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Southeast Asia

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Indonesian Youth and Islamic Revival

In Indonesia the coming out of Islamic radicalism has once more disquieted public life. Since the US assault on Afghanistan following the September 11 terrorist acts, Islamic youth organizations have been staging anti-America protests throughout Indonesia's main cities, showing the world a face of Indonesian Islam different from the moderate one with which it is usually identified. The protests also show a different face of young Indonesian activists. This time they do not appear as the spirited bunch of the student movement that ousted Suharto in 1998, but as fiery campaigners for a jihad.

The young activists are far less numbered nowadays but the impact of their actions is no less considerable, especially in the context of enduring crisis, with recovery depending on stability. The question is how this affects Indonesia's uplifted image as an open, tolerant civil society, or the image of the youth, fostered by their role in upsetting an aged regime, as progressive harbingers of change and modernity.

Indonesian women protesting in Jakarta, 24 November 2001.

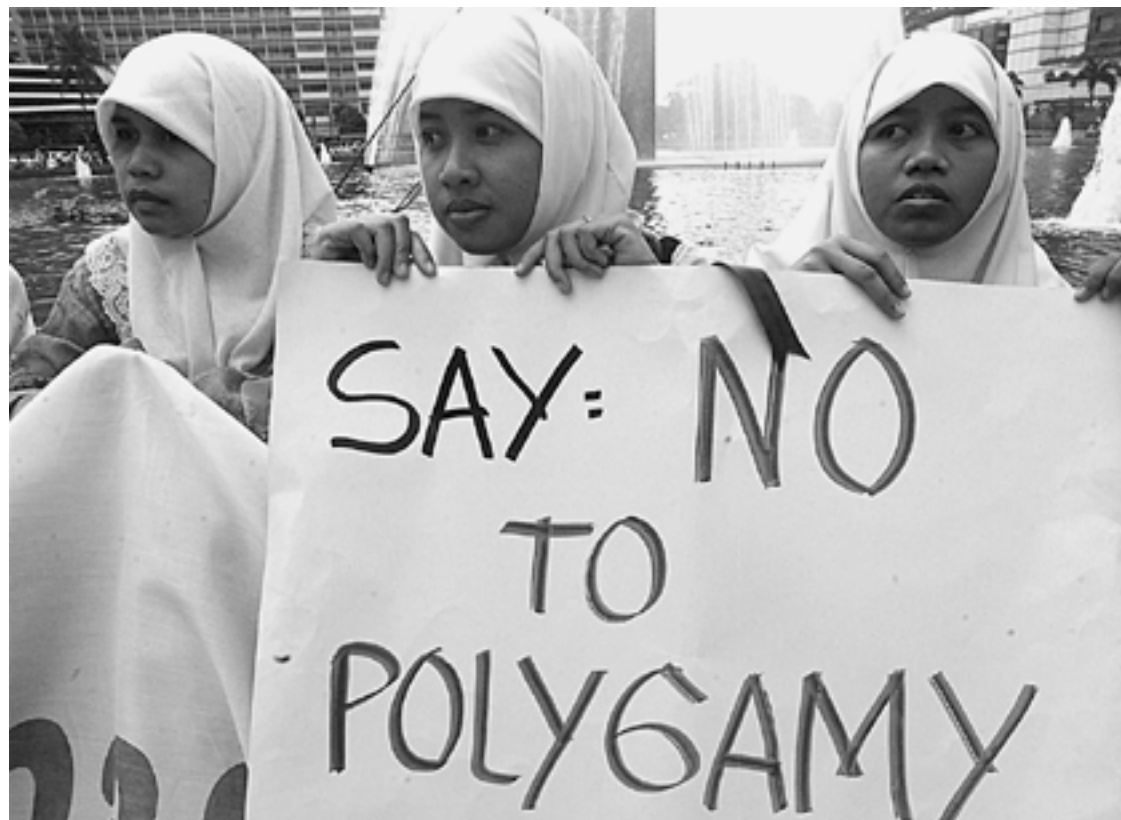


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Many Indonesians consider the rise of Islamic radicalism harmful to the process of reforms if not a sheer setback to modernity. But in fact it fits the era of reforms and indeed modernity quite well, if only to substantiate its predicament of plurality and conflict. With Suharto's policy of strict control and engineering of the uniform nation-state gone, marginalized voices have resurfaced and are more expressive than ever. In theory, this would give way to the formation of a plural base for a diverse civil society. But among the manifold voices that have been raised in the past three years, those of Muslim interest groups, both 'modernist' and 'traditionalist' (with new alliances being forged the distinction is not always clear) have been among the most vocal. As a result the era of reforms has seen a new Islamic revival. Muslim parties have gained a larger share in power, as confirmed with the recent election of Hamzah Haz, leader of the conservative Muslim party PPP for vice president. Moreover, Islamic disposition has become more prominent in public space. There has been a marked rise in public displays of Islamic practice, idiom and activism, while the mass media further added to the publicity of Islamic discourse with a substantial increase in Islamic teachings appearing in print and on television. Even in the world of show business an Islamic way of life is exalted. Many celebrities have

turned devout, appear in Islamic dress as a latest fashion item, or have their marriage ceremonies arranged in Mecca; all of it in great style and well documented by tabloid media.

