

***TAKING RELIGION MORE SERIOUSLY:
BEYOND SECULAR ASSUMPTION IN STUDYING RELIGION AND
POLITICS IN INDONESIA***

**MELIHAT AGAMA SECARA LEBIH SERIUS:
MELAMPAUI ASUMSI SEKULAR DALAM MENELITI AGAMA DAN
POLITIK DI INDONESIA**

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Book Title : *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East*
Author : Veri R. Hadiz
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Book Title : *The Politics of Sharia Law: Islamic Activist and the State in Democratizing Indonesia*
Author : Michael Buehler
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Abstract

This review looks at two important recent publications by leading scholars on Indonesian politics namely Vedi Hadiz's Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East, and Michael Buehler's The Politics of Shari'a Law: Islamist Activists and the State in Democratizing Indonesia. Both publications have advanced the literature analytically by offering new approaches in a literature that is saturated by culturalist and, more recently, institutionalist arguments. Buehler's book, however, is better-equipped in meeting the challenge offered by Benedict Anderson to understand the unique motive of religious politics in Indonesia than Hadiz's book. Buehler has managed to acknowledge the success of Islamist politics in Indonesia in asserting religious laws in the public sphere. Hadiz, by contrast, still treats the case of Indonesia as a case of failure of Islamist politics primarily by relying on the electoral performance of Islamist actors as an indicator. Ultimately, the two publications should be welcomed warmly by the student of religion and politics in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Islamist politics, Indonesian politics, Islamic populism, Shari'a bylaws, Democratization.*

Abstrak

Review ini membedah dua buku penting dari Vedi Hadiz dan Michael Buehler berjudul masing-masing *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East* dan *The Politics of Shari'a Law: Islamist Activist and the State in Democratizing Indonesia*. Dua publikasi ini telah memajukan literatur tentang agama dan politik di Indonesia dengan menawarkan pendekatan analitis baru dibandingkan dengan pendekatan kultural dan institusional yang selama ini dominan. Buku dari Buehler secara khusus telah lebih baik menjawab tantangan dari Benedict Anderson

untuk memahami motif unik dari politik kaum religius di Indonesia dibandingkan dengan buku dari Hadiz. Hadiz, di sisi lain, masih melihat Indonesia sebagai kasus kegagalan dari perjuangan politik kaum Islamis sebagai akibat dari memfokuskan perhatian pada lemahnya kinerja elektoral dari aktor-aktor Islam politik sebagai indicator. Namun, kedua buku seyogyanya disambut dengan hangat oleh para pelajar studi agama dan politik di Indonesia.

Kata kunci: Politik kaum Islamis, Politik Indonesia, Populisme Islam, Perda Sharia, Demokratisasi.

Introduction

One central puzzle in contemporary Indonesian politics concerns the weak performance of Islamic parties in the electoral arena. The number of votes for Islamic parties in recent elections in Indonesia taken together has never exceeded their initial milestone in the 1950s. In fact, the votes of the majority Indonesian Muslims are by and large evenly distributed to both secular nationalist and Islamic camps.¹ This observation often suggests the ability of secular nationalist parties to carry out the Islamic aspiration of Indonesian voters.² The failure is especially puzzling in light of the success of Islamic politics³ outside the general election. Political Islam as a social force has been able to assert its religious agenda in the public sphere as indicated by the successful issuance of Sharia bylaws at the subnational level in Indonesia after democratization and decentralization.⁴ The two books under review here attempt at partially or squarely solving this puzzle.

Vedi Hadiz commences his argument by situating Indonesia comparatively in the larger

universe of Muslim majority countries. His book *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East* asks what explains the different outcome of Islamic politics across the Muslim world. Why, for example, does the AKP in Turkey manage to reign politically and to assert dominance over the state while its counterpart, PKS (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*), in Indonesia consistently fails to do so? Concretely, Hadiz examines three diverse cases; the positive case of Turkey, the negative case of Indonesia, and the middle-value case of Egypt where the Muslim Brotherhood managed to win the electoral game only to find their victory rolled over by the military later on.

Approaching the problem at hand with the optics of populism, Hadiz suggests that the variation in the outcome of Islamist politics is accounted for by (i) the degree to which the Islamist actors manage to craft a cohesive cross-class alliance and by (ii) the presence of a cohesive political vehicle to represent the *ummah*. In Ernesto Laclau's original formulation of populism, this is the moment when the sectoral *plebs* are transcended into the universal *populus* thus empowering the populist political project.⁵

Indonesia and Turkey

Hadiz does not confine his discussion only to those three cases above. He touches lightly upon several other cases in the Muslim world, such as Iran and Tunisia, to arrive at his conclusion. The thrust of his theoretical insight, however, stems from the juxtaposition of the two empirical cases of Turkey and Indonesia.

