquiry and religious identity that enables HMI-MPO to bridge the gap between the liberal and the fundamentalist elements among the students and contribute to a moderating and dialoguing process internally within the organization as well as externally among other student organizations. The HMI-MPO is able to facilitate a dialogue between the organizations due to its own internal plurality, which makes it credible among the liberal Muslims, and also because it has a reputation of being Islamic, which gives it credibility among more conservative Muslims.

## Notes

1. This article is based on ethnographic research for a Ph.D. dissertation. The fieldwork was carried out among Muslim university students in the Central Javanese town of Yogyakarta from September 2003 to August 2004.
2. Robert W. Hefner, "Muslim democrats and Islamist violence in post-Soeharto Indonesia," in *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization*, ed. Robert Hefner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 273-301.

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