



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Muslim-Hindu Relations in Contemporary Indonesia

Ramstedt, M.

Citation

Ramstedt, M. (1999). Muslim-Hindu Relations in Contemporary Indonesia. *Isim Newsletter*, 4(1), 14-14. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17342>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17342>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Southeast Asia

MARTIN RAMSTEDT

The collapse of the Soeharto regime has undermined the three legitimacy pillars of the Indonesian state: the much acclaimed economic development of the country is thwarted; the alleged preoccupation of the Indonesian government with economic and political equity has been recognized as the rhetorical decorum of 'crony-capitalism'; and the lauded socio-political stability has finally erupted in social unrest and perturbation, gradually dissolving the 'social glue' provided by Indonesia's 'civil religion', the *pancasila* philosophy. The repressed ghosts of nationalist imagination – political Islam and the disruption of centre-periphery relations – walk again. Apart from gender, 'religion' became an issue in the run for presidency.

Ever since the independent, unitary state of Indonesia came into being in 1950, Indonesia's 'Hindus' have had to fight against cultural and religious discrimination on the part of the central government in general and the Ministry of Religion, representing mainly the interests of the Muslim majority, in particular. First of all, it was not until 1958 that 'Hinduism' was recognized as 'religion' by the Ministry of Religion. Since religion was defined as being a universal and monotheistic creed, based on a holy book which had been conceived by a holy prophet in divine revelation, recognition was initially granted only to Islam and Christianity. The various 'animist' traditions throughout the Indonesian archipelago were classified as primitive and superstitious belief systems, which were destined to be transformed into local variants of the modern Indonesian culture by the modernizing policy of the Indonesian government and by the spread of religion. The Balinese immediately reacted to the threat of being proselytized by either Islam or Christianity by redefining the tenets of their traditional belief system, originally called 'Shiva-Buddha-Religion', and by reforming those aspects of their culture that were not in keeping with the modernist requirements of the Indonesian government. Having streamlined their theology and ritual practices according to the definition of religion by the Ministry of Religion, they succeeded in achieving the recognition of 'Hinduism' in 1958.

New order Hinduism

With the onset of Soeharto's 'new order', 'Hinduism' became the umbrella-institution for various other local traditions (i.e. Aluk To Dolo and Ada' Mappurondo of the Sa'dan- and Mamasa-Toraja as well as the tradition of the Towani Tolotang in South Sulawesi, Pemena of the Karo-Batak, Kaharingan of the Ngaju- and Luangan-Dayak in Central and East Kalimantan) whose adherents have turned to 'Hinduism' with the hope of being able to continue their ritual practices under the protection of a more tolerant religion. The integration of these new 'Hindu sects', as they are called, into 'Indonesian Hinduism' has nurtured the prejudice against Hinduism still prevailing among Muslims and Christians. Until today, Hinduism has frequently been accused of being polytheistic and animistic, hence of not being a 'religion', or at least a religion equal to Islam and Christianity. During the Soeharto regime, Indonesia's 6 million 'Hindus' were protected against attempts at Muslim and Christian proselytizing by the government party GOLKAR and by the army both of which promoted 'religious tolerance' as one tenet of the state ideology, the so-called *pancasila* philosophy. Since the fall of Soeharto and the subsequent de-legitimization of GOLKAR, the army, and the *pancasila* philosophy, the non-Balinese 'Hindus' have again become the target of Islamization and Christianization.

Since October 1998, the sensitive relations between Indonesian Muslims and 'Hindus' have suffered a further setback from what has come to be known as the 'A.M. Saefuddin Affair'. The whole affair started on 14 October 1998, when the Minister for Nutrition and Horticulture, A.M. Saefuddin, who had then recently joined the vanity fair of those competing for the Indonesian presidency in the 15 November 1999 elections, was asked by a journalist to assess his chances *vis-à-vis* Megawati Soekarnoputri, the popular daughter of the charismatic former president Soekarno. Megawati had just won massive support as a presidential candidate at the congress of the Fighting Indonesian Democratic Party (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia, PDI, Perjuangan), taking place in Bali from 8-10 October 1998.

The ambitious minister boasted that his chances against Megawati would be very good, since he himself is male and a Muslim, whereas Megawati is female and a Hindu, insinuating that the Muslim majority of the Indonesian people would not approve of a Hindu president.

When accusing the liberal Muslimah Megawati of being Hindu, Saefuddin referred to a photo which had been published in several Indonesian newspapers. It showed Megawati joining the prayers in one of the Balinese temples. This breach of orthodox Muslim convention was hitherto considered to be quite a normal act for Indonesian politicians and bureaucrats visiting Bali. That it was now made an issue by Saefuddin aroused massive protest and demonstrations in Bali.