The Indonesian case demonstrates that cross-class alliance and a cohesive political vehicle representing the *ummah* as the two critical variables explaining a successful trajectory of Islamic politics are largely absent. Hadiz

¹ A.R. Baswedan, "Political Islam in Indonesia: Present and Future Trajectory," *Asian Survey*, Vol.44, No.5 (September/October 2004): 669-690.

² Sunny Tanuwidjaja, "Political Islam and Islamic Parties in Indonesia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.32, No.1 (April 2010): 29-49.

³ Throughout this review, I will utilize Islamic politics and Islamist politics interchangeably. Although I am aware of the distinction between the two concepts of Islamist and Islamic, I mainly refer to the politics of asserting religious agenda in the public sphere by various actors claiming to represent Islam as a political community.

⁴ Robin Bush, "Regional Sharia Regulations in Indonesia: Anomaly or Symptom?" in Greg Fealy & Sally White (eds), *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008): 174-191.

⁵ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, (London: Verso, 2005).

suggests that PKS as one main actor of Islamic politics fail to forge alliance with big Chinese bourgeoisie as is seen in their poor maneuver to open party membership to non-muslims.⁶ This failure of crafting a cross-class coalition with the big Chinese bourgeoisie has historical precedent, namely in the genesis of the old Islamic populism during the colonial era. The genesis of the old Islamic populism in Indonesia concerns an antagonism between indigenous, Islamic petty bourgeoisie and the foreign bourgeoisies represented by the colonial government and the Chinese. The constitution of the notion of *ummah*, therefore, includes a deliberate exclusion of the ethnic Chinese from the notion of the 'people'.⁷ This exclusion contributes to the difficulty in forging a cross-class coalition as the anti-Chinese sentiment persists and the Chinese dominate sectors of the Indonesian economy.

In addition to the failure of crafting a cross-class alliance, PKS also finds itself in such a narrow space among the already established organizations and parties such as NU, Muhammadiyah, and PPP in its effort to represent the *ummah*. The more radical section of the Islamic civil society also does not find itself in agreement with PKS as a political vehicle.⁸

Historically, this problem of fragmentation of the *ummah* is not novel at all. During the period of Liberal Democracy in the 1950s, Masjumi and NU were also unable to forge a cross-class alliance to support their Islamist political project.⁹ Similarly, during the New Order ICMI was also unable to mobilize various sectors of the Islamic *ummah* as it was against the "floating mass" policy of the Soeharto's regime.¹⁰ Ultimately Hadiz argues that this fragmentation of the *ummah*, understood in class terms, explains the inability of Indonesia's Islamic populism to take over the state unlike their counterpart in Turkey.

⁶ Vedi Hadiz, *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp.178.

⁷ Hadiz, *Islamic Populism*, pp.72.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.147-148.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.153.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.154.

The Turkey case, in contrast to Indonesia, demonstrates an emergence of successful cross-class alliance and a presence of a cohesive political vehicle. To begin with, Turkey does not have the historical baggage of existing 'alien' capital within Turkish society and an antagonistic sentiment toward it. This modality endows Turkey with a better possibility to develop bridges between its indigenous Muslim bourgeoisie and various other classes such as the urban poor and the big bourgeoisie.¹¹ Also, the AKP operates with a greater ease to make incursion into the urban poor through provision of services such as health care. These activities are largely supported by the Gulen movement as both the representative of big Turkish bourgeoisie and AKP's major ally. It is important to note that the Gulen movement has not only serviced Turkey but also various other countries.¹² This transnational capacity speaks volumes about the significance of the Gulenist as an ally. In contrast, its counterpart in Indonesia has found it challenging to make an incursion to the urban poor as this sector has been a traditional domain of the secular-nationalist, Soekarnoist populism represented by PNI in the past and PDI-P in the present.¹³

Remarkably, Hadiz observes that these varying trajectories of Islamic politics across the Muslim world take place within the context of the demise of its secular Left adversary. All the three cases share a history of a narrowing political space after the eradication of the secular Left by a brief alliance between the military and the Islamist. Consequently, Islamic politics in the three countries is virtually without a serious contender in capturing the imagination of the masses in crafting populist political project. The fact that the trajectories of Islamic politics still vary demonstrates that even in the context of the absence of external competition, the process of transcending the *plebs* into *populus* through crafting an imagination of a nationalized *ummah* is not a foregone conclusion. Nothing is inevitable about the emergence of Islamic

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.72.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 44.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 45.

populism. Hadiz has successfully demonstrated that fragmentation within Islamic front is a severe internal impediment for a successful populist political project.