Yet the broad revival of Islam means more than just a trend. Particularly in this period of national transition with its enduring crises of economic slump, political instability and social breakdown, an Islamic way of life is often taken up as an act of consciousness; a deliberate choice mostly made by urban, educated young people. Considering that the urban youth are reputedly demoralized, inasmuch as many appear to have lost faith in traditional and societal institutions, a reinvigoration of an

Islamic disposition among them is remarkable indeed. These days many students prefer to join Islamic rather than university-based, nationalist or leftist student organizations and a growing number of cosmopolitan young women choose to wear a *jilbab*, Islamic head covering, in the public sphere. Besides this being a matter of following one's peers, to be sure, it appears a self-confident expression of a reconstructed identity, as an individual and member of a peer group community that wishes to go beyond traditional orders and contemporary society as it developed under New Order rule. In this regard their choice is distinctly progressive, synthesizing religion with the tenor of liberality, social awareness and enlightenment, characteristic of the spell of reforms.

However, young people's attempts to re-fashion and present a modern, tolerant Muslim identity are complicated by ambiguity and different opinions on what modernity and tolerance mean and where to put the limits on these. Confusion particularly arises in relation to issues of morality. Adding to the confusion, altered attitudes towards religion and morality are also at stake in the actions of some of their radical peers which, according to several young people spoken to, 'are giving Islam a bad name'. Anyhow, existing tensions are certainly amplified in these radicals' actions.

Moral wars

A striking illustration of such tension (observed by the author Ayu Utami in *Djakarta*, September 2001) is the staining of a billboard advertisement along Jakarta's main roads starring the popular actress and presenter Sophia Latjuba. Her sensually pictured figure had been covered with black paint, leaving bare only the area around her eyes in a meticulous attempt to make it look as if Sophia, Indonesia's leading sex symbol and personification of a cosmopolitan lifestyle, was shrouded under an Islamic veil. This meaningful act did not carry a signature but it was clearly not an act of random vandalism. It rather seemed to fit into a series of 'small wars' that the radical youth have been waging in the name of religion and morality.

Several radical Islamic youth organizations, for instance Gerakan Pemuda Islam (GPI, Islamic Youth Movement) and Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Islamic Defence Front), both based in Jakarta, have lately stepped up public activity. This involved sporadic and seemingly ad hoc actions that nonetheless show remarkable coherence. While borrowing from the repertoire of student activism as established since the protests of 1998 and the global repertoire of political Islam as imitated from mass-mediated images of Palestinian activism, their actions are notably marked by a specific discourse of morality; or rather, immorality, often expressed through an idiom of evil and sin. Radical groups have used such idioms when engaging in political protest, as when they joined the demonstrations at the beginning of this year against then President Wahid (whom they accused of corruption as well as treason of Islam and covert communism). But a discourse of immorality has been most of all pronounced in their actions against social vices. These included violent attacks on discotheques, bars, homosexual venues and other sites of assumed perversity, and also public orations pointing the general public to its sinful habits, such as the consumption of pornography.

In addition, there has been a boost in the campaign against an alleged revival of communism, the historical enemy of Islamic movements. Besides the spread of anti-communism propaganda, for instance using banners in public space that warn the people to watch out for lurking communism (a method reminiscent of New Order tactics), this has also entailed occasional fights with left-wing student organizations. Most shocking to critics, however, has been the act of book burning and threatening to 'sweep' from the market (semi-)leftist publications branded communist, recently conducted by a broad alliance of several Islamic youth organizations. As these publications had only just been relieved from their ban under Suharto's rule, this act was widely condemned for undermining the new freedom and openness of reforms. But criticism has hardly been discouraging. Now, linking with the global mood of war, GPI, FPI and their allies have found the ultimate infidel foe in America, while Bin Laden has become a cult hero whose holy war is seen by many among them as worth dying for. Dozens have already volunteered to join the Taliban fighters in Afghanistan and are currently undergoing military training at secret posts in Indonesia.

But what kind of war and whose war are they actually waging? Regarding them as al-

lies of Bin Laden does not make much sense. Some Islamic youth organizations do have ties with global Muslim affiliations with bases in the Middle East, but this does not account for most of their actions which are related to distinctively local or national concerns. Then assuming them to be pawns of certain off-stage powers – relics of the New Order establishment that wish to upset the sitting government of President Megawati, which has also been much hinted at – may also be misleading. For the radical Islamic youth are not the unitary bloc easily mobilized by third parties. Most seriously, such explanations draw attention away from the moral calls implicit in their actions. Is their cause then, at least of the rank and file of youths that feel urged to join radical movements, essentially a moral cause, impelled by the frustration of witnessing the rampant corruption among the powers that govern them and depravity in the society they live in? Of course it is not that simple. But at least this suggests that their movement does not stand completely apart from the plights of present-day Indonesian society and young people's experiences of them.

Challenges of modernity

The radical Islamic youth will find little support among the mass of their Muslim age-mates, although direct opposition has been notably absent; maybe for fear of violent retaliation, or maybe because young people struggling with their own Muslim identity are unsure of how to deal with the bearing of their radical peers. In any case, to understand what an Islamic revival among the youth in present-day Indonesia means, we should avoid interpretations that disconnect 'radicals' from 'moderates', or for that matter 'political' from 'popular' expressions of religion. It makes more sense to examine how young people are variously responding to the conditions in which radical movements arise – urban environments where the maelstrom of change is most pressingly felt by younger people – and to relate this to their experiences of religion in daily life. Then we may get a better picture of the tensions and dilemmas that face GPI activists, students drawn to Islamic mysticism, or young feminists wearing a *jilbab*, in attempting to reconcile old and new demands and desires of life in an increasingly plural world.

In Indonesia as elsewhere, the crumbling of establishments together with changing conditions of modernity confront young people with new challenges, such as the problem of balancing tolerance and criticism in a world fraught with incongruity and conflict. It should come as no surprise that religion comes to play an important role in taking up these challenges, or that the meaning of religion itself will alter in the process.

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