

Islamic Youth Movements in Indonesia

Research >
Southeast Asia

Often in the past, Islam has been seen as external to Indonesian, especially Javanese, culture. Later on, radical and militant Muslims were portrayed as puppets created by the intelligence agency, BAKIN, while moderate and 'civil' Islam were branded as natural to Indonesia. Hence, until recently, most studies on Islam in Indonesia have focused on these 'moderates'. Nowadays, however, radical Islamic movements in Indonesia are also keenly observed. Some of these movements use violence; some do not. Unconventional as it may be, this article argues that the common radical/moderate dichotomy is not an appropriate way to understand Islam in Indonesia. By focusing on two youth movements, namely the Islamic Left and the Justice and Welfare Party, I hope to shed light on this new perspective.

Thousands of students have received LKiS training as social activists and have since formed a multitude of NGOs in large and small cities, which aim to tackle various social problems.

Mainstream Islamism on campus

Although they are ideologically opposite, Islamists have a similar history. The Action Unit Indonesian Muslim Students (KAMMI) and the Justice Party (reorganized as the Justice and Welfare Party in April 2003), both founded in 1998, have their origin in the *dakwah* (propagation) movements on campus (*dakwah kampus*). The *dakwah kampus* originated in the early 1970s at the Salman mosque of the Bandung Institute of Technology, but did not spread substantially until the crackdown on the political student movement that had resisted Suharto's re-election in 1978. This time, Islamism provided the alternative activity to political movement. Without a doubt, their religious cause was first encouraged by the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and, later, by intensifying propagation from the Middle East and, especially, from Saudi Arabia, seeking to counter the Shia influence. Indonesia thus became involved both in a global Islamic surge and in contests between various international Islamic groups.

The *dakwah kampus* at the Salman mosque imitated the training programme of the Egyptian Islam Brotherhood (Ikhwan Muslimin): hundreds of cadres were trained and subsequently started similar movements at other campuses. Meanwhile, student activists translated foreign, mainly Arabic books into Indonesian, thereby making the ideas and skills of *dakwah* available to the public. Books from the Pustaka, a publication office owned by the Salman mosque, covered a diverse range of titles. As well as Sayyid Qutb of the Islam Brotherhood, Pakistani neo-modernist Fazlur Rahman and Iranian Ali Shariati featured amongst the translators. They were not always monolithic: French-educated Ali Shariati was one of the ideologues of the Iranian Revolution.

The mainstream of *dakwah kampus* endorses such modern values as democracy, civil society, human rights, and equality of women, yet understands these differently from modernists in the West. Thus the *dakwah kampus* should be distinguished from modernists represented by the Islamic social and educational organization Muhammadiyah and by the Masyumi Party. At *dakwah kampus* meetings, women and men are separated but treated equally: women must use a different entrance, but are not required to sit behind the men. In general, women are encouraged to participate in political activities, and there are actually far more female activists in the Justice and Welfare Party than in other parties. Disproving Western feminist concepts, these Islamists in fact subscribe to concepts of sexual equality. For example, and thus belying common Western perception, the movement for women to wear a veil was initiated by female students as part of their demand for religious freedom on campus.

Within the Islamic Left, by contrast, some argue against the veil, referring at once to Islamic legal sources and Arab feminists. Hence the LKiS published a book by the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi, who asserts that ulama manipulate the concept of wearing veils to maintain male privileges.

