The Dialectics of Islamophobia and Radicalism in Indonesia

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The world economic crises in 1998 and the subsequent political terrorism on September 11, 2001 vastly impacted the social, political, and cultural landscapes of Islam in Indonesia. The earlier political changes from the authoritarian New Order to the reformation era in 1998 had sparked not only democracy, but also the arrival of Islam as a political power that promised an instant solution to social, cultural, political, and economic decadence. Islamist movements, however, gained momentum after 9/11. Islamists interpreted “war on terror” and the use of terms like “Islamofascism” as a threat against Islam and Muslims. In response, they mobilized what the United State perceived as anti-Americanism. This anti-Americanism is, of course, concretely fueled by the Islamist views of US foreign policy and Western domination. But the Islamist perception of American Islamophobia plays a role as well.

Islamophobia Ethos and the Politics of Fear

Gottschalk and Greenberg define Islamophobia as “a social anxiety toward Islam and Muslim cultures that is largely unexamined by, yet deeply ingrained in, Americans.” This anxiety exists in the political cartoon, in the popular media, and in the opinions of political and religious leaders, policy makers, and Islamophobes. Islamophobia imagines Islam as a threat to the political, cultural, and religious core of American identity, “the political principles of liberty, equality, democracy, individualism, human rights, the rule of law, and private property
embodied in the American creed.” As Huntington argues, the cultural core that nurtures these values has been taken as White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism and the homogeneity of race, religion and ethnicity.

After 9/11 the Bush administration evoked the memory of the crusades, and its policies like the Patriot Act, the banning of Islamic organizations, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the institution of Guantanamo Bay all seemed particularly directed against Muslims. Similarly, vigilance toward Muslim visitors and Muslim residents increased.

Immediately following 9/11, hate crimes against Muslims and those of the Middle Eastern ancestry jumped by 1600 percent. Although no longer so dramatic or frequent, Muslims continue to be the object of derision and attack. In this sense, Islamophobia, in Sway’s perspective, includes violence against Muslims in the form of physical assaults, verbal abuse, and the vandalizing of property, especially of Islamic institutions including mosques, Islamic schools, and Muslim cemeteries. Islamophobia also includes discrimination in employment where Muslims are faced with unequal opportunities; discrimination in the provision of health services; exclusion from managerial positions and jobs of high responsibility; and exclusion from political and governmental posts. Ultimately, Islamophobia also comprises prejudice in the media, literature, and everyday conversation.

In this paper, the term Islamophobia refers to derogatory assumptions, theories, practices and policies toward Islam and Muslims as understood by the Islamists in Indonesia. Islamophobia has been fueled in particular by theorists, such as Fukuyama and Huntington, who predict that Islam will be the next archenemy of the West. The vilification of Islam along with the US policies in carrying out the “War on Terror,”
(including the use of military measures against any person, group, or country that is suspected of harboring terrorists and terrorism) are interpreted by Islamists as a war against Islam and Muslims. Although the United States’ political strategy in the War on Terror is to tackle the growing threat of terrorism, the radical Islamists in Indonesia utilize the rhetoric of self-defense to stand up for Islam in the face of the Western threat and to promote Islam as the solution to all the social and cultural decadence caused by the post-colonial legacy.

**Radical Islamism in Indonesia: Political Responses**

As part of the War on Terror, the US named several Indonesian pesantren, mass organizations, and controversial figures such as Abu Bakar Ba’asyir as terrorist threats. Islamist groups like Front Pembela Islam (Front of the Defenders of Islam, FDI), Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (Indonesian Holy Warrior Assembly), and Hizbut Tahrir (Party of Liberation) responded to this labeling as an intervention in Indonesian home affairs. The Islamists consequently displayed their anger at the United States’ foreign policies in Afghanistan and Iraq through a wave of anti-American demonstrations in major cities, including Jakarta, Makasar, Medan, and Solo. These Islamist groups perceive America as a threat to Islam and to Muslim freedom.

