STUDIA ISLAMIKA

JAVANESE ISLAM: THE FLOW OF CREED
Jamhari

THE ISLAMIC REFORMIST MOVEMENT IN THE MALAY-INDONESIAN WORLD
IN THE FIRST FOUR DECADES OF THE 20TH CENTURY:
INSIGHTS GAINED FROM A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT EGYPT
Giora Eliraz

THE POLITIC OF SALT, NOT THE POLITICS OF LIPSTICK:
MOHAMMAD HATTA ON ISLAM AND NATIONALISM
Ihsan Ali-Fauzi

Gender in the Eyes
of the Indonesian
Muslim Organizations

By: Ismatu Ropi

"**W**ho is to decide whether a wife can work outside home?" I asked this question to a woman, standing next to me in the veranda of a closed store in a village in West Sumatra, waiting for the rain to stop. "My husband," she said. The day is Friday morning. She, and other hundreds of other woman—usually in their middle age—went to a big mosque in the village for talabul ilmi (looking for knowledge). "Knowledge" for them is religious knowledge, and the source is a religious scholar kiayi. Among other things that the kiayi said is that a husband is the leader of his family, referring to the Qur'an 4:34, "al-Rijâl qawwâmûnâ 'alâ al-nisâ (men are responsible of women). Accordingly, the argument goes, he has the one who has to say on many things about what the wife has to do, including working outside home. And the wife is obliged to listen to him, provided that what he says does not contradict religious teachings. But the reverse is not always true: the husband does not need to ask the wife's permit to work outside. "If my husband wants me," she says further, "I cannot refuse, unless I let the angles curse me for
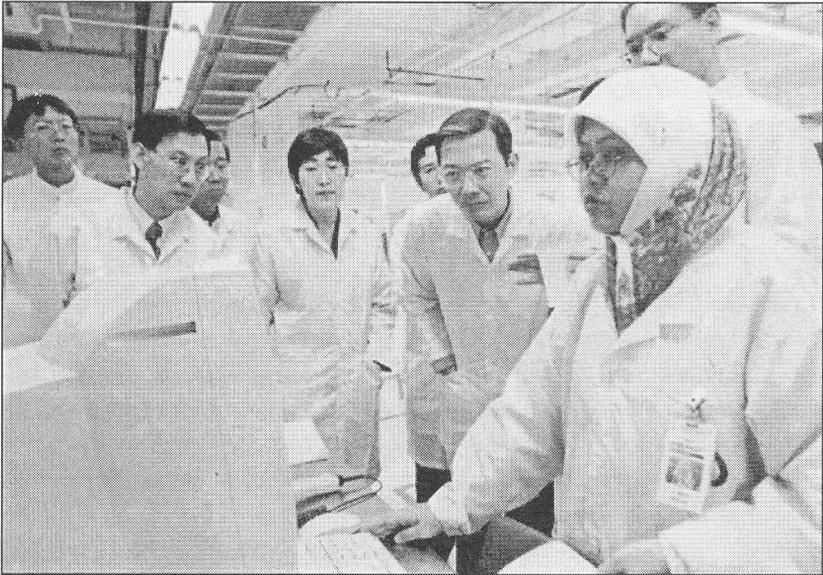
the whole night." "But what happens if you wants your husband, can he refuse?" I wonder. "No, the man will never refuse," I was stunned.

While the woman looks at her husband as her superior to whom she has to devote her life, Umi, an 80 years old widow, saw it differently. Being asked whether she would ask her husband's permit to go out, she said "Yes, of course." Even for talabul ilmi?" "Yes." "What happened if the husband does not allow you to go." "Well, I will bring the kitab [Arabic book on religious prescriptions] to him and ask him to instruct me with it. If he cannot read it [let alone explain it] I will go. I do not care if he is up set. It is his fault."

Unlike the fisrt women, Umi was an educated woman. She was one of the two woman students who attended a class at a PERTI (Persatuan Targiyah Islamiyah) school in Jaho village. The other woman was the doughter of the founder of the school Syech Jamil Jaho. The Syech was also one of the founders of PERTI, an influential tradisionalist mass organization particularly in West Sumatra. After the death of the Syech, the daughter became his successor to run the school and PERTI, and Umi was asked to help her. Umi, like other women in the village was thought to follow religious prescription, to listen to her husband, but her education and activism enables her, using religious arguments, to correct the religious ground used by her husband to hold her home. She understands that there are layers of religious doctrines and teachings, and she is also aware that the higher one should be prioritized, even when her husband is at stake.

