

## Politicization of Islam and Islamization of Politics in Indonesia: A Sociological Perspective

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### Abstract

Valorising religion in politics lays out the social aspect of religion itself, categorically clustered in political sociology of religion. Religion and politics, due to their very nature as social institutions, cannot be separated but must be precisely analysed in a binary perspective. Sociologically, the relationship between these two institutions can take two extreme forms. By nature, religion tends to contribute to society in civilization. By choice, religion can manifest its contribution to society in two ways, either domination or periphery. More specifically on peace studies, therefore, the genealogical problem goes straight to the very peaceful aspect of religion – that is characterized by the esoteric mysticism of religion. As every single religion has its own internal plurality, institutional religion has proved itself to deliver its peaceful aspect to the society. In Indonesia, the existence of “cultural Islam” is often considered as an anti-thesis toward “political Islam”. An indirect logic from this stipulation refers to a possibility that “cultural Islam” has been more successful in delivering the peaceful aspect of Islam rather than “political Islam”. This article aims to take a deeper look at Islam as a mass religion in Indonesian politics, especially in its politicizing peaceful aspect to the wider community.

**Keywords:** polity, Islamists, cultural Islam, politics.

### Introduction

Despite its 88% Muslim population out of 240 million, Indonesia is barely categorised as a Muslim world. This statement was professionally delivered by Robert Hefner, a professor at Boston University who conducted his research in Indonesia (Hefner, 2021). His proper knowledge about Indonesian Muslims cannot be undermined or ignored. He said that an investigation of Muslim politics that includes this often overlooked portion of the Islamic world has the additional benefit of allowing us to distinguish features of Muslim politics that owe more to Middle Eastern circumstances than Muslim civilization as a whole. Marginalized in treatments of classical Islam, henceforth, he insisted on distinguishing Indonesia as an important point of entry to an understanding of the diversity of modern Muslim politics.

The very question raised by that statement can be formulated at its utmost sociological level, in what way the Indonesian Muslims transform themselves so smoothly that supports the Indonesian civilization. In other words, the proper question on how the Indonesian “cultural Muslim” has managed to cope with their competitor “political Muslim” will go deeper in the context of public civilization. On the one hand, Chiara Formichi witnessed that scholarly approaches to Islam and politics remain unlike and even rare, even though they can be inevitably influential in platforming the ethical and moral foundations of civilization (Formichi, 2021). On the other hand, several endeavours in exploring Islamic compatibility in democracy sound a little burdened at some stage – if not artificial. Lufti Makhasin and Usman Ismail are only a few to mention. Their hypothesis on how the decline of democratization in Indonesia impacted by the Islamic values permeates something more sociological rather than philosophical (Makhasin, 2010). Tasawuf, notwithstanding, is left theoretically accessible for instilling the Islamic ethics in politics (Ismail, 2010). Meanwhile Diego Fosseti and Chris Chapin are complete outsiders among other prominent Indonesianists. Their anti-theses about Islam in relation with the singled-out task of civilization in democracy can be dominantly felt, delivering internal friction in Islam itself that not only hinders but also eliminates Islamic value to impact public life (Fossati, 2010). Meanwhile, identity politics had been solely considered as the perfect hurdle of Islam in instilling Islamic value in politics (Chapin, 2010).

At its finest, the assessment delivered by Fareed Zakaria (2024), a Muslim scholar who lives in the United States of America, sounds honest in his hard-fought findings. In his book, *Post American World*, he was preoccupied with being unable to deny the possibility of a crystallized-genealogical problem that puts Islam as the main factor. Nevertheless, he could not accept the entire problem without confronting its stimulus. He said: *"If Islam itself is the problem, then why is this conflict only happening now? Why did Islamic fundamentalism only emerge after the Iranian Revolution? Islam and the West have lived side by side for fourteen centuries. There have been some wars, but far more peace"*.

Both Fosseti and Hefner mention frictions in Islam that go uncontrollably brutal. Hefner compares the development of Islam politics with what happened in the West conducted by Christianity. Quoting Alexis de Tocqueville, congregational Christianity was a vital element in the democratic culture of early 19<sup>th</sup>-century America (Tocqueville 1969). As Hefner cites, De Tocqueville understood that the American separation of church and state took government out of the business of coercing conformity, but it did not take religion out of public life. Religion remained one of the most important institutions in American civil society. What is the most important thing is, according to him, based on Casanova’s findings, American

civilization was characterized not by the smooth consensualism of "civil religion", but by vigorous denominational competition and ethical debate (Casanova 1994:211-34).