Diverse forms of modern religious revivalism in Indonesia stretch back to the early twentieth century. Among those that continue to have influence are the Muhammadiyah (the Way of Muhammad), the Nahdatul Ulama (the Awakening of Religious Scholars), and the Persatuan Islam (the Unity of Islam). While these organizations vary in propagating the purity of Islam and its pedagogical method, they have gradually become the backbone of moderate Muslims. The Nahdlatul Ulama, whose members form the majority of Indonesian Muslims, is much more flexible than the other two organizations in that it appropriates Islam to the existing cultures, just as the Qur’an took into consideration the culture of the Arabian society.
Although Persatuan Islam is well-known for being more vigorously observant, it is not inclined to political action. Political Islam has its roots in the twentieth-century post-colonial history of Darul Islam. Led by Kartosuwariyo, Darul Islam rebelled against Sukarno’s government after the Renville agreement in 1948. He had earlier safeguarded West Java from the Dutch colonial power before the Indonesian National Military (TNI) finally took control of that region. Indonesia’s first post-colonial leader, Sukarno, failed to recognize the significant contribution that Kartosuwiryo and his troops (Hizbullah) had made in liberating West Java from the Dutch.16 As Kartosuwiryo felt betrayed by Sukarno, he drew upon popular support from those who desired an Islamic state in West Java and Indonesia and declared an Indonesian Islamic State in 1949. In 1962, Kartosuwiryo was captured and the Darul Islam movement was banned.

Thirty years of Suharto (1967-1998) marginalized Islam and Muslims in Indonesian politics. The Suharto regime considered Islam as a threat to national stability and supported a policy of Pancasila—the five principles of Indonesia: (1) unity of God, (2) humanitarianism, (3) Indonesian unity, (4) system of representation, and (5) justice for all—as the permanent ideology of the state, political parties, and socio-religious organization. Along with the homogenization of the ideology, Suharto and his authoritarian government militarized the state and governmental posts from 1967-1998. Nonetheless, politically oriented Muslim activists kept the spirit of political Islam intact, and Islam became an ideology for opposition to an authoritarian regime.17 Many of these organizations operated first as underground movements because the Indonesian government in the Suharto’s era did not tolerate any organization with Islam as its ideology. Some Muslim revolutionaries were captured, imprisoned, and even killed. The Iranian Revolution of 1979, however, gave hope to millions of Indonesians that Islam could become the foundation of the state.
Politically-oriented Islamic revivalism today finds support among the members of revolutionary Islamist movements such as Jama‘ah Tabligh (1974), Darul Arqom (1980s), and Hizb al-Tahrir (1978). These organizations fervently demand the implementation of Islam at personal, familial, societal, and political levels. Even though the politicization of Islam is driven only by a small segment of Indonesian society, this small fraction feeds the Western imagination of Islam as anti-modernization, anti-human rights, anti-democracy, and anti-globalization and as the enemy of the West.

Political Islam views radicalism in a positive light and supports it as an important aspect of Islam. For example, Ja‘far Umar Thalib— who founded the Islamist group called “Communication Forum of Ahlus Sunah Wal Jama‘ah” in 1999 and who has often been viewed to offer radical views of Islam—suggests that radicalism could be positive or negative. Radicalism is considered positive when it means reform (islâh) or renewal (tajdîd); and negative when it refers to ideas and practices beyond the allowable limit (ghulw or ifrât). In other words, radicalism as reform and renewal is a key element of Islam, but in excess it contradicts the doctrine that Islam is a middle path. Wadjdi blames the Western media for equating Islam as political ideology with radicalism, fundamentalism, and militancy.

Radical movements in Indonesia are not monolithic, and they have various and significant impacts on society. The impact of radical movements on the daily lives of Indonesians is, indeed, unprecedented, as reflected in the increasing interest in Islamic symbols, such as Muslim/Arabic names, religious rituals, and dress codes—especially for women. According to three consecutive surveys held in the years 2001, 2002, and 2004, conducted by the Center for the Study of Islam and Society in Indonesia at the State Islamic University in Jakarta, most Indonesian Muslims report that they observe rituals such as praying and fasting regularly. The discourse on the implementation of Islamic Shari‘ah is not taboo anymore. The
growing interest in Islamization also occurs at the structural level. Muslims believe that Islamic Shari‘ah is the ideal legal system to be implemented. The number of supporters of this view has grown from 61.4% in 2001, to 70.6% in 2002 and to 75.5% in 2004. A much smaller percentage agrees on the amputation of one’s hand as a form of punishment for thieves (2001:28.9%, 2002:33.5%, and 2004: 39.9%). The increasing support of the implementation of Islamic Shari‘ah and its elements seems, however, less surprising when we consider the context of a corrupt legal system that ignores social justice.