The Secular Assumption: Treating Religious Politics like Its Secular Counterpart

Hadiz's book is a significant contribution to the study of religion and politics in Indonesia especially due to its comparative perspective. Works on Indonesian politics with comparative perspective are almost literally non-existent, let alone those that aim at a theoretical contribution at the disciplinary level. Hadiz's work, therefore, stands arguably unrivaled in comparison to its contemporary counterparts. However, this *magnum opus* is not without its own shortcomings.

Two of them merit attention; the first is empirical, the second is theoretical. Empirically, the assertion that there is an absence of a cross-class coalition in Indonesia especially between Islamic petty bourgeoisie and the big Chinese bourgeoisie overlooks the fact that the cross-class alliance could take place between the Islamic *petty* bourgeoisie and the big *native* bourgeoisie.¹⁴ There was an emergence of groups of big native bourgeoisie in the mid-1980s to the early 1990s mainly as an effect of the Keppres 10 policy during the New Order. These *pribumi* big bourgeoisies includes, among others, Soeharto's children and families, the groups at KADIN, and those new riches dubbed 'the Ginandjar boys.'¹⁵ Hadiz

¹⁴ Part of the problem here is that Hadiz does not provide clear indicators differentiating the class of bourgeoisies. It is difficult to know whether a certain wealth-endowed actor belongs to Islamic petty bourgeoisie or to big *pribumi* bourgeoisie.

¹⁵ Mentions of this emerging *pribumi* bourgeoisies include, for instances, in Kartasasmita's own interview. See Ginandjar Kartasasmita, *Managing Indonesia's Transformation: An Oral History* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2013), pp. 408, and Ayako Masuhara, *The End of Personal Rule in Indonesia: Golkar and the Transformation of the Soeharto Regime* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2015), pp. 255 fn.23. For a more journalistic piece, see George Junus Aditjondro, "GJA-Bisnis Keluarga",

recently discusses how the oligarchs are playing identity politics in contemporary Indonesia to explain the recent eruption of Islamic mass rallies in Jakarta.¹⁶ Could it be that this outbreak of mass rallies a symptom of a cross-class alliance between Islamic bourgeoisies, both petty and big, and the urban poor? The fact that Soeharto's children were observed actively wooing the Muslim masses with their mass prayer during the Jakarta gubernatorial election might be indicative of this effort of forging cross-class coalition.¹⁷ The later success of Anies Baswedan's campaign which was backed by Gerindra and the populist Islamic masses is therefore one of a successful cross-class coalition.¹⁸

Theoretically, taking aside Hadiz's somewhat non-conventional take on a comparative methodology,¹⁹ one would find the strongest

Apakabar Archive, , <https://www.library.ohio.edu/indopubs/1998/03/20/0038.html>. Accessed November 22, 2017.

¹⁶ See Vedi R. Hadiz, "The Indonesian Oligarchy's Islamic Turn?", Australian Institute of International Affairs, <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/indonesian-oligarchys-islamic-turn/>. Accessed November 22, 2017,

¹⁷ See Nurul Fitri Ramadhani, "Soeharto Family Gains Momentum for Political Revival, The Jakarta Post, March 13, 2017, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/03/13/soeharto-family-gains-momentum-for-political-revival.html>. Accessed December 7, 2017,

¹⁸ Hadiz later concurs that there is an involvement of oligarchic power behind the recent identity politics in the Jakarta election. See Hadiz, *The Indonesian Oligarchy's Islamic Turn*.

¹⁹ Hadiz's take on comparative techniques to isolate causal factors and eliminate rival hypothesis would appear rather unconventional for a reader trained in the more mainstream tradition. In fact, Hadiz does not formalize his argument at all, thus making it difficult to assess his causal logic. For example, the fact that he highlights the legacy of the Cold War in the eradication of the Left as an important explanatory factor should be rather surprising given the most-different research design he employs. For a more conventional take on comparative historical techniques to probe causality see James Mahoney, Erin Kimball, & Kendra Koivu, "The Logic of Historical Explanation in Social Sciences", *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 42, No.1 (January 2009): 114-116.

critique to the book in Ben Anderson's decades-old challenge to students of religion and politics in Indonesia. Situating Hadiz's work squarely within the study of religion and politics in Indonesia, one could argue following Anderson that the book still takes a secular assumption in understanding the motive and goal of religious politics.²⁰ Religious actors in the book cannot be readily differentiated from secular actors in their pursuit of power. In Hadiz's treatment, Islamic populism is up for taking over the state as its *ultimate* goal as much as other secular actors. The failure of Islamic populism as a political project is therefore measured by its inability to win the electoral contest.

