

# The Seven-Word Controversy

Research >  
Southeast Asia

Amendments to several crucial articles of the 1945 constitution topped the agenda at the most recent session of the Indonesian People's Consultative Assembly (MPR, *Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat*). Following upon lesser amendments (in 1999, 2000, and 2001), the 2002 annual session, held 1–10 August, tackled such vital issues as the authority of the MPR and the president; education; and religion. Particularly sensitive were proposals to amend Article 29, which would redefine the relationship between religion and state. Controversy raged over inclusion of the so-called 'seven words' of the 1945 Jakarta Charter ('*dengan kewajiban menjalankan syari'at Islam bagi pemeluknya*' [with the obligation for adherents of the faith to carry out Islamic sharia]), advocated by some Islamic parties, organizations and movements.<sup>1</sup>

By Moch Nur Ichwan

Three Islamic political factions<sup>2</sup> and one ultra-reformist Islamic organization<sup>3</sup> alone advocated the enshrinement of Islamic sharia in the constitution. In this they were opposed by the 'secular' factions.<sup>4</sup> Rejection of the 'seven words' also came from the largest Islamic organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. Former President Abdurrahman Wahid opposed altering

Article 29 on the grounds that it was the creation of the founding fathers of the Indonesian nation state. Echoing the 1945 statement of his father Wahid Hasyim, he argued that the most important question was not 'what ... shall be the place of Islam [in the state]', but rather, 'By what means shall we assure the place of all religions in independent Indonesia? What we need most of all at this time is the indissoluble unity of the nation.'<sup>5</sup> Later, Amien Rais suggested

that the religion article should not be amended. A poll by *Tempo Interaktif*, conducted 17–24 May 2002, found 52 per cent of respondents opposed to any amendments to the religion article. While 44 per cent were found to be in favour, they were divided as to its formulation.

## Debating the religion article

Anticipating deadlock, meetings to discuss 'crucial articles' of the constitu-

tion were held before the annual session of the MPR. Initiated by Islamic parties, participants at these meetings were accused of creating an 'Islamic caucus', a charge they denied. Participants supported amending Article 29 but did not agree on a formulation. The PPP, PBB, PNU (Nahdlatul Ummah Party), and PK (Justice Party) proposed the inclusion of the seven words of the Jakarta Charter, while the PAN and PKB had their own versions (later, the PKB changed its posi-

tion to defend the original text). The participation of the PKB in the meetings illustrated the split of the 'old friendship' between the 'traditional' Muslims (NU-PKB) and the nationalists (PDIP), due to the latter's participation in the impeachment of Abdurrahman Wahid from the presidency. Anticipating the deterioration of relations, Megawati's husband, Taufik Kiemas, visited Wahid, the head of the consultative body of the PKB, stressing the compatibility of 'nationalism and Islam'.

Meetings were then widened to include non-Islamic parties, such as PDIP and Golkar, defusing the issue of the so-called 'Islamic caucus'. As in the earlier meetings, the parties discussed

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the crucial articles, including, of course, the religion article. No agreement was reached except that, as far as possible, deadlock should be avoided at the annual session. Both Islamic and secular parties formulated alternative amendments to the religion article before the annual session.

### Article 29: 1

Alternative one: The state is based upon the belief in one God (original text).

Alternative two: The state is based upon the belief in one God with the obligation to implement Islamic sharia for the adherents of the religion.

Alternative three: The state is based upon the belief in one God with the obligation to implement religious teachings for the adherents of each religion.

The proponents of the Jakarta Charter supported the second alternative. The reformation faction supported the third alternative. Along with PDIP and Golkar, the PKB supported the original version. In the midst of the annual session, anti- and pro-amendment movements emerged inside and outside the MPR. Anti-amendment forces outside the MPR were spearheaded by retired military elites and PDIP members; inside the MPR, by PDIP legislators. It appeared that the PDIP was conducting a 'politics of double faces' with official statements supporting amendment alongside unofficial pronouncements suggesting otherwise.

Outside the MPR, supporters of the amendment demanded the inclusion of the seven words of the Jakarta Charter. Opposition to the idea also came from moderate Muslims, nationalists, and adherents of other religions. The latter argued that the religion article is a national consensus that should not be dominated by any particular religion. Nurcholish Madjid, a prominent Muslim thinker, said the inclusion of the Jakarta Charter would allow the state to intervene into religious space. For the same reason, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah demanded the original version of the religion article be maintained.

Support for the amendment of Article 29 inside the MPR weakened before its discussion in Commission A, which was responsible for the amendment of this article. The head of the MPR, Amien Rais, advocated 'going back to the original text'. The PPP, moreover, began to waver in its support. This weakening was condemned by proponents of Islamic sharia inside and outside the MPR. Strong support came, in the end, only from the PBB and PDU factions. When Commission A failed to reach agreement on amending the religion article, the issue was brought into the plenary session on 10 August,

resulting in the preservation of the original Article 29. The PBB and PDU factions and some Islamic parties and movements vowed to continue their struggle into the future.

This was not the first taste of failure for the proponents of Islamic sharia in Indonesia. The seven words of the Jakarta Charter, issued on 22 June 1945, were then 'amended' because of the protest of the 'people of the Eastern Part of Indonesia'. In the Constituent Assembly between 1956 and 1959, the debate about Islamic sharia reoccurred. Sukarno, however, issued a presidential decree in 1959 declaring, *inter alia*, the re-establishment of Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution. The discussion on Islamic sharia and the Jakarta Charter was then officially closed. Finally, during the New Order, Suharto issued Law No. 8 of 1985 on mass organizations, disallowing Islamic sharia and other non-Pancasila ideologies.



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'Rejecting the amendment = traitor of the nation.' The pro-amendment movements outside the MPR building.

The 2002 annual session of the MPR, which, it is expected, witnessed the last of the constitutional amendments, showed the religion article to be the most controversial and sensitive in the Indonesian constitution. Any effort at Islamization (or 'religionization') of Article 29 would affect relations between religion and state, and between religions in the country. The adoption of the article would be deadly expensive, as the plurality of Indonesian society and of Muslims themselves, many of whom rejected sectarianism and anti-pluralism, would be at stake. The maintenance of the religion article is, indeed, not the failure of Muslims in the country, but rather their great success in maintaining their identity as adherents of a moderate, tolerant Islam. <

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### Notes >

- 1 The present article is based on the observations of a number of newspapers, magazines, and online media, particularly *Kompas*, *Republika*, *Media Indonesia*, *The Jakarta Post*, *Tempo*, *Tempo Interaktif*, and *Gatra*, published between 20 May and 20 August 2002.
- 2 The United Development Party (PPP), the Crescent Star Party (PBB), and the Daulatul Ummah faction (PDU)
- 3 The Dewan Dakwah Islam Indonesia (DDII).
- 4 The Golkar Party (PG), Indonesian Democratic Struggle Party (PDIP), National Awakening Party (PKB), Loving Nation Democratic Party (PDKP), Indonesian Nationhood Coalition faction (FKKI), Regional Representatives (FUD), and the Military-Police faction (FTNI/Polri)
- 5 Cited in Harry J. Benda, *The Crescent and the Rising Sun: Indonesian Islam under the Japanese Occupation*, The Hague: Van Hoeve [etc.] (1958), p. 189.