At another level, the government’s delegation of power to its provincial counter-parts has also had significant implications for the spread of Islamic influence. The implementation of Islamic Law in the province of Aceh, for instance, reflects the indigenous desire of the Acehnese to be distinct from the rest of the Indonesian archipelago, since the province considers itself the “Porch of Mecca (Serambi Mekah).” Aceh has also striven for the implementation of Islamic Shari‘ah for more than 50 years. For this reason, the special treatment of Aceh is a negotiating point for the Central government for resolving the military conflict that has been going on for more than 20 years.

With this decentralization, many local municipalities in West Java, including Cianjur, Garut, Tasikmalaya and Indramayu, have also expressed interest in the application of Shari‘ah. They endorse women’s veiling, police raids on nightclubs, a more restrictive social role for women, religious education for Muslim youth to supplement public secular schools, and the increased uses of Arabic names and symbols. However, it is not quite clear what they mean by Shari‘ah. They seem to assume that Shari‘ah deals with the ritual aspects of Islam in public life. When it comes to Shari‘ah, the Islamists have no uniform voice. Referencing the results of a survey conducted at the State Islamic University in Bandung, Afif Muhammad, Director of the Graduate Studies Program, explains that Shari‘ah for the Muslim majority connotes fiqh (the understanding of Islamic
On the basis of the growing interest in the implementation of Islam at the personal and social levels, can we say that radicalism has become epidemic? Based on the same survey done by the Center for the Study of Islam and Society in Indonesia, it is shown that by 2004 the coalition of Islamic-oriented parties (Partai Keadilan [Justice Party], Partai Bulan Bintang [Moon and Star Party], and Partai Persatuan Pembangunan [Unity and Development Party]) received only 19.7% of popular support compared to the nationalist-oriented parties, such as Partai Amanat Nasional (National Mandate Party), Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (National Awakening Party), Golongan Karya (The Party of the Functional Groups), and Partai Democracy Indonesia Perjuangan (The Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle) which together received 60.5%. The majority of Muslims in Indonesia seems to support the secular government and political pluralism. Indeed, the 2009 election showed strong support for secular political parties, such as the Democrat Party (Partai Demokrat) and Partai Democracy Indonesia Perjuangan (The Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle). While all Muslims converge with radical Islamists in honoring a return to Islam’s primary sources, the Qur’an and the Hadîth, as the foundation of Muslim life, most diverge from radical political Islamism.

Anti-Americanism: Islamist Ideological Response?

The outrageous mistreatment of prisoners in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay in particular led Muslims to believe that the War on Terror was a war on Islam and Muslims. Any Muslim has seemed to be a potential suspect. In Indonesia, Islamic institutions, which are the heart of Muslim education—such as the Pesantren of al-Mukmin, established by Abu Bakar Ba’asyir and the Learning Center of al-Ishlah in Surakarta—have been accused of promoting terrorism. Yet, like many other Muslim nations, Indonesia became a crossfire zone for terrorism committed in the name of Islam. On October 12, 2002, two
bombs devastated Bali; on August 5, 2003, Jakarta’s Marriott Hotel was set ablaze; on September 9, 2004, the embassy of Australia was bombed; and on October 1, 2005, Bali was devastated by another bomb. Victims included both foreigners visiting Indonesia and innocent Muslims. The terrorists no doubt targeted both Americans/Westerners and those who acted like them.