## Discussion

In a configurative frame, it is not some Indonesianists who triggered scholarly researches on Islamization of Indonesia, e.g. Formichi, many original-Indonesian Muslim scholars have tirelessly accommodated "peaceful face of Islam" more than "political Islam". It has been generally well known that it was "cultural Islam" who negotiated with some Islamists during the Revolution, ending up with Pancasila as the foundation of the nation. They insisted on instrumentalizing heterogenous Indonesia, instead of Islam as the majority group, to foster the nation (Setneg RI, 1945). As Formichi (2021) provides, the movement of politicizing Islam to Islamize Indonesia from *Partai Sarekat Islam Indonesia* (PSSI) and Masyumi with their pan-Islamism propaganda in 1930-1945, calling for the *Perang Sabil* and Jihad in 1945-1947, a step closer to establishing the Islamic state in 1948, the emergence of Darul Islam (DI) in 1949-1962, until the latest version of amendment to change the Indonesian ideology during the Reformation (1999-2002), faded away without losing its real impact in the grassroot level.

At the latter stage, the phrase "Islam Nusantara" as the most comprehensive formulation for Indonesia had arguably never come easy to be agreed either philosophically or pragmatically. The rationalization confronting the notion is based on the scripture, stating that Islam is a perfect religion already (Ridwan, 2019). This kind of literal conceptualization could also be tracked in the Fatwa delivered by MUI (*Indonesian Ulema Council*) on pluralism, liberalism and secularism. Simone Sinn precisely observed this anti-thesis not only toward other non-Muslim communities, but also toward the Indonesian traditional value. She said:

*„Einbezogen wird auch die Fatwa des MUI (Rat der Islamgelehrten in Indonesien, the Indonesian Ulemma Council), über Pluralismus, Liberalismus und Säkularismus. Sie ist selbst keine staatliche Regelung, hat aber unmittelbar die Frage nach der religionsverfassungsrechtlichen Grundordnung Indonesiens zum Thema und gehört deshalb der Sache nach zur Analyse der religionspolitische Auseinandersetzungen“. (Sinn, 2014)*

Overall, Jokowi was considered as the only president among six others who had been strongly decisive in principal but technically modest (*fortiter in re, suaviter in modo*) against Islamic extremist groups such as Hitzbut Tahrir (HTI, banned 19 July 2017) and Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders Front/FPI, 30 December 2020) respectively. More specifically, the 2019 presidential election was categorized as the most brutal appearance of Islamic political agenda. It crystallized the previous movement that resulted in Basuki Tjahja Purnama or nicknamed 'Ahok', the former governor of Jakarta who is Christian and a

Chinese, to be sent to jail for blasphemy against Islam in 2017. Objectively, both *de jure* and *de facto*, he was not guilty. But, the aggressive political movement by *kadrun* and those who dislike Jokowi and Ahok for political rivalry, Ahok should have spent two years in prison. Consequently, Ahok was halted to run for any governmental position. At the grassroot level, racist and religious issues have been politicized so massive that all high school students across the District of Central Java should have answered their summative test in May 2019 with the question: 'Who is the blasphemer of Islam?'. They had no choice but chose 'Ahok' as the correct answer, without being given any chance to confront or argue. This Islamic radicalism has been systematically instilled into the heart of education as the rest of Indonesian society was sleeping peacefully like a baby.

Meanwhile, Franz Magnis-Suseno (2017) attempted to explore Islamic political movement after Suharto. As both Magnis-Suseno and Sinn released their findings - focusing on how Suharto was too late to accommodate some Islamist groups that resulted in his fall, Sumanto Al Qurtuby articulated Suharto's anti-political Islam and his preference for cultural Islam (al-Qurtuby, 2013). What the three scholars missed is the most fluid characteristics of Indonesian politics. It has been generally well-perceived that politics always arguably plays a pivotal role in any field of Indonesian public life. In Indonesia, breaking news in politics could literally change in seconds. Due to its brutality, entwined by its banality, politics in Indonesia is considered more than as 'room of possibilities' in good ways and at the same time 'room of forcing/making something impossible to be possible'. There is a popular saying in Indonesian politics, stating 'there is no eternal rivalry nor partnership, but political interest lasts forever'.

A prominent Indonesian historian, Soedjatmoko, meticulously exposed the historical chronicles of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago, from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries onward, to its greatest impact. According to him, Islam at that time was a progressive driving force, liberating many people from the shackles of closed communities and making them part of the global Muslim community. Soedjatmoko (1984) makes is clear: *However, despite all the dynamics it initiated, and even though Islam is not just a religion but also a complete system of social organization that sought to impose its own form on the societies it entered, Islam did not fully succeed in shaping Indonesian social and religious life according to its own mold. The Islamization of Indonesia was never truly achieved ."*

Firmly but with great heart, Soedjatmoko explained that even in Sumatra, with the longest history of Islamic experience, Islam never fully succeeded in replacing pre-existing customs as the basis of social order. In fact, within most Sumatran communities, there is a gap between those who live from a supreme Muslim conscience and other groups who, while subjectively no less devout to Islam as a religion, in practice tend to prioritize customary prescriptions over Islamic ones. This division has been a persistent source of social and political tension, not only in Sumatra but also in many other regions over the past few

centuries. He argues that the gap between Islam and adat, and the contrast between second-wave reformist Islam and the older orthodox stream, are both reflected in modern political life. He humbly acknowledges the inability of Indonesian Islam to identify with any secular movement for Islamic renewal and modernization. He said,

*"The basic set of attitudes I have outlined above may shed some light on the inability of Islam in Indonesia to identify itself with any secular movement for social renewal and modernization. Islam's own efforts at modernization are still very much confined to its own world and its own problems. The necessary shift in perspective regarding its relationship to an independent secular world—even one that is rapidly evolving—may only just be beginning. For many members of the post-revolutionary generation of Muslims, the old debates about the interpretation of law and the position of the caliphate versus obedience have become increasingly irrelevant, which may justify the hope that this generation will be able to address the problems of nation-building and social change creatively. The problem of bringing the ulama closer to them in accepting the modern world remains significant."*

According to Soedjatmoko, in addition to exclusivism, internal plurality explains the persistent emergence of differences (caliphate) in the interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) and theological issues, such as the position of reason (ijtihad) versus obedience (taqlid) in interpreting and applying old rules to new problems. This was a significant cause of the division between modernists and traditionalists, which manifested itself politically in the conflict between Masyumi and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). The purpose of this brief overview of Indonesian cultural history is to demonstrate how differences within the Indonesian political spectrum are embedded in history, and how the two main cultural currents responded to modernity and independence. It is clear that each current faced its own difficulties in adapting to the vastly changed post-independence national environment. The reactions, or types of reactions, of each to various problems were, to a considerable extent, influenced in advance by traditional attitudes and behavioural patterns.

An interesting review by Soedjatmoko of two experiments in implementing parliamentary democracy and guided democracy, referring to the decline of constitutional democracy presented by Herbert Feith in the topic *"The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia"*. He argued that both failed not because of parliamentary decisions, but because of extra-parliamentary intrigues by political parties combining and recombining in temporary and constantly shifting alliances. In reality, parliament never held power. Power was firmly held in the hands of party oligarchies. According to him, Feith correctly outlined the most important reason why the experiments of the early and mid-1950s failed: the emergence of the independence struggle without a unified political leadership or a structure of forces that could serve as a foundation for national leadership. This was due to the inability of the political elite as a whole to

establish a national goal. Evidence of this leadership weakness was the frequent cabinet changes within short periods.

Soedjatmoko was so irritated that he described the behavioural tendencies of Indonesian society as *kleinburgerlijkheid*, a closed understanding of the nation characterized by both arrogance and cunning, and which certainly did not allow for free growth. The concept of *kleinburgerlijkheid* refers to an excessive belief in the uniqueness of a nation's personality, which seems to be unique and cannot be compared with the culture and personality of other nations, all of which will lead to a narrow attitude without comparison. Without reading Soedjatmoko's previous writing, the Javanese term I utilized is "*kumalungkung*" to describe the tendency of Indonesian society to behave in the name of pious deconstruction of a value system, but in reality, it merely destroys whatever has been carefully constructed and is unprepared for the new concept that must be pursued as a collective value system (Sudarto, 2018). Fighting for Pancasila and its noble values is a fact that can be categorized as an anomaly precisely because it has been defeated by mainstream political Islam. The character of Indonesian society is indeed strange, not unique. It's like a teenager whose emotions are still unstable but who pretends to be able to fulfil the responsibilities of adulthood. I call this "*kumalungkung*," a Javanese phrase that resembles a split personality, as acute inferiority requires a grand and luxurious appearance in all personal claims in the public sphere. The cultural circularity of Indonesian society, on the one hand, provides eternal energy for surviving even the most difficult situations, whether economic or natural. On the other hand, this circularity creates a kind of fondness for experimenting with anything that seems interesting and new. In the name of deconstruction, the strong tendency to destroy anything that has been established is inherently intrusive in Indonesian society. Whether intentional or collective, this spontaneous desire to disrupt the established is a type of behavioural tendency that arises from the subconscious: the will to power. The allure of power is indeed very seductive for political Islam.

In a classical sociological approach, Max Weber (1966) termed the Islamic typology as '*warrior*'. Weber attributed this personality stereotype to the influence of the city. While Christianity is an urban religion, with the Christian typology referred to as the scholarly scribe, the city influences Islam, but Islam is not an urban religion. More specifically, Islam can be categorized as a cosmopolitan religion due to its coastal domain of birth. In reality, various cosmopolitan cultures in Indonesia and Africa embody Islamic identities. The Islamic personality type, synonymous with coastal culture, refers to two primary behaviours: extroversion and non-institutionalism, due to the lack of a clear hierarchical structure as in Catholicism. In Central Java and Africa, Catholicism developed in the centre and south, not on the north coast. Muntilan's nickname as the "Bethlehem of Java" refers to the early mission of Father Van Lith SJ in 1897, who established a Teacher Training School (SPG) for indigenous youth. From Muntilan, as the epicenter of the

mission, the number of followers was growing greater to the south (Yogyakarta) than to the north (Semarang, Kudus, and Pati). This pattern supports the hypothesis that Islam is a cosmopolitan religion, while Christianity is an urban religion.

This stereotypical behaviour can be regarded as a sociological attempt to characterize Islam in its relation to the weak aspect of democratization. Back to Fareed Zakaria, he acknowledges that Islam strongly supports authoritarianism and that there are no democratic values in the Quran. He clearly states:

*"It is clear that the model of leadership according to the Quran is authoritarian. There are many examples of just kings, pious rulers, and wise judges. The Bible also has authoritarian tendencies. The kings of the Old Testament were not democrats. Solomon was a king of an absolute monarchy. The reality is that there is little clue to be gained by searching for the true nature of Islam in the Quran. The Quran is a book of immense scope, full of poetry and contradictions—much like the Bible and the Torah. Until the founding of Israel, the Jews were a minority scattered throughout the modern world."*

According to Zakaria, the Westernized Jeffersonian concept of democracy is completely alien to Islamic geopolitics. Two examples of the rejection of supreme Islamic leaders when America offered democracy to the Arab world demonstrate how even the most pious political will for democracy will fail to be incorporated into Islamic values. American diplomats slowly raised the issue of human rights and suggested that the Egyptian government make concessions to political dissidents, grant more freedom of the press, and stop imprisoning intellectuals. Hosni Mubarak's answer was short but firm, *"If I do what you ask, Islamic fundamentalism will take over Egypt. Is this what you want?"* Americans and Arabs have been engaging in such conversations for years. When Clinton demanded that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat agree to the Camp David peace plan negotiated in July 2001, Arafat responded exactly the same as Mubarak: *"If I do what you want, Hamas will take power tomorrow"*.

Rather than being an alternative form of governance for the advancement of civil society, the very idea of democracy is seen as an attempt to poison Islamic values ("Westoxification"). This does not mean that all Muslims are anti-democratic. The unique dynamism of Islam points to two contrasting ends, with monarchies being more liberal than the societies they govern. For example, King Abdullah of Jordan is very liberal on women's rights but is opposed by his own people. While the emir of Kuwait has proposed granting women the right to vote, parliament and Islamist groups have strongly opposed it. When Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah proposed allowing women to drive, conservatives rallied against him and forced him to withdraw his proposal.

Zakaria stated that Arab Muslims would happily seek power through democratic elections, but would then establish their own authoritarian theocratic rules. According to him, this path is the opposite of the historical process in the Western world, where liberalism produces democracy and democracy fuels liberalism. The Arab path has instead produced dictatorship, which then gave rise to terrorism. Terrorism is merely the most widely reported manifestation of the dysfunctional relationship between state and society. There is still economic paralysis, social stagnation, and intellectual bankruptcy. The notions of representation, elections, popular suffrage, political institutions governed by laws enacted by a parliamentary assembly, laws to be upheld and supported by an independent judiciary, and the very idea of the state—all of these are alien to the Muslim political tradition.

However, Zakaria pointed to an intrinsic aspect of Islam's anti-authoritarian character in the Hadith: "If he commands a sin, a Muslim must neither obey his leader nor obey that command." This logic is also advocated by Asep Usman Ismail in his study of the Sufi approach. Meanwhile, Chris Chaplin focuses more on the creation of a Muslim majority identity and its impact on democracy. Regarding the compatibility of Islam with capitalism, Zakaria pointed to Indonesia, which until recently was a third-world country held up as an example by the World Bank because it had liberalized its economy and grown by 7% annually for nearly three decades. Indonesia is also said to have implemented democracy and had its first female president, Megawati (2001-2004). Besides Indonesia, the three largest Muslim populations in the world are Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. All three have elected female leaders: Benazir Bhutto (Prime Minister of Pakistan, 1988-1990), Sheikh Hasina (Prime Minister of Bangladesh, 2009-2024), and Droupadi Murmu (President of India, 2022 to present).

In my observation, the growth of Islam, which is projected to surpass the Christian population by 2050 as revealed by The Pew Research, refers to the non-institutional characteristics inherent in Islam itself. Zakaria said,

*"Islam lacks a religious body that can officially declare the correct interpretation. The problem is the absence of religious authority within Islam, not its over-dominance".*

The decision to challenge the state because it is insufficiently Islamic can be made by anyone who wishes to do so. Islam shares many similarities with Protestantism. With just one practice, one can declare oneself a religious leader. In a religion without an official religious body, Osama has as much or as little authority to issue fatwas as a Pakistani taxi driver in New York City." According to him, the question of the fundamental nature of Islam is that Islam is not what is written in its books, but what its adherents do.



The analogy offered by Lebanese scholar Halim Barakt regarding the syntax of the family in Islamic politics is very inspiring. The same patriarchal relationships and values that prevail in Arab families also seem to prevail in the workplace, at school, and within religious, political, and social organizations. A father figure lords it over others, monopolizes authority, demands rigid obedience, and shows very little tolerance for dissent. By projecting a parental image, those in positions of responsibility (as rulers, leaders, teachers, employers, supervisors) securely occupy the top of this pyramid of authority. Once in this position, a patriarch cannot be overthrown except by someone equally patriarchal.

In his summary, Zakaria noted that the Arab world is deeply disappointed by the failure of its dreams of emulating the West because it is its leaders who have shattered them. Modernity presents a painful experience, as one failure follows another. Every path taken, whether socialism, secularism, or nationalism, has proven to be a dead end. However, the fact that fundamentalists are a minority within Islam makes the study of Islam as a whole seem biased. The daily lives of most Muslims do not reflect a fundamentally anti-Western or anti-modern belief. The world's most populous Muslim country, Indonesia, has had a secular government since its independence in 1945 and has a small religious opposition.

## **Conclusion**

In her presentation, Sharifah Alatas (2025) mentioned corruption that has been happening in many countries, especially developing countries. Based on her pragmatist lens, corruption has become the most brutal reality check for fostering religion in politics. In my perspective, no matter the Indonesian government has officially shown their obvious support (*policy*) by entrusting religion (*polity*) to run coal mining (*market/economics*), the single sociological question goes straight to religion dealing with corruption on a daily basis. From a sociological perspective, brutal frictions and factionalisms in Islam itself also unquestionably matter in hindering Islamic institutionalization in politics. In other words, Islam should have first coped with its own frictions to guarantee some peaceful environment – before providing a proper positively peaceful atmosphere for the rest of the society.

The sociological problem goes to its structural form of Islam itself. As Christianity, represented by Catholicism before the Enlightenment, had managed its peaceful institution despite its various denominations by dominating the society under the leadership of hierarchs, Islam should go deeper with its rationalization for spiritual leaders. In Catholicism, on the one hand, despite its enormous downfalls, celibacy plays a pivotal role in institutionalizing some collective behaviours based on religious rationalization. Divinization of the role of its hierarchs constructively manages any dissent or rebellion. On the other hand, the way Catholic congregations at the grassroots level develop themselves under blind trust

to their hierarchs in the name of religious obedience features how apoliticality has reserved them as cohesive power of the community.

From a sociological perspective, what becomes the most important thing in religion is the totem. In Catholicism, the status of hierarchs as religious leaders remains as a totem for the rest of the congregation. Respecting hierarchs has been even clustered in the same room with *sacrilege*, venial sins that could also halt heavenly grace. This level of institutionalization cannot be ignored or dismissed in any discussion of politicizing the peaceful aspect of religion, starting with the structural form of religion.

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