The cases of the first woman and Umi mirror two different attitudes of understanding religion. While Umi looks at religion as an open and dynamic doctrines, the woman simply accepts what the kiayi said, and follow it blindly. But the woman does not feel that she was being oppressed by her husband when she has to serve her husband day and night. She understands that, doing so, she is actually serving her God and His Prophet. To her, her husband is a means to achieve happiness in the life after life. Suffering, if she suffers at all, is token of her devotion to God. She is simply happy. Once a gender activist said that, in cases such the woman's, theology is certainly used to oppressed woman. Or, to be precise, the husband uses religion to oppress his wife. But what happen if the wife does not see her situation as problematic and, above all, she is happy? Gender activists sometimes find it difficult even to make their case.

These are only some of the living and rich anecdotes found during the field research on Indonesian Muslim organizations' views on gender cur-

rently done by PPIM and the Ford Foundation. Needless to say that the relation of religious doctrines and its adherents is more complex than one might think. Responses to a religious doctrine, as illustrated above, can be different from one individual Muslim to another, from one group to another. To make it more complicated, there are also other factors that play significant role in making their opinions and responds to a certain religious doctrine different. These include social background, culture and politics.

One might remember how the New Order tried to 'domesticate' women through bureaucracy and state apparatus. A good woman, to the New Order, is the one who can act as a good mother for her children and a good accompany for her husband. Dharma Wanita, the state backed-up organization for the wives of the public servants, and the ministry of woman affairs are allegedly instrumental in this domestication project. For sure there are some political benefits that the New Order gained from this project. If the New Order thinks that state bureaucracy is one of the most important pillar for maintaining their political interests, then they should control all people behind it down to the lowest level. In this context Dharma Wanita is a good way to extend such control to the family level. But as far as the gender mainstreaming is concerned, the policy has been viewed as contributing to the oppression of woman organizations detrimental to it, although one should be aware that its impact in the village

level cannot be exaggerated. The economics problems in the villages make it too luxurious for the women there to be Dharma-Wanita-ized, to stay home taking care of the kids and waiting for their husbands to come home. Here social (and economic) condition is a natural resistance to state interference.

State, compared to culture and religion, is the latest comer in this regard and, therefore, the least influential. Before state, there are culture and religions. The PPIM research takes religion or, to be precise, religious understanding as a pivotal in shaping the minds and the attitudes of its believers concerning gender. In Islamic context, an important vehicle in socializing religious doctrines and teachings are Muslim mass organizations and educational institutions. These institutions are the materialization of certain religious understanding and outlook. Each group interpret Islam differently according to their affiliation to certain madhhabs (school of thoughts) that have existed in the Islamic World. NU, for example, claim themselves as the followers of Ahlussunnah wal-Jama'ah, that is a theological school closely attached to Islamic medieval theologian figures al-Ash'ari and al-Maturidi. The way of looking at Islam will be different from the followers of Mu'tazilah, the rational school of thought to which the late Harun Nasution (on of the rectors of IAIN, now UIN, Jakarta) is associated. In terms of fiqh, NU claim themselves to be the followers of the four madhhabs, i.e.Mâlikî, Hanafî, Shâfi'î and Hanbalî, although in practice they mainly follow Shâfi'î school.

Muhammadiyah, claim that they do not commit themselves to any of the existing madhhabs and propagate a direct reading of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, have different way of understanding gender issues. During the interviews one can see clearly how the different attitudes between the followers of Muhammadiyah and that of NU and other traditional organizations. In general, on the question of whether it is allowed for the wives to work in offices (government and private alike), the former are faster to answer "Yes" than the former. But, once again, religious understanding alone is not sufficient to explain the difference. The distance between the respective organization to the ruling group is also an important factor that should be looked at.

Needles to say that there are numerous Muslim organizations all over Indonesia, and therefore, some limitation is a necessity. The following qualifications are used to select which of them are to be included: (1) they must be well established and enjoyed a high community support, and (2) act as centers of religious values production and reproduction, especially

for the surrounding community. Thus only Muslim organizations with real mass support and strong networks, as well as with real contributions in shaping the Muslims minds and attitudes, will be studied. Using the criteria, besides PERTI, NU and Muhammadiyah mentioned before, thirteen organizations are selected including PERSIS, DDI (Darul Dakwah wa Irsyad), Nahdlatul Wathan, and al-Washliyah. Some of these organization are strong only outside Java such as PERTI in West Sumatra, al-Washliyah in North Sumatrea and DDI in South Sulawesi. It is only natural that the research also put great emphasis on Muslims traditions outside Java.