This secular bias of treating Islamist actors as undifferentiated from secular actors stems from our inability to understand "how religious people use politics for religious ends" as Anderson astutely observed in the 1970s. The challenge is actually to understand the unique motive of religious actors in their pursuit of power. Hadiz's assessment of the Indonesian case will be different if he recognizes the unique motive of religious politics. Anderson suggests that the unique motive of religious politics in Indonesia, in this case Islamic politics, is "to preserve and extend religious way of life."²¹ Enforcement of religious laws arguably is a central part of extending religious way of life to the public sphere. The motive of implementation of the religious law is distinct from the motive of seizing state power. The latter is a means of achieving the former. Seen primarily from the perspective of this motive, Islamic politics in Indonesia has made a considerable gain. Indonesia after democratization witnessed the proliferation of sharia bylaws at the subnational level and an increase in the enforcement of religious laws in the public sphere. This success takes place despite the electoral failure of Islamic parties. As a matter of fact, secular nationalist parties are the dominant actors passing these

bylaws. Buehler's book discussed below attempts at squarely solving this puzzle.

The Effect of Democratization: Explaining Proliferation of Sharia Bylaws in Indonesia

After democratization in 1998, Indonesia has witnessed what several scholars dub Islamization of politics. This process is evident in the various religious regulations passed at the district and provincial level across Indonesia. In total, there were 443 sharia regulations passed between 1998 and 2013 clustering in 6 provinces of Aceh, West Java, East Java, West Sumatra, South Kalimantan, and South Sulawesi.²² By any standard, this development is a remarkable shift from the situation during the New Order where enforcement of religious laws in the public sphere was mainly absent. Following Anderson's suggestion, we should see this as a success of Islamic politics instead of failure.

Buehler's timely book attempts at explaining this exact variance of the success of Islamic politics in Indonesia. Why have the Islamist parties failed in the electoral game while Islamist movement in civil society succeeded in asserting their religious agenda onto policymaking? Buehler argues that the answer lies in the dynamics located both within the state and within state-society relations. From within the state, the nature of elite formation has changed considerably following democratization. The nature of elite formation during Soeharto's New Order was more centralized and revolve around the decision of the smiling general. In contrast, the nature of elite formation after democratization is more decentralized and geared toward intensified intra-elite horizontal competition in an election.²³

The emerging intra-elite competition in election takes place in a context of the absence of reliable party machines. As a consequence, elites reach out to informal networks within society to win election game. Islamist networks incubated

²⁰ Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, "Religion and Politics in Indonesia since Independence", in Benedict R. O'G. Anderson et. Al, *Religion and Social Ethos in Indonesia*, (Clayton: Monash University, 1977), pp. 21-32.

²¹ Anderson, *Religion and Politics.*, pp.24.

²² Michael Buehler, *The Politics of Sharia Law: Islamic Activist and the State in Democratizing Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 1.

²³ Buehler, *The Politics*, pp. 69-89.

during the New Order reap benefit from this intra-elites competition as they can barter electoral support with influence toward policymaking. The central role of Islamist networks, therefore, explains the geographical distribution of sharia bylaws that cluster around six provinces where historically the Islamist movement was strong.

The Islamist Networks in West Java and South Sulawesi

From within state-society relations, Buehler argues that the need to reach out to the electorates as a consequence of the introduction of local election is critical to the proliferation of Sharia bylaws. Buehler first demonstrates that state-society linkage in West Java and South Sulawesi as seen from the landownership structure is less tight as state elites do not have direct control over the subsistent landowning population.²⁴ The case of West Java and South Sulawesi he is discussing are treated as emblematic of the six sharia provinces. As a consequence of this disjointed state-society relations, the electorate is independent and has to be won over instead of controlled. In the business of winning over independent voters politicians are primarily dependent on informal networks of Islamist organizations proliferating after democratization instead of the weak party machines.

The Islamist groups that emerged in West Java after democratization include among others *Gerakan Reformasi Islam* (GARIS), *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI), and *Gerakan Anti Pemurtadan dan Aliran Sesat* (GAPAS). Some notable individuals from the New Order days are behind these organizations. For instance, Ahmad Sumargