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“Islam and Civil Society in Indonesia”¹

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Scholars and activists have debated and explored both the tensions and the points of mutual support between Islam and democracy for decades, but the increasing polarization of “western” policy and the Muslim world has given greater imperative to this endeavor in recent years. Transcending the stereotypical categorizations of the classical European and American Orientalists and the polemical rhetoric of militant ideologues, a new generation of thoughtful Muslim and non-Muslim scholars have found many points of synchronicity between Islamic and democratic worldviews. Muslim concepts of ‘shura’ and ‘ijma’ are often invoked by scholars arguing that there are inherently democratic principles and practices within Islam. Articles are published in scholarly journals and papers presented at international conferences attesting to the possibility of Islam and democracy existing in a mutually supportive relationship. While these intellectual developments are welcome, they remain, by and large, limited to an academic or theoretical sphere. There is very little discussion of practical application of these ideas, very little elaboration of what a present-day Muslim civil society looks like in concrete terms. An important exception to this can be found in Indonesia.

Indonesia is the world’s largest Muslim-majority nation, and simultaneously the world’s third largest democracy. These two characteristics are deeply intertwined, and indeed cannot be separated from each other as insights into the character of Indonesia and Indonesians. Many factors – geopolitical, cultural, and historical – have contributed to the pluralistic and tolerant nature of Indonesian society, and as such, of the expression of Islam in Indonesia. Indonesia is an oft-overlooked yet rich reservoir of Muslim intellectual contributions to an Islam-based articulation of civil society, human rights, and pluralism. Further, Muslim activists and leaders have been at the forefront of the transition to and consolidation of democracy in Indonesia. Civil society and democratic

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institutions in Indonesia have a distinctly Muslim face, and here the counterattack against Islamist militancy is not waged by non-Muslims, but by democratic Muslims themselves.

In this paper, I will provide a picture of the contribution of Indonesian Muslim thinkers and activists to political development and civil society-building in practical and concrete, rather than theoretical, terms. Indonesia has recently been held up as a “shining example” for the Muslim world – its last two general elections (1999 and 2004) have been fair and peaceful, its Muslim majority population have firmly rejected Islamic law time and time again at the national level, and even its Islamist political parties were forced to campaign on platforms of anti-corruption and justice rather than Islamism in the last election. By exploring the factors contribution to Indonesia’s success, we can gain insight into the conditions under which democracy can thrive – not only in theory but in day-to-day practice – in the Muslim world.

Welcome developments in the academic world have opened up a rich and provocative exploration of the relationship between Islam and Democracy. Esposito and Voll argue that in the Islamic context, religious resurgence and democratization “are contradictory and competitive only if democracy is defined in a highly restricted way and is viewed as possible only if specific Western European or American institutions are adopted, or if important Islamic principles are defined in a rigid and traditional manner.”² Furthermore they argue that central Islamic principles of *shura* [consultation], *ijma* [consensus], and *ijtihad* [independent judgment] are key building blocks for democracy within Islam.³ Similarly, Robert Hefner describes what he calls a “civil pluralist Islam” that rejects “the wisdom of a monolithic ‘Islamic’ state, ... instead affirming democracy, voluntarism, and a valance of countervailing powers in a state and society.”⁴ Charles Kurzman, one of the foremost proponents of “liberal Islam”, argues that among the many interpretations and expressions of Islam there is a

² Esposito and Voll, *Islam and Democracy* 21.

³ Esposito and Voll, *Islam and Democracy* 25-38. This is not a new argument, but has been made by Muslim reformists since the beginning of the *salafiyah* movement, in an attempt to seek authenticity and legitimacy for these concepts by rooting them in Islamic language and tradition. In fact, Norton argues that contemporary Arab thinking has advanced far beyond this stage, in that now thinkers are dealing with questions of “civility (*madani*), minority rights (*huquq al-aqalliya*) and confidence or security (*ta’min*).” *Civil Society in the Middle East* 11. Meanwhile Browsers asserts that while many contemporary Islamists reject the use of the term “*dimuqratiyya*” [direct translation of “democracy” in Arabic] because of its foreign origins and tradition, they do articulate a notion of Islamic democratic values using using the concept of *shura*. See Michaelle Browsers, “The Politics of Translation: Civil Society’s Travels and Travails in Arab Political Thought,” dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2001, 129.

