

Documentary Film on Progressive Islam in Indonesia and its Impact on Muslim Women

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Introduction

As a Malaysian woman living in a Muslim majority country, I have noticed that the increasing conservatism that sees the adoption of more restricted and rigid interpretations of the Qur'an, *hadith* and legal body of law that has come to be known as the *shariah*, has detrimental impacts, including exclusion and discrimination, on both non-Muslims and the Muslim female population. After various short visits to Indonesia, and engagement with a few Muslim scholars and activists there, I found that Indonesia is home to thriving religious intellectual discourse as well as progressive and pluralistic religious thought. During my visits I was struck by the richness and openness of religious dialogue by and between male and female religious scholars and public intellectuals. Community and social issues were openly and widely debated from within a progressive religious framework, so that an issue that affects a particular segment of the community, for example women, was seen not only as an issue for that specific community of people to deal with alone, but that needed to be addressed by the wider community, including both men and women.

This was made evident during efforts to challenge a proposed Bill against Pornography and Porno-Action which set out to make it unlawful to act in any manner deemed indecent. This included women showing their navels or shoulders, or being seen performing dances that could incite sexual arousal. In these efforts, Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, arts practitioners, activists and ethnic groups from diverse backgrounds worked hand in hand in rejecting the bill for violating personal freedom and because it was felt it could have adverse impacts on the many traditions and cultural practices of diverse ethnic groups. This exemplifies the uniqueness of Indonesia, where traditional Muslim organizations such as Nahdhatul Ulama (NU), the largest Muslim non-governmental organization (NGO) in the country and a traditional independent Sunni group with about 30 million followers,

along with some of its religious figures, including its former leader and also the former Indonesian president, Abdur Rahman Wahid, are promoting a more progressive understanding of Islam and defending an "Indonesian Islam" that is more tolerant to diversity and friendlier to women.

The creative, vibrant and progressive Islamic discourse amongst religious scholars and activists has in the main been contained within the geographical boundaries of Indonesia. As a result, regional and international intellectual discourses have not benefitted fully from the progressive discourses being developed. Discourse on Islam, especially that projected by the international media, primarily still focuses on the Middle East and the West. Through the accessible medium of film, I hoped to be able to highlight Indonesia's progressive Islamic thought, particularly on women's issues, at a regional and international level. I believe that the inspiring religious tradition in Indonesia can contribute to a growth of public discourse in which effective and nuanced responses to gender issues can be generated.

Indonesia has its fair share of Islamic fundamentalism and even religious radicalism. But on the whole, Indonesia's moderate and tolerant stance and vibrant intellectual traditions embrace diversity of religion and cultures and advance progressive Islamic discourse. This project tries to understand the development of progressive Islamic discourse in Indonesia and its impact on Muslim women's issues. It will highlight several figures who play roles in shaping a societal landscape that empowers women to take more prominent roles in the public sphere.

As a means to engage with the general population, particularly youth, it was intended that the research would be presented in a one-hour documentary film. The film would try to capture relevant elements such as the history, culture, education system and socio-political landscape of the country. It would

demonstrate the relationship between Muslim women and general Islamic discourses, and their mutual impacts. It would seek to give a glimpse of “Indonesian Islam” in terms of how religion engaged with culture, politics and the lived realities of people, particularly girls and women. It would focus on a few personalities, both male and female, that have had great influence on Islamic discourse. It was planned that the film would include snapshots of events that illustrate the diverse Islamic thinking that takes place within traditional Islamic settings.

This paper is in three parts; i) a description of the methodology of research, including interviews with progressive Muslim scholars and activists ii) the historical and cultural context of Indonesia, particularly in relation to the development of the Islamic discourse, iii) preliminary findings, including challenges and wider impacts.