The Justice Party tends to be regarded as more moderate and democratic than other parties in the political domain, simply because their demonstrations, though 'radically' criticizing the American position towards Muslims, are always carried out very peacefully. Above all, however, the Justice Party propagates an Islamist political ideology that attempts to re-establish Islamic civilization and to place Islam at the centre of the political order. The manifesto of the Justice Party says: 'Allah who has supreme power wished human beings to play a role as representatives of God or the caliph. It depends on how far human beings are responsible to function (as caliph) consistently. The universal value of democracy is people's interpretation of the responsibility (of caliph).' Such an understanding of democracy is not far removed from that of so-called 'militants' or 'fundamentalists', who may deem the Justice Party to be 'radical' enough in terms of political thought, but too moderate in its methods. Not only, therefore, should we carefully examine the interaction between thoughts and actions of specific 'moderate' groups, we also need to draw the complete map of social and political movements in order to understand so-called militants. ◀

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By Ken Miichi

In order to understand the various developments in Islam in Indonesia, we need to consider the post-1970s activities of Islamic students. The nature of Islamic life in Indonesia now is different compared to the 1950s, due to the emergence of activism in the 1970s and 1980s which sharply changed the map of Islamic movements. As these changes took place very quietly, however, they have by and large escaped the academic eye. This article compares the mainstream of Islamist student movements that made up the Justice and Welfare Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera), and the counter-Islamism movement, known as 'Islamic Left'.

Origin of the Islamic Left

Urban youths' interest in organizing social and religious activities sprang from the failure of political movements. After students' anti-Japanese demonstrations turned to riot in 1974 (the Malari incident), the government blamed the former Indonesian Socialist Party and the Masyumi Party, which is composed of Islamic modernists, and arrested 770 people. As the government's grip on political activities tightened during the 1970s various NGOs, such as the LBH (Legal Aid Association) and the LP3ES (the Institute for Social and Economic Research, Education and Information), were founded by former-students-turned-political-activists. Although many Islamic modernists were involved in these NGOs, their outlook was not religious: the LP3ES, in particular, was heir to both the Indonesian Socialist Party and the Masyumi Party, which were banned in 1960. At the time, socialism rather than Islamism was the way for social reform and transformation, and it was the LP3ES who introduced the latest leftist thinking, such as the dependent theory and theology of liberation, through the publication of books and its journal *Prisma*. It also conducted a training programme to lead community development, thus attracting young intellectuals from various backgrounds.

Among those joining this leftist intellectual network were

Students in prayer during a student movement rally, in 1998, symbolizing the return of Islam into the political arena.

prominent figures from the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) such as Abdurrahman Wahid and Masdar F. Mas'udi. Notwithstanding that the NU was the biggest Islamic organization, only a few of its members were active as urban intellectuals, the reason being that NU leaders used to be educated at traditional Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and, therefore, did not qualify as urban intellectuals. This changed in the late 1970s, when National Islamic Institutes (IAIN) opened their doors to those educated at *pesantren*, and when the number of students at IAIN increased significantly, from 23,748 in 1979 to 81,579 in 1989.

This youngest generation of NU cadres with an IAIN education inherited the leftist intellectual network and formed the Islamic Left, working with non-religious and leftist social-political movements. They read anything from Marx to Gramsci to Foucault yet, in respect of Islamic discussion, often refer to Western-educated Muslim intellectuals such as Hasan Hanafi and Mohammed Arkoun: indeed, the term Islamic Left itself is derived from Hasan Hanafi's writing. Today's Islamic Left is critical of religious authority (whether exerted by certain individuals, by using the written word, or by using historical examples) and, especially, of the 'one and only' and 'pure and glorious' Islam. Rather, it tries to revive plural Islamic traditions, by linking with contemporary Islamic Studies in Europe. In its strive for a religiously pluralist nation it opposes the so-called Islamists, the 'rightist' group in the Indonesian political context.

At the beginning of the 1990s, some Yogyakarta IAIN students established the Institute for Islamic and Social Studies (LKiS), with the aim of spreading a 'transformative and tolerant' Islamic discourse. The 'i' of the LKiS, which denotes Islam, is quite intentionally written in lower case, to underscore that the LKiS is squarely against the type of Islamism that emphasizes superiority over other existing social systems. By contrast, the Islamic Left does not deny indigenous traditions and customs, which are often branded as un-Islamic or pre-Islamic, and thus it attracts grass-rooted, spiritual, and mystic 'islams' as well as ex-Communists in rural areas.