⁴ Robert Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 12.

“tradition that voices concerns parallel to those of Western liberalism...[such as] opposition to theocracy, support for democracy, defense of freedom of thought.”⁵ Another important contribution is that of Abdulaziz Sachadina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), which attempts to “map some of the most important political concepts in Islam that advance better human relationships,” (11).

Where many of these thinkers seek to find a role for Islam is, rather, precisely in the public sphere. This brings them again to loggerheads with American and European democratic theory, for one of the primary constructs in the public sphere associated with democratization in this body of thinking is civil society – a place in which the analysis of a role for religion is largely neglected in contemporary European and North American political science literature.

The small but growing literature dealing explicitly with the relationship between Islam and civil society contributes a rich empirical foundation from which to counter stereotypical views of both Islam and civil society. There is, however, little construction of concrete frameworks or criteria for measuring or evaluating civil society within an Islamic context from which to draw guidelines for this research.

Hefner’s approach to the relationship between Islam and the state is also useful, not only because he explicitly raises the possibility of Muslim organizations promoting democratization, by building, “mediating institutions in which citizens develop habits of free speech, participation, and toleration,”⁶ but also because his work focuses on the experience of Islam in Indonesia. Hefner argues that the voluntary organizations that characterize Islam in Indonesia have potential to be agents of civil society and democratization by promoting civil participation, if they are able to transcend sectarianism and promote a “public culture of equality, justice, and universal citizenship.”⁷ As noted above, Hefner challenges Putnam’s emphasis on the structure of voluntary organizations, arguing that the culture and discourse of the organization is equally important, but he also emphasizes the necessity of what he calls a “civilized and self-limiting state.”⁸ He posits three conditions that must be met for civil society to emerge: one, local intellectuals must find from their own experience a “model of political culture that affirms principles of autonomy, mutual respect, and

⁵ Charles Kurzman, *Liberal Islam: A Source Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 4.

⁶ Hefner, *Civil Islam* 13.

⁷ Hefner, *Civil Islam* 20.

⁸ Hefner, *Civil Islam* 215.

voluntarism;”⁹ two, these values must be generalized “beyond their original confines to a broader public sphere;” and three, these values must be supported by a variety of institutions, including the state.¹⁰

Indonesia provides an excellent laboratory for the study of civil society in a Muslim-majority nation. Its position on the world stage as not only a successful Muslim democracy but the largest Muslim-majority democracy in the world has been cemented by successful, peaceful, and legitimate general and presidential elections in both 1999 and 2004. It is not necessarily breaking news for a Muslim majority nation to have successful elections – what is breaking news, and what is to my knowledge unprecedented in the Muslim world, is that Muslim organizations and activists were directly responsible for ensuring the success and validity of these elections. Jaringan Pendidikan Pemilu untuk Rakyat (Peoples Voter Education Network) was established by the Asia Foundation in 1998 to provide voter education and election-day monitoring in the 1999 and 2004 elections. The JPPR is primarily composed of mass-based Muslim organizations, combined with mass-based Christian and inter-faith groups. In both 1999 and 2004 the JPPR implemented one of the largest and most comprehensive civil society voter education campaigns ever conceived, in 1999 they: trained and deployed 117 community-based voter education volunteers, and distributed over 23 million pieces of voter education materials (leaflets, stickers, posters); in 2004 they: deployed over 140,000 community based voter education and election-day monitoring volunteers, and produced and distributed over a million pieces of voter education materials in 350 districts. The active involvement of mass-based Muslim organizations in the elections process served to effectively bind them to a politically secular process.

There are many extraordinary things about the phenomenon of the JPPR that don’t meet the eye, and that go beyond the numbers you see on the screen there. The first is the fact that the largest and most far-reaching of the voter education and monitoring groups in these elections was made up primarily of Muslim organizations – demonstrating the commitment of the Muslim majority to the most basic and fundamental of democratic processes – free and fair elections. But second, and really the indicator of the depth and substantiveness of the Muslim civil society in Indonesia, is the fact that the JPPR represents an unprecedented instance of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah members collaborating and working in concert in Indonesia. NU and Muhammadiyah are the largest mass-based Muslim organizations in Indonesia and the world, together representing about 65 million members. These two

⁹ Hefner, *Civil Islam* 36.

¹⁰ Hefner, *Civil Islam* 36.

organizations represent very different segments of the Indonesian Muslim population – from a sociological, theological, socio-economic, and political perspective. In fact, it is my argument that the cleavage between these two organizations represents the primary cleavage in Indonesian Islam – more significant as an explanatory factor than even that between “moderate” and “militant” Islam. Within the JPPR, however, these two organizations not only co-exist, but work hand-in-hand, sharing responsibility, credit, and political leverage. This is significant, not only historically, but because it fulfills one of Hefner’s criteria for an effective civil society – that agents of civil society must be able to generalize values of “equality, justice, and citizenship ...beyond their original confines to a broader public sphere”¹¹. In many of the other examples of civil society that I will raise in this paper, NU and Muhammadiyah play a very important role – but they do focus primarily on their own constituencies. In the case of the JPPR, they were able to effectively transcend those affiliations, and work to ensure the democratic process for all Indonesian citizens.

This kind of advanced Muslim civil society did not appear overnight, but rather is the result of a gradual consolidation disparate and ad hoc Muslim NGO efforts into an actual movement promoting civil society from an Islamic perspective. Muslim intellectuals and activists were at the forefront of the move to topple Suharto’s authoritarian government. Then, during the reformasi period, it was Muslim NGOs and mass-based organizations that led the way in articulating notions of civil society from a Muslim perspective, and in developing an understanding of what it meant to be a Muslim-majority democracy. So, for example, Lakpesdam, an NU think tank, educated farmers and villagers in rural areas about their rights as citizens in a democracy, and empowered them to engage in the democratic process – for example, by having a voice in decision-making about allocation of resources within their village. In another example, P3M – a *pesantren*-based NGO -- spearheaded a program of halaqah, or discussion groups, for kiai and *ulama* in *pesantren*, about fundamental democratic values of pluralism, religious tolerance, and gender equity from an Islamic perspective. IRM, a Muhammadiyah youth organization, brought youth from interfaith backgrounds together to discuss anti-violence and how Islam and other religions support peaceful methods of achieving change. Fatayat, NU’s young women’s branch, established a network of 26 provincial level domestic violence advocacy units – aimed at empowering Muslim women to confront oppression within their own homes and to participate in the political process at the local level.

These activities, while small in scale and somewhat ad hoc in nature at the beginning, ultimately resulted in the creation of something that was far greater

¹¹ Hefner, *Civil Islam* 36

than the sum of its parts. Over several years of holding training workshops for *pesantren* leaders, women's activists, and Muslim youth organizations, gradually a network of *pesantren*, of *ulama*, and of Muslim intellectuals became grounded in arguments in favor of civil society, democratic institutions, and pluralism that were deeply rooted in Islamic teachings and perspectives. A corpus of intellectual material was gradually produced, writings on *fiqh* and interpretations of Islamic texts that supported gender equality, human rights, and religious pluralism emerged. Most significantly, over time a movement was generated – a Muslim civil society movement the like of which is not found anywhere else in the Muslim world. This is a movement that, while driven by intellectuals and urban-based NGOs, has its roots and its power base in the nationally networked Muslim organizations that they are affiliated with.

I would like to highlight the work that this movement is doing to solidify Indonesia's democracy and to promote pluralism, through three main vehicles: civic education, policy advocacy, and religious leaders.