Methodology

The project was carried out between July 2011 and the same month the following year. It focused primarily on the island of Java, since this is the dominant site for progressive Islamic discourse. The research was carried out through personal observation of the daily lives of Indonesians, interviews with activists and scholars, observing media such as television, theater, cinema, magazines and newspapers, following programs such as the Female Ulama program and cultural festivals in a few cities, short stays with a few resource persons to better understand local contexts, and reading materials written by scholars and researchers.

During the process I sought to establish closer networks and relationships with individuals and groups of interest as well as to develop on-the-ground understanding of the politico-religious landscape. Filming was carried out during events of interest, such as *Hari Raya*, the Muslim religious festival. Groups and individuals filmed and interviewed include religious scholars, public intellectuals, women activists and women’s organizations and participants of training programs.

I planned that the film would depict “Indonesian Islam” in terms of how religion engages with culture, politics and the lived realities of its people,

particularly girls and women. I set out to include snapshots of participant observation such as the *babthul matbail* (an annual event whereby a debate on religious issues takes place within various religious establishments) and events organized by Fatayat, the women’s wing of NU.

During interviews with scholars and activists such as Dr. Agus Sunyoto, Ms Lies Marcoes, Dr. Musdah Mulia, Mr. Ulil Absbar Abdalla and Ms Eridani, I gained insights into their knowledge, opinions and personal stories which shed light on issues such as the history of Indonesia, the early spread of Islam in the country, early national figures who left a great impact in the development of progressive thinking, and women’s movements.

On the technical side, the filming process comprised three phases i.e. i) shooting ii) editing iv) conversion. The shooting was carried out primarily through “solo-journalism” style, using a high-definition video camera and mini tapes. About 100 one-hour tapes were recorded. Editing was carried out on Final Cut Pro software. At the time of writing this paper, editing was in the process of completion.

Indonesian Historical and Cultural Context

Indonesia has a population of around 210 million, of whom almost 90 percent are Muslims. In contrast to general public perceptions, Dr. Agus Sunyoto, a history lecturer in Brawijaya University in Malang, asserts that the wide distribution of Islam throughout Indonesia was not carried out by Arab traders, but in fact was spread by Sufi missionaries known as *Wali Songo* (the nine saints) from Champa (Vietnam). According to Dr. Sunyoto, although Arabs came to the region at around 700 CE, they did not succeed in spreading Islam widely. The main reason why Wali Songo succeeded was due to its soft approach in engaging local cultures. The Saints saw themselves not only as religious figures, but also as agents pushing for social reform and fighting oppression of the poor. Syekh Siti Jenar, for example, empowered people to be independent agents and to free themselves from the tyranny of oppressive Sultans. He taught the concept of “Tauhid,” that is, the Oneness of God, and that human beings should only worship and be subservient to God, and not to other

human beings. He introduced the term *masyarakat* or society, which was derived from the Arabic word for to “live and work together” and rejected the imposed notion that people were slaves to rulers. The saints deployed a great deal of wisdom. One of them, Sunan Kudus, was known to prohibit Muslims from eating beef in order to respect the Hindu majority; this tradition is still practiced. This rich historical background, transmitted from one generation to another, has helped to create a more tolerant society.

Dr. Sunyoto is also the head of LESBUMI, a cultural department in NU. This organization advocates for local culture to be acknowledged as an intrinsic part of the Muslim identity in Indonesia. Sunyoto rejects any move to curb the practice of local cultures in the name of religion, asserting that, “If you say that local cultures are not Islamic, then you are actually accusing God of being unjust”.

The two large Muslim organizations in Indonesia, namely NU and Muhammadiyah (the country’s second largest Muslim organization), supported the first Indonesian President, Soekarno, in the inception of “Pancasila” in 1945. Pancasila is a philosophical foundation for Indonesia which includes the promotion of ideas around nationalism, justice, equality, humanity, and religious tolerance. Both NU and Muhammadiyah play a pivotal role in promoting Pancasila and maintaining the moderate and tolerant nature of Muslim societies in the country. They reject the notion of an Islamic state or the implementation of hudud, the classical Islamic criminal law.

Muhammadiyah focuses on carrying out reform within the Muslim community by engaging with modernity through activities such as building modern schools and clinics, and also by rejecting syncretism, which is deemed un-Islamic. The reformist ideas of Rashid Ridha, the student of Syeikh Muhammad Abduh, the renowned reformer who was the Mufti of Egypt, have been embraced by various Muhammadiyah figures such as HAMKA. Open forms of Islam were later promoted by figures such as Dr. Nurcholis Madjid, who was instrumental in the setting up the Universitas Paramadina, and the intellectual activist Dawam Rahardjo.

NU, on the other hand, maintains a traditional approach and embraces existing local cultural practices. One of its renowned leaders, Abdur Rahman Wahid, was a staunch defender of what he terms “Indonesian Islam,” that was tolerant and respected diversity of religion and culture as well as diversity of thought. He also showed a great concern for protecting the rights of minorities and marginalized groups.

Many other national figures, religious figures, artists, cultural activists and public intellectuals have contributed to progressive discourse. These include Harun Nasution (reformist scholar), Syafie Maarif (leader of Muhammadiyah), Goenawan Muhammad (artist and thinker), Emha Ainun Nadjib (artist and religious personality) and Musdah Mulia (woman scholar). They advocated for a more intellectually vibrant education system, moderation and tolerance of diversity of cultures and diversity of opinion, and for a more humanist Islam that upheld justice and equality. Kartini (1879-1904), a woman from an aristocrat family who was exposed to Western education, put forward feminist views and advocated for women’s empowerment in an era where patriarchy, feudalism and autocracy were cultural norms. Her works, including advocacy for girls’ education, left a great legacy in the promotion of women’s rights in Indonesia.

Another figure whose writing is widely read, especially by university students and activists, is Ahmad Wahib, an intellectual who died at the young age of 35. Wahib’s journal *Islamic Thinking, Discontent: The Diary of Ahmad Wahib* can be considered a great legacy towards the growth of progressive thinking. The book encourages Muslims to question, think, and use reason in understanding religion. It is widely read and has inspired many contemporary progressive scholars and activists.

Prof. Dr. Quraish Shihab and Dr. Nasaruddin Umar, two renowned scholars who have lectured at the Islamic State University (UIN) and held high positions, are also among the contemporary Muslim scholars who show concern for gender issues. Their books are widely read by academics, activists, university students and their lectures are available on the Internet.

The State Islamic University (UIN), previously known as the State Islamic Institute (IAIN) (established in 1960), plays an important role in producing human resources that are intelligent, creative and innovative, and that treasure Islamic values while embracing modernity and Indonesian identity. The university promotes diversity of thought amongst its students and strives to integrate religious, social as well as scientific and technological knowledge with Indonesian identity, in order to enrich the national culture. Important figures in shaping the focus and direction of UIN include Prof. Dr. Azyumardi Azra and Prof. Dr. Komaruddin Hidayat.

During the Soeharto era, in 1998, Nurcholis Madjid was granted funds to build the Universitas Paramadina. The institution promotes freedom of thought and adopts a comprehensive, holistic, rational, critical-analytical and methodological approach in responding to issues faced by contemporary societies. Numerous classes and forum discussions are open to the public, thus enabling the general people to participate and engage in vibrant intellectual discourse.

The two modern educational institutes, UIN and Universitas Paramadina, are not the only hub of progressive discourse. NU itself has a rich tradition in developing jurisprudence that corresponds with the needs of contemporary society. Its Bahtsul Masa'il event in which the *ulama* hold extensive debates on a variety of issues such as on Islam and nationalism, the legal system and also on ritual matters, plays an important role not only in the enrichment of jurisprudence itself, but in encouraging healthy debates and respecting diversity of opinion and knowledge amongst its followers, particularly the young. Traditional religious institutions, namely the *pesantrens* (Islamic boarding schools) also play a significant role in the promotion for a more moderate and tolerant Islam. *Pesantrens* are generally run by members of NU, while Muhammadiyah runs "modern" schools.

In 1983, a body called P3M, the Indonesian Society for *Pesantren* and Community Development, was formed to engage in human rights and socio-cultural issues, focusing on economic matters,

health, environment and gender. Many P3M activists later branched out individually or organizationally, to further their work in areas such as women's leadership and women's sexual and reproductive rights. Among them are organizations such as Rahima (the Centre for Education and Information on Islam and Women's Rights) and individual activists such as the renowned Muslim woman activist Lies Marcoes and Kiyai Husein Muhammad, a traditional religious scholar who has written many books and give lectures all over Indonesia and the world on women's rights in Islam.

The above historical and cultural context is important for the purpose of contextualization in relation to progressive Islam in Indonesia.

Issues, Challenges and Impacts of Progressive Islam

This section focuses on issues, challenges and impacts of progressive Islam. It provides brief profiles of notable Muslim organizations and individual intellectuals and activists.

i) Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL) and Ulil Abshar Abdalla

Ulil Abshar Abdalla is a founder of the highly controversial organization Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL) (Liberal Islamic Network) formed in 2001. JIL promotes progressive and liberal ideas such as freedom of thought and religious pluralism. Although it is a small organization, it has had a significant impact on Islamic intellectual discourse. Despised by conservatives but welcomed by those who seek intellectual enlightenment, especially amongst the young, JIL has acquired iconic status, including among some young people who disagree with it. JIL was highly protected by Abdur Rahman Wahid, who remained consistent in his support for freedom of speech. He in fact collaborated with the organization by being the main resource person for its radio talk show.

Abdalla comes from a traditional religious background, and is well versed in both classical and modern discourses in Islamic and Western thought. In 2010, he tried to contest the position of head of

NU. Although some quarters shunned him for his liberal views, he remains quite popular among young intellectuals who wish to have a more critical discourse.

Abdalla believes that society has a “religious rationality” that encompasses the ability to discern teachings that are conducive to the wider good. With that religious rationality, society will evolve in keeping with the times, without leaving behind the basic principles of the religion. He is optimistic that liberal views in Islam will be more widely accepted as many things that were regarded as too liberal and were rejected earlier have been slowly accepted, such as the wearing of “Western” clothes.

JIL was formed by young activists who were influenced by senior progressive Muslim figures. Prof Munawir Sazali, the former minister of religion in 1980s, for example, criticized the classical Islamic law on inheritance, in which males receive the bigger share. He used his religious rationality to interpret religious texts to correspond to the changing context.

Ulil’s work is more focused on the relationship between Islam and the state. He believes that one of the challenges after Indonesia’s reformation (ie. after the fall of Suharto) is how to achieve a proportional relationship between religion and politics, between Islam and the state, between religious morality and ethics and universal ethics based on human rights and the state constitution. His concern relates to the implementation of *shariah* in the country and he critiques the impact of implementing classical *shariah* in the modern world without the proper reinterpretation. He believes that if the state wants to implement classical *shariah* in modern societies, then it must subject the Islamic law to reinterpretation, criticism, and reevaluation. He is confident that people do exercise their wisdom and religious rationality, and thus constantly evolve. People will continue to dialogue with religious texts in order to provide answers to their contemporary situations, which are becoming more complex by the day.

ii) *Rahima*

Rahima is the Centre for Education and Information on Islam and Women’s Rights. A few members of P3M founded this women’s organization in 2000, a year before the inception of JIL. While JIL focuses primarily on promoting liberal ideas at the intellectual and academic level, Rahima’s main concern is the empowerment of women from the Islamic perspective, with grassroots women as its main target audience. Hence, Rahima has to adopt more progressive positions in its effort to provide answers that correspond to women’s lived realities in arenas such as women’s rights in Islam and reproductive health.

In its early years, Rahima focused on advocating for critical thinking and dissemination of information on women’s rights within the *pesantren* community. It later reached out to wider groups such as state religious schools and their teachers, religious discussion groups, Muslim women’s organizations, university students and NGOs.

In 2010, Rahima launched a seminar on “The Future of Female Ulama Leadership”. The “Female Ulama” program can be considered as a bold and radical movement. This is a pilot project and the participants are pioneers; it is thus understandable that they may not have enough confidence to project themselves widely. However, the knowledge received from the program will empower women to participate in decision-making and share their views with the public as well as strengthen their advocacy networks.

iii) *Kiyai Husein Muhammad*

Amongst the active members and main resource persons in Rahima’s advocacy work is a traditional Muslim scholar by the name of Kiyai Husein Muhammad. He studied in local *pesantren* and later graduated from Al Azhar University in Egypt. He has acknowledged that he held more conservative views on Islam until he was exposed to gender issues during a workshop held by P3M. The discussions on gender troubled his conscience, for he began to question the long-held

classical position of women being inferior to men. He then re-read the religious texts from the perspective of justice and equality, and concluded that a more progressive understanding needs to be adopted in order to find solutions to problems faced in contemporary society, especially by women and children. His familiarity with the classical religious texts, understanding of gender and human rights issues and critical analysis is a great contribution to the growth of progressive religious discourse in Indonesia. Some of his writings have been translated into other languages, benefiting not only Indonesian society but also international communities.

The involvement of a male religious scholar like Muhammad shows support for gender issues and support for the empowerment of women. He has written various books that argue for gender equality in Islam.

iv) Prof. Dr. Musdah Mulia

Prof. Dr. Musdah Mulia was the first woman to obtain a doctorate degree in Islamic political thinking from the Islamic State University, Jakarta, in 1997, and she was an advisor to the Ministry of Religious Affairs. She was very active in Fatayat, the young women's wing of the NU. Her involvement exposed her to the lived realities of Indonesian society, particularly the needs of women and children. She thus conducted advocacy work on human-rights issues related to gender, sexual orientation and freedom of religion.

She has been involved in the preparation and submission of the Counter Legal Draft of the Compilation of Islamic Law in 2004, which proposed for a revised law that upheld democracy, pluralism, human rights and gender equality in the context of Indonesian society. Known as a vocal scholar, Musdah Mulia has not minced words in expressing her thoughts on women's issues, interfaith issues and even Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) issues. She has written books on topics such as reformist Muslim women, Islam and gender equality and women in politics. Women activists and scholars like Prof. Dr. Musdah Mulia are held

in high esteem and respected for their knowledge, skill and expertise, including among male activists and scholars.

v) Masriyah Amva

Nyai Masriyah Amva was a wife of a local religious leader who ran a *pesantren*. After her husband's demise, she was concerned about the possibility of the school being closed down. Her despair later turned into courage and conviction in ensuring its survival. Her strong faith in God, and with guidance and moral support from Kiyai Husein Muhammad, meant she found the courage to lead the school herself. She is now amongst the very few women to be the head of a *pesantren*. Kiyai Husein Muhammad believes that by having a good understanding of gender equality, it will be much easier for a person to understand other human rights issues such as respecting cultural and religious diversity. He thus not only helped Nyai Masriyah to have a good understanding of gender issues, but also interfaith issues. Together they engage with other religious groups such as visiting churches and dialoguing with the Christian community.

While Prof. Dr. Musdah Mulia is a nationally and internationally-renowned scholar who writes extensively on the issues of Muslim women's rights, gender equality and religious freedom, Nyai Masriyah is a local woman figure in her community who inspires and empowers her students by her courage and resilience. She is living proof that a woman can be a good leader of a traditional religious institution and is well respected in her community.

General Observations

My stay in Indonesia was very refreshing and inspiring. I considered myself very privileged to be able to witness the vibrant intellectual discourse there. Young activists and university students, including those who focus on Islamic issues, are knowledgeable about western philosophy and progressive discourse, informed by local and international scholars. Their thirst for knowledge and interest in engaging in debates is something

to be envied by Malaysians. People in Indonesia are generally open and respectful of diversity of opinion. Most Indonesian communities are still deeply rooted in their own cultures and *pesantren* education has also taught them to be humble, cooperative, respectful and articulate in expressing their views. My first exposure as to how Syiah (Shi'a) came about, and on the fundamental difference between Syiah and Sunni, emerged during this study. Although there is a generally negative perception about Shiites, academics and activists can openly discuss the issues in public forums or workshops. There are also some traditional scholars who come in support of Syiah and declare publicly that Syiah is not deviant from Islam.

Many people that I talked to were quite skeptical about the government's efforts and record in helping the people. Rampant corruption is a particular source of discontent. The situation makes people expect little of government, and instead, to adopt an independent spirit and venture into new terrain with a strong sense of camaraderie. Many people form groups, lobby certain quarters, network and engage with local communities in order to bring about change or keep their cultures alive. The Lumajang Anniversary Cultural Festival, the Jogja Festival, the Tanoker children's group and the many small arts groups in different parts of Indonesia express this energy. The amazing Jember Fashion Carnival, an international-level event held at a town far from Jakarta, is another inspiring example.

There is a more relaxed attitude in male-female relationships in Indonesia than in Malaysia. Perhaps this is because it is an agrarian society where men and women have traditionally worked together in the fields. Segregation between the sexes or seeing women as "the source of *fitna*, or evil" is not the norm. Activists generally work, joke, and laugh together at a comfort level similar to that of family members, rather than exuding a constant fear of "being seduced by the other sex". In some *pesantrens*, male teachers speak directly to female students without any separators. The girls may even laugh and jeer at the teachers' jokes and comments.

In the mosques, there are no high or thick curtains separating males and females. In certain sections of some mosques, men and women can even be seen praying side by side. There are less hang-ups about the issue of women wearing hijab in the mosques. This goes also for religious classes that are open to the public participation, held at the Paramadina University. Some women attend classes in skirts without raising any eyebrows from anyone present, including the lecturer who is a senior scholar in the Qur'anic exegesis. Girls are taught public speaking in *pesantrens*. In fact, in their leadership trainings, they are not only trained to articulate their thoughts and to speak in public, but they are also taught on human relationships and team building. Women conduct choirs and conduct the singing of the national anthem, even in the religious gatherings held by the NU.

On the whole, I find many Indonesians are articulate and knowledgeable about many issues. In the era of Facebook, I have noticed that posts by Indonesian friends on religious issues are often thought-provoking, written from a philosophical perspective and articulated in a humorous and relaxed manner. The posts show their deep level of understanding, maturity and confidence in engaging with others and in expressing their views.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this research, and the forthcoming documentary, will contribute to wider understanding of gender issues. It is also hoped that learning about progressive Islam in Indonesia will inspire some, especially youth, to bring about transformative social change in their own communities. More importantly, hopefully women will feel empowered to question and challenge some of the discrimination that they face, some of which has been justified in the name of Islam, including in the arenas of domestic violence, marital rape, and child marriage. Other countries, particularly Muslim societies, could learn and benefit from the Indonesian experience, by understanding the factors that have influenced and continue to contribute to the intellectual

diversity of Islamic thought and scholarship as well as gender mainstreaming in Indonesia.

Possible future research could focus on the development of the female ulama program. It would be interesting to study the impact of the program on the respective communities of each participant. It would also be interesting to follow the progressive Islamic discourse that continues to be vibrant and growing in Indonesia's fast-changing societal context. Apart from intellectual discourse, Indonesian models of engagement and discourse on culture and religion may also offer a model for a more women-friendly society.