Anti-Americanism refers to “perceptions and attitudes of individuals or groups that display dislike, hatred, or intolerance to America.” In the United States, as T.P. Thornton suggests, “The terms ‘anti-Americanism’ and ‘terrorism’ are nearly synonymous” in that the US tends to equate anti-Americanism with terror—or with the potential employ terror against United States’ interests.” Thornton argues that “the high visibility of the United States and its perceived association with injustice make it a particularly attractive target.” This is precisely what Ismail Yusanto, the leader of Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, believes. He admits that he hates the United States and that his hatred is triggered by American attitudes and behaviors that do not mirror just, humanistic, and democratic values. He adds that the United States’ behaviors hurt Muslims and innocent people. Anti-Americanism is rooted in the experience of Muslims’ encounter with the War on Terror and with a foreign policy that targets Islam and Muslims.

Despite the fears and declarations of many in the West, anti-Americanism is not always violent, even if it is widespread. As Louis Cantori says, “Anti-Americanism among Muslims in the world, like its political extreme of terrorism, originates as a reaction to American foreign policy. It does not originate in the deep reservoirs of evil, hatred, and irrationality attributed to it by American policymakers.” What has triggered anti-American sentiments has been the perception the Islamists have derived from United States activities that America stands as an enemy of Muslims or Islam. Laskar Jihad, for example, perceives “the United States as Zionist,” and “Zionism is the enemy of Islam.” This kind of anti-American sentiment is not unique to Indonesia; leaders in many Islamic countries or those with large
Muslim populations argue that America’s perception “…as an ardent advocate of the Zionist project is …the principal theme in the analysis of Muslim anti-Americanism.”

The equation of anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism should not come as a surprise since Islamists, like Laskar Jihad and Hizbut Tahrir, perceive both the United States and Israel as the enemy of Islam. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a control issue for radical Islamists. They generally perceive the US support for Israel to be without any reservation. Farid Wadjdi, a member of Hizbut Tahrir, argues that “when Islamists defending the Palestinian land from the Israeli occupation are accused as terrorists, the Zionist Israeli treatment of Palestine is seen as defending its independence.”

Wadjdi is also critical of the War on Terror because of its indiscriminate violence. He argues that even though the US tells the world that the War on Terror is not the war on Islam, proof to the contrary is evident in the casualties of the war. He believes that the real purpose of the War on Terror is to undermine Muslim resistance to capitalist colonization. America’s Islamophobia generates anti-American sentiments among many Muslim populations, including that of Indonesia. The findings of the Center for the Study of Islam and Society, whose national survey interviewed over 1,200 respondents across 25 provinces, show that anti-American Muslim behavior includes: 1) demonstrations against United States’ foreign policies that are perceived to hurt Muslims; 2) demonstrations against United States’ foreign policies that support Israel’s aggression toward Palestine; 3) demonstrations against the United States’ invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq; 4) boycotts of American goods and service; 5) demonstrations against United States’ interference in the domestic affairs of Indonesia; 6) convincing others that the United States is a threat to the Ummah (community); and 7) pressures to terminate diplomatic relationships with the US. The percentage of those participating in these activities ranges from 1.5 to 2.1% except for point six entailing speech at 8.8%. This survey shows that...
active anti-Americanism is extremely low and occurs in the capital cities.

The survey also suggests that American-Indonesian relations at the state level are good in a general sense. The survey found that only two out of ten adult Indonesians mentioned America as the country they hate most. Muslims are generally moderate and tolerant in their outlook towards others. According to a survey conducted by the Center for the Study of Islam and Society in 2001, 2002, and 2004, Muslims have a higher degree of tolerance towards people of other faiths than do the minority communities with which they live. In 2004, 44% of Muslims responded that they had no objection to Christians teaching at public schools where Muslim children attend. 44% of Muslim Indonesians surveyed stated that Christians should be able to build a church wherever they want. While the survey also revealed that very few dislike Jews (7%) and Christians (6.5%), they had far less tolerance for communists (57.6%). The survey also suggests that Muslims value political participation. In the first election, 71.6% of Muslims surveyed stated that they believed that democracy is the best system to promote good governance and civil society. Muslims expressed less dissatisfaction with the national-oriented party (19.7%) than they did with the Islamic party (60.5%).

