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Ajinomoto Indonesia Haram or Halal?

Kobayashi, Y.

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Southeast Asia

YASUKO KOBAYASHI

On 5 January 2001 the Japanese *Asahi Shinbun* newspaper reported that the Indonesian Department of Health had ordered P.T. Ajinomoto-Indonesia to withdraw its product, Ajinomoto, an artificial seasoning of monosodium glutamate (MSG), from the market because it contained pork. A few days later, the then Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid, also an expert on *fiqh*, expressed to the Japanese Minister of Justice that he believed the Ajinomoto seasoning could indeed be consumed by Muslims. This seemingly trivial occurrence nonetheless became intertwined in the religious and political issues of Indonesia under the Wahid government.



Monosodium Glutamate: Halal or Haram?

Ajinomoto, a multinational corporation based in Japan, has been operating in Indonesia for more than thirty years and has succeeded in establishing itself in the Indonesian market by selling its product in small bags at quite reasonable prices. In Japan itself, nowadays people do not consume this artificial seasoning very often as it is widely known that natural ones are healthier. In Southeast Asia, however, Ajinomoto is regularly consumed despite the availability of various kinds of natural spices.

Halal certificate

In Indonesia, one can find the mark of 'halal' or 'halal 100%' on the wrappings of processed food. This means the product has met the government requirements for *halal* products. The MUI (Majelis Ulama Indonesia; Indonesian Council of Ulama) is authorized to assess the products. The LPPOM-MUI (Lembaga Pnengkajian Pangan, Obat-obat, Kosmetika-MUI; Assessment Institute of Foods, Drugs and Cosmetics of the ICU) is in charge of scientific assessment. The results of field and laboratory examinations are brought to an auditors' meeting of the LPPOM-MUI, after which the Fatwa Committee assesses the data relating to products from the point of view of religion, granting or withholding approval. A *halal* certificate issued by the MUI thus declares the legitimacy of foodstuffs in accordance with the dictates of Islamic law. However, this certification system, which began in 1994, is not obligatory. A producer can apply voluntarily for a *halal* certificate. To date, almost 1300 products have obtained *halal* certification, but that figure constitutes only some 10% of the total of products concerned.

The certificate is valid for two years, but the LPPOM-MUI must be consulted promptly on any change of ingredient, food additive or raw material in order to gain approval for its use. Ajinomoto obtained its latest *halal* certificate in September 1998 and reapplied in July 2000. The application showed that one of Ajinomoto's ingredients had been changed – from Bactosoytone to Bactosoytone – without consulting the LPPOM-MUI.

The main raw material of Ajinomoto is sugarcane molasses, fermented by microbes and made into MSG, which is further separated and purified. Bactosoytone, which is not produced by P.T. Ajinomoto-Indonesia itself but is purchased from the Difco Corporation in the United States, is used as the growth medium for the fermentation microbes. Bactosoytone is made from soybeans out of which the protein is hydrolyzed. The LPPOM-MUI looked for information on this unfamiliar ingredient and they received a letter from the United States informing them that in the process of hydrolysis, an enzyme extracted from a pig pancreas is used as a catalyst in the manufacturing of Bactosoytone. The use of such an enzyme in the production process became an issue even though the final product of Ajinomoto does not contain any pork enzyme.

The LPPOM-MUI reported these findings to the Fatwa Committee, where the matter was hotly debated. In October 2000 the LPPOM-MUI advised P.T. Ajinomoto-Indonesia to stop using Bactosoytone. They heeded this and from 23 November began to replace Bactosoytone with Mameno, which is free from pork enzymes. On 16 December the Fatwa Committee concluded that the Ajinomoto that had been produced by using Bactosoytone was *haram*.

Legal-formalism or multi-dimensional approach

Let us consider briefly the *ijtihad* process of the Fatwa Committee. Naturally the discussion starts with the prohibition of the eating of pork, found in the Qur'an. Next is the *hadith* containing the Prophet Mohammad's utterance concerning the disposal of oil in which a dead mouse has been found. The committee quotes the '*ulamas*' long-standing agreement that every part of a pig is *najis* '*ain*, inherently impure. Then, a *kaidah* (legal maxim) is applied, to wit: 'in cases where *halal* things are mixed with *haram* things, then *haram* things are pronounced to be dominant'. Finally the results obtained by the LPPOM-MUI are considered and a decision is taken.¹ Clearly the MUI's deliberations concentrate on the religious domain and scrutinize religious materials.