Saefuddin himself is a representative of the more radical faction of Indonesian Islam. Besides, he shared much common ground with B.J. Habibie, the short-serving successor of Soeharto. Like Habibie, Saefuddin studied engineering in Germany and is hence also a member of the Union of Alumni from German Universities (Perhimpunan Alumni Jerman) and the Union of Indonesian Engineers (Persatuan Insinyur Indonesia). He is furthermore a member of the Guiding Council of the Committee for the Co-operation for Indonesian Muslim Boarding Schools (Majelis Pimpinan Badan Kerjasama Pondok Pesantren Indonesia) and a member of the Council of Experts of the Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals (Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia, CMI), which was headed by Habibie before he became president.

Both moderate and fierce critics of Saefuddin in and outside Bali agreed that his statement had unnecessarily dragged private matters of religion and belief into the political arena, even that he had selfishly tried to use religion against his political rival. Criticism differed, however, on whether Saefuddin had scorned Hinduism in general and whether he had therefore violated the principle of religious tolerance prescribed

by the *pancasila*, which is still supposed to be the ideological basis of the Indonesian state.

Hindu protests

When, due to Balinese pressure, then President Habibie agreed to demand an official apology from his minister, matters began to escalate, for Saefuddin's apology rang a rather contemptuous and insincere note. In response to his half-hearted apology, Bali went into strike and continuous demonstration, demanding that Saefuddin be removed from office and stand trial for having endangered the national unity. Several Balinese even went so far as to threaten to call for an independent Balinese state (Negara Bali Merdeka), should their demands not be granted by Habibie.

The demonstrations and strikes were actively supported by most segments of Balinese society including representatives of the tourist industry and a considerable number of Muslims living in Bali. During the demonstrations and strikes, every Hindu Balinese wore white traditional clothing usually donned during prayers, rituals and ceremonies. People even brought along some musical instruments (*baleganjur*), which are normally used in ritual processions, and sang ritual songs like traditional Balinese *geguritan* and India-derived *kirtan*. Hundreds of banners cursed A.M. Saefuddin and threatened, for instance, to throw him into a box together with pigs. The decorum of the public protests revoked similar actions of Balinese self-defence which took place at the beginning of this century, i.e. the dramatic *puputan* or ritual self-destructive fights against the Dutch colonizers.

Smaller demonstrations also took place in Jakarta, Bandung and Surabaya where there are large numbers of Balinese students, government officials and businessmen. In the other 'Hindu' areas in Indonesia, protest was almost non-existent. There, the 'Hindus' belong to the politically, economically and educationally marginalized minority even among their own respective ethnic groups, the majority of which have already either converted to Christianity or Islam. Hence, they often do not dare to protest against a kind of cultural racism which they have come to regard as almost normal. The Balinese, on the other hand, who have developed a strong affluent middle class, have a very strong Hindu identity. And it is their religious symbols that have frequently become the target of religious defamation. Recent examples are the scandalous photo of a Balinese offering containing a golf ball which was published in the brochure *Bali Kini* in order to advertise the respective tourist facilities of the island, or the plans to build a huge Garuda statue in the south of Bali in order to greet tourists arriving by plane. In 1995, Bali-wide demonstrations attempted in vain to prevent the construction of the Bali Nirwana Beach Resort right next

to the famous Tanah Lot Temple. Since that time, protest against (Muslim) Javanese selling Balinese religion to the tourist industry has never really subsided.

In spite of Balinese agitation, Habibie eventually refrained from removing A.M. Saefuddin from office. The president closed the whole affair after another official apology had been forwarded by the recalcitrant minister. Meanwhile, some prominent *ulama* and Muslim intellectuals had urged the Indonesian Council of Islamic Theologians (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) to issue a *fatwa* on whether a woman can or cannot become president. On 7 November 1998, the same day that Saefuddin apologized for the second time, an Islamic Congress (Kongres Umat Islam) voted against women becoming president or vice president. On 1 June 1999, this vote was officially expressed in something stronger than a *fatwa*, i.e. in a so-called *amanat* – a mandate of the Indonesian Muslims represented by the Indonesian Council of Islamic Theologians. During the actual elections for presidency in October 1999, it became apparent that the Muslim vote prevented a woman – at the least for the time being – from becoming president of Indonesia, notwithstanding her large popular support. ♦

Martin Ramstedt is a European Science Foundation (ESF) Alliance fellow at the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), Leiden, the Netherlands.
E-mail: mramstedt@rullet.leidenuniv.nl