Conclusion
I am confident that radical Islamists in Indonesia will not gain momentum. Most Muslims support moderate Islam, as promoted by organizations like the Nahdlatul Ulama and the Muhammadiyyah. They typically present their interpretation of Islam as cultural or indigenous in contrast to Arab Islam (as noted by Metcalf in the introduction above). If such organizations flourish, Indonesia could become an emblem of a peaceful, predominantly Muslim nation. Even so, United States’ foreign policy and the War on Terror as the perceived threat to Islam continue, to a certain degree, to fuel Islamist radical propaganda of America as the enemy of Islam and Muslims. Hizbut Tahrir’s

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demonstrations during Obama’s inauguration35 and the visit by Hillary Clinton36 show that radical Islamists still oppose United States’ foreign policy and the War on Terror, even though the current administration is willing to enter into dialogue with the Muslim world respectfully. In this sense, Islamophobia and anti-Americanism are dialectically intertwined because each proponent defines the other. As the United States’ foreign policy is interested in “the desirability of democracy in the Muslim world,”37 examinations of the genealogical contexts of the terms, the political motives, and the social conditions in which terms collide are important steps in an attempt to understand the fear of Islam on one side and anti-Americanism on the other.

Footnotes
1The author wishes to extend special thanks to Lisa Trivedi and Barbara Metcalf for reading the drafts of the paper and providing valuable insights and meticulous suggestions.
5Ibid., 54.
8Charles Amjad-Ali, Islamophobia or Restorative Justice:

9Pesantren is a formal and informal educational system that teaches Islamic sciences.

10Front Pembela Islam was founded by Muhammad Rizieq Syihab (b. 1965), a Hadrami descent who is believed to have descended from the Prophet. The goal of the organization was to enjoin virtue and eliminate vice at the personal, social, and political level. See Noorhaidi Hasan, Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militancy, and the Quest for Identity in Post-New Order Indonesia (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2006), pp. 14-15.

11Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (Indonesian Holy Warrior Assembly) sprung up out of the first national congress of mujahidin (warriors of God) in Yogyakarta in 2000. The assembly elected Abu Bakr Ba’asyir as their Amirul Mujahidin (the leader of the warriors). The main goal of the organization has been to establish an Islamic state and to implement Islamic shari’ah in Indonesia. Ibid., 18-19.


13Muhammadiyah was founded in 1912 by a male activist, Ahmad Dahlan. The Muhammadiyah aims at purifying Muslims’ theological belief (aqîdah) from takhayul (mythical beliefs), bid’ah (heretic innovation) and khurafat (superstition). For more discussion on Muhammahiyah movement, see, James Peacock, Purifying the Faith: The Muhammadiyah Movement in Indonesian Islam, (Menlo


16During the colonial era that ended in August 1945, Muslims had struggled against the Dutch and Japanese colonials.

17Alfadal, et.al. Islam and Radicalism in Indonesia (Jakarta: LIPI Press, 2005), 112.


20For more complete statistical data about the increase of formal practices of Islam, see Saiful Mujani, Jajat Burhanuddin, et al., Benturan Peradaban: Sikap and Perilau Islamis Indonesia terhadap America Serikat (Jakarta: PPIM-UIN and Freedom Institute, 2005).

21Personal Interview with Dr. Afif Muhammad, Director of Graduate Studies, date February 3, 2006.

22Jamhari and Jajang Jahroni, Gerakan Salafi Radikal di Indonesia (Jakarta: RajaGrapindoPersada, 2004), 231.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Saiful Mujani, Jajat Burhanuddin, et al., Benturan Peradaban: Sikap and Perilaku Islamis Indonesia terhadap America Serikat (Jakarta: PPIM-UIN and Freedom Institute, 2005), 22.


Ibid., 16.

Saiful Mujani, Jajat Burhanuddin, et al., Benturan Peradaban: Sikap and Perilaku Islamis Indonesia terhadap America Serikat (Jakarta: PPIM-UIN and Freedom Institute, 2005), 38.

I obtained the executive summary of a collaborative research between Freedom Institute, Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat and Jaringan Islam Indonesia on “Who hates America” from one of the authors of Benturan Peradaban: Sikap and Perilaku Islamis Indonesia terhadap America Serikat (Jakarta: PPIM-UIN and Freedom Institute, 2005), Mr. Jajang Jahroni.