In terms of gender mainstreaming, Muhammadiyah in terms of institutional development seems to be the most outstanding among Muslims organizations. Like other Muslims organization, Muhammadiyah establishes a separate body for women activities, 'Aisyiyah. While Muhammadiyah is named after the Prophet Muhammad, 'Aisyiyah is after the Prophet's wife 'Aisyah. Thus the 'Aisyiyah activists are usually the wives of the husbands who are the Muhammadiyah members. Established in 1917, five years after the establishment of Muhammadiyah, 'Aisyiyah has well developed its body and activities. In West Sumatra alone, for example, in the end of 2000 there were 86 branches with 365 religious study groups with 240 woman preachers/motivators. Among other things, they run 25 orphanages (with more than 1200 orphans, half of them are girls), at least 1 hospital in which 2647 patients were treated in the year, 667 of them were free of charge (as early as the Dutch Colonial period, the 'Aisyiyah of West Sumatra had already had 25 birth clinics), and 163 kindergartens (with 4501 students, 2656 of them are girls). Being concerned with combating illiteracy, 'Aisyiyah has payed a special attention to children education, and kindergartens is the most favorite 'Aisyiyah programs in this regards. (In the 37th National Congress of 'Aisyiyah in 1964 in Yogyakarta, they had a special session on how to improve teachers of 'Aisyiyah Kindergartens). To have access to a better education and information, 'Aisyiyah decided to socialize its members with Indonesian language. It is in West Sumatera, in its Congress in 1930, 'Aisyiyah instructed that all of its branch throughout Indonesia should provide courses on Indonesian language. In 1935, 'Aisyiyah decided to use Indonesian as daily language among its members. These steps are strategic not only for networking but also for developing institutional education.

The Muhammadiyah case, briefly provided, could illustrate the importance of mass organizations both in national and in local level in gender

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mainstreaming. Through them local women are not only educated and facilitated to express themselves through variety of programs but also connected to their sisters outside the regions and to the rest of the world. But again, being religious organizations, religious values and outlook—as they are understood by the community behind those organization—will be influential in the use and the abuse of such a good institution and networks.

Through interviews, both with its leaders and its members, and documentary research, the following issues were raised: (1) leadership (decision making in terms of contents, i.e. what can be decided by women, and participation, i.e, what positions that women can hold), (2) reproduction rights (pregnancy, number of children, contraception, sexual intercourse, divorce and parental issues), (3) public participation, (4) self determination, and (5) economy. Those issues are discussed by scholars in the wide range of themes in religious books. The question of leadership, for example, are discussed by religious scholars when they are interpreting the Qur'anic al-rijal qawwamun 'ala al-nisa mentioned above. During the interviews with members and leaders of Muslim religious organizations the verse has been constantly referred to when they were asked about the relation of men and women both in domestic and public spheres. Reading books of tafsir, one can clearly see how different scholars, lived in different places at different time, put forward different arguments. But, during the inter-

views with members of Muslims organizations, one can hardly see the wide range of arguments and opinions as if there is only one meaning of the verse. While Islamic tradition is reach, Muslims are poor.

Why is it that pluralism and dynamism in Islamic traditions is reduced to singularity and passivity? It is to be remembered that Islamic mass organizations in Indonesia emerged out of tension and, sometimes, conflicts, between two major groups especially in the beginning of 20th century: the modernists and the traditionists. All the 16 Muslim organizations chosen for the research can be drawn according to this line of division. Although the conflict originally is religious—the modersists initial main attempts is to clean Islam from local believes and practices unfounded in the Qur'ân and the Hadîth—the impact went beyond religious boundaries. It is only natural that the complexity of the conflicts lead to the strengthening religious groups and organization as communal identity. The religious doctrines and teachings does not merely serve as reference in living their lives but also, and this is more apparent, as drawing line between "they" and "we". To become a successful means of communal division, the complexity of religious doctrine must be made simple and monolithic, otherwise it will not work and create internal quarrels within groups. This is the beginning of religious rigidity and exclusivity.

Umi, regardless of her personal strength, is thrown into a such difficult situation. PERTI, to which she belongs, is, like NU, a traditional organization. It is even more traditional than NU. Unlike NU, who are willing to follow 4 different madhhabs in terms of Islamic laws, PERTI only follow one madhhab, Shâfi'î. She graduated from the Syech Jamil Jaho school when the Syech was still alive. On her graduation certificate, signed by the Syekh, it is written that she will never follow any madhhab other than Shâfi'î. She still remembered that on the night of graduation the Syech, through his representative, asked each of the students to do bay'ah (religious pledge) that he/she will not leave Shâ'fi madhhab. This means that, as far as women issues are concerned, what Imam Shâfi'î said on the issues will be followed. She would not marry, as she did, a follower man of Shâfi'î, not of other madhhabs. But that is not to say that the members of modernist organization do not experience the same thing. In theory, because they proclaim that they do not commit themselves to any madhhabs, they would be more flexible and open to diversity of interpretations. The question of communal identity has lead them to the same religious exclusivity. What is worse, their commitment to purify Islam, is potential trap for being more monolithic and rigid.

The strength of mass Muslim organizations lies exactly in the fact that they are equally potential for better or worse. Each of them have each own claim for failure and success. But the complexity of these institution both as the materializations of certain religious understanding and communal identity calls for a patient and a close look. The book that will be published later as an out put of the research, will perhaps gives more questions and answers.