Civic Education

It may seem counter-intuitive, but the most advanced, creative, and effective institutions on the cutting edge of civic education curriculum development in Indonesia are not its premier secular research universities but rather are its Islamic universities – both state and private. After many years of Muslim pro-democracy organizations seeking to integrate information education in the form of seminars, workshops and ad hoc training programs on democracy and civil society issues for *pesantren* leaders, students, and activists, two major Islamic university systems have taken the initiative to design and implement almost revolutionary civic education curricula in their university systems.

Civic Education under the Suharto era was “citizenship” courses taught by lecturers trained in the state military academy who gave it a strongly militaristic spin. When Suharto fell, this material was no longer required, but there was no movement to replace it until 2000 when regional autonomy law opened a window of opportunity for curriculum reform. The institution that spearheaded this reform was the State Institute for Islamic Studies (IAIN) system.

This network of 47 colleges and universities developed a textbook to teach civics in an Islamic context, and they developed a teacher training program to train their lecturers to teach about democracy in a participative and democratic manner. After a gradual process over two years of textbook development, publishing, piloting the program, and multiple evaluations, this curriculum is now a mandatory class for all first-year students at all state Islamic colleges and universities – reaching over 75,000 students across Indonesia a year. Such was the success of this new material, and the enthusiasm with which the content and the

revolutionary new teaching methods were met, that Muhammadiyah university system adapted the IAIN curriculum to their own context, and then developed their own textbook and teacher training program. This curriculum is now a mandatory course in all 35 Muhammadiyah universities, taught to approximately 45,000 students each year. This material approaches civic education from the perspective that Islam teaches state-society relations, it teaches how to be a good citizen, how to be a responsible member of a civilized and plural society, and respect for human rights. Thus again, invoking Islamic texts and teachings for support for education on democracy, this time in a formal education setting reaching hundreds of thousands of students.

Policy Advocacy

In 2003, after several years of working separately on a range of democracy-building initiatives, a group of almost 30 Muslim and church-based NGOs decided to join together to confront what they saw as movements towards discriminative and anti-democratic tendencies within legislation and policy. This network, known as JPS (*Jemaah Persaudaraan Sejati; Advocates for Inter-community Relations*), are concerned with pending and existing national and regional legislation that infringes on basic human rights and promotes discrimination either by the state or by elements of society towards minorities.

Though still in its formative stages, the effectiveness of this network was tested in JPS' successful advocacy campaign against the proposed Religious Harmony Bill (RUU-KUB of 2004). This bill advocated for the strict separation between religious communities and reinforced current legislation that continues to impede harmonious inter-religious relations. Through a regional and national advocacy campaign the JPS network successfully mobilized religious leaders and their communities to reject the passing of the bill, which saw the Ministry of Religious Affairs retract the draft. This innovative network is unprecedented, not only because mass-based Muslim organizations have never before engaged so directly in national-level policy advocacy on interfaith-relations, but also for the first time, Muslim groups have worked in close cooperation on such policy advocacy with interfaith and church groups.

For example, the requirement to state religious affiliation on citizen identity cards (KTP) often results in discrimination with regard to jobs, university placement, sometimes even health services on the basis of religion. This requirement is problematic because of another regulation that JPS finds troubling -- known as UU No.1 TMPS 1965, this bill gave recognition to only five religious groups; Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists and excluded the myriad traditional and belief communities that continue to exist in contemporary Indonesia. The fall-out from this single piece of legislation has manifested itself in ways that is both legislative and cultural. By defining the legitimate

Indonesian citizen as an adherent of one of these religions, subsequent legislation has effectively limited the access of other faith communities to basic public services – such as education, health and the civil registry (for instance, the registering of matters of burial, inheritance, marriage and birth) not to mention their ability to run for parliament, access justice and security and the civil service. The presence of such legislation has led to attacks on the homes and sites of worship of minority groups by other religious communities, with tacit agreement from government and semi-government bodies. These groups also experience inordinate levels of corruption from government and the security apparatus, frequently having to pay large sums of money in order to protect themselves and their cultural events from further attack.