We may look at how Abdurrahman Wahid justified his opinion. He also began with the Qu'ran, but specified the limitations of the prohibition against the eating of pork. He did not take issue with the use of pork, because it has too wide an application. He received a report that no pork enzyme was extracted from the final product of Ajinomoto. He applied a *kaidah* 'giving priority to the rejection of taking a great risk rather than wishing to gain benefit'.² Also he took into consideration the withdrawal of investment and the possibility of mass unemployment.³

The first criticism of the MUI's fatwa came from a scientist, Umar Anggoro Jenie, a

chemistry professor at Gadjah Mada University: 'Bactosoytone is not an active material. So Ajinomoto is not a *haram* item.'⁴ According to some Muslim intellectuals, this case is included in the category of *khilafiyah* (an issue on which different opinions are legitimately possible), which is often found in Islam.

President Wahid was criticized by rival politicians for interfering in the religious administration procedure. Demonstrators also came to the presidential palace to protest. Wahid has earned a reputation as a substantialist Muslim, that is, one who wishes to concentrate on the real substance of Islam. For a long time he has been criticizing stiff legal-formalism, and has been encouraging '*ulama* to move out of the narrow framework of religion and pay attention to social problems. He considers how Islam can respond to the demands of modern society. He advocates a multi-dimensional approach to practical problems. And so it is clear that he would still have delivered the same blunt opinion concerning the MUI's fatwa whatever his position in Indonesian society. As a supporter of pluralism, he did not forget to say: 'Both opinions are correct in doing *ijtihad*,'⁵ again provoking the anger of the conservative '*ulama*.

Political conflict

President Wahid stated that he saw this problem as a political one, part of the series of manoeuvres undertaken to damage his government. Many were inclined to agree. Indeed, during those months there was a sequence of attacks on the President, ranging from bomb explosions to the disclosure of a 'sex scandal', all intended to effect a speedy discrediting of Wahid and his government. Indonesians seemed exhausted as a result of all the political conflict – any and all problems were suspected of having a political background. The starting point for all of this, however, remains the issue of P.T. Ajinomoto-Indonesia and its having neglected the obligatory consultation on a change of ingredients. While it may be difficult to establish any political motivation behind the issuing of the MUI's fatwa itself, there are certain political issues that played a role in the evolution of events.

The MUI and P.T. Ajinomoto-Indonesia had initially agreed not to bring the issue into the open, but to settle it secretly by withdrawing products produced before 23 November. However, the *haram* decision was leaked by another Islamic organization and the MUI was forced to announce this publicly. It may well be that about this time political motivation began to play a part. The first media report appeared on 29 December in the newspapers. On 3 January the Ajinomoto case was first reported on television and the events were followed by the media for several days but not to any great extent. Suddenly on 8 January the Ajinomoto case was presented as the most important item and was widely reported. This scale of coverage was maintained for a few days, the President's statement forming the climax.

The internet newsgroup 'Indonesia-L' featured many postings on this issue, including those of critics of the MUI who supported the New Order to legitimize development policy in accordance with the Islamic point of view. Broader distrust of Din Syamsuddin,

the general secretary of the MUI, was expressed in that he often appeared in the media as a spokesman of the MUI. It is widely known that Wahid bitterly denounced him for having the intention of politicizing Islam. It can thus be said that the historical background also generated speculation concerning the political motivation of this case.

However, the majority of the public remained calm, although there were some small disturbances. Around the middle of January the news was disappearing rapidly from the television as if the effort expended in making use of this case to hasten political conflict had been in vain. Only in newspapers was related news found from time to time.

P.T. Ajinomoto-Indonesia apologized and withdrew their product from the market, at a cost of six hundred million yen excluding transportation and personnel expenses. Ajinomoto obtained a new *halal* certificate around the middle of February. However, it does not seem so easy to restore Indonesian consumers' confidence in Ajinomoto.

This case demonstrates how in Islam differences of opinion may arise, and some Muslims can accept that while others cannot. Also, in the midst of political conflict as in the present Indonesia, anything can be made into a political issue. However, we should not forget that in such a situation a sound and constructive opinion can still be heard. 'It is regrettable that society, '*ulama* and political elites are so responsive to the issue of pork lard, but they seem to turn a blind eye towards various corruption scandals which should be punished more severely in that their destructive power is far more dangerous than is the consuming of Ajinomoto.'⁶

Notes

1. *Mimbar Ulama: Suara Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, no. 269 (January 2001): 18–21.
2. *Ibid.*: 4.
3. *Kompas*, 11 January 2001.
4. *Panji Masyarakat*, no. 30 Tahun IV (17 Januari 2001): 69.
5. *Kompas*, 11 January 2001.
6. Komaruddin Hidayat, 'Ajinomoto dan "The Low Trust Society"', *Tempo*, no. 46/XXIX (January 2001): 33.

Yasuko Kobayashi is an associate professor at Nanzan University, Nagoya, Japan.
E-mail: kyasuko@nanzan-u.ac.jp