JPS has established five regional networks capable of launching advocacy campaigns on discriminative current or pending legislation in West Java, South Sulawesi, Lombok, West Sumatra and East Java. JPS will link these regional campaigns to a nationwide network by collecting data on the regional legislation and channeling it to groups either at the regional or national level who can launch a multi-pronged campaign involving media, awareness raising initiatives, legal drafting, and hearings to relevant officials. In this way JPS seeks to engage local constituencies and give them a voice on policy that affects them.

Pesantren and Religious Leaders

In Indonesia, the *pesantren*, (roughly translated as an Islamic boarding school or academy) is the center of the production of Islamic knowledge, and is also the hub of the community in many rural areas of Indonesia. *Pesantren*, and *madrasah* (day schools that teach both religious and the state national curriculum) in Indonesia have garnered a great deal of negative attention from the international community. This is not the place to discuss the source of militancy in Indonesian Islam, but suffice to say that at least 80% of *pesantren* in Indonesia are affiliated with NU and as such teach classical approaches to *fiqh* and Islamic law that emphasize tolerance, pluralism, and freedom of thought. That said, *pesantren* are certainly vital and very influential institutions within Indonesian society. Realizing their strategic importance, many Islam-based NGOs have for some years now sought to develop materials that can be used within the *pesantren* context to teach democratic values and institutions, gender equity, and human rights. Fahmina, a *pesantren*-based NGO in Cirebon, West Java, is one of these. Fahmina is led by a traditional and very senior Muslim scholar, or *kyai* – *Kyai Hussein*. *Kyai Hussein* has led Fahmina in conducting a series of “thematic discussions” called *Dawroh Fiqh Democracy*, inviting leaders, teachers, and senior students in the four biggest and most influential *pesantren* in the region. *Kyai Hussein* presents democracy, gender equity, and human rights from a deeply Islamic perspective, using classical texts and teachings within the *fiqh* as

well as the *hadis* and *qur'an*, to show that these values come from Islam and are not being imported from the west.

Despite this careful and highly contextualized approach, Fahmina is still experiencing resistance from some *kyais* in the region, who question especially Fahmina's position on gender issues. These *kyai* have expressed the concern that Fahmina is being used as a "tool of the west to undermine Islam." Because these *pesantren* leaders are Fahmina's target constituency, it has taken this resistance seriously, and dealt with it successfully by approaching the *kyai* in a traditional Islamic manner. Hence, individual visits to the respective *pesantren* to pay their respects to the *kyai*, and to ask for their support one by one. On the issue of women's rights, Fahmina approached the topic by raising local problems, such as high numbers of domestic violence victims currently handled by the Fahmina-affiliated Women's Crisis Center Balqis; a prominent case of rape by a *pesantren* leader; trafficking in women and children in Cirebon; and girls education in *pesantren*. By relating women's rights to these local issues, Fahmina effectively rejected the common claim that "women's rights" is a Western concept. With regard to democracy issues, Fahmina also effectively led the *kyais* to agree that Islam is compatible with human rights and democracy, by approaching the *kyai* in a very culturally relevant manner, and by discussing these issues with Islamic terminology. Ultimately, each of the influential *kyai* approached agreed that Fahmina's program is important for civil society building. By obtaining this foundation of support from key and influential *kyai* in the Cirebon area, Fahmina have effectively created for themselves a solid platform of legitimacy and credibility that will undergird all future work in the area of women's rights and promotion of democracy within *pesantren* communities in West Java.

In conclusion, Indonesia is a rich and fertile terrain upon which democratic Muslim intellectuals and activists have successfully inculcated principles of gender equity, religious tolerance, and human rights – such that now it can play a role as an example to the Muslim world – not only in successfully accomplishing the most basic of democratic processes – free and fair elections, but having developed an advanced and nuanced understanding of the relationship between Islam and democracy, and the mutual reinforcement of Islam and civil society.

These important initiatives have been initiated and driven by Indonesian Muslim organizations. The Asia Foundation is proud to have supported many of them, with funding from USAID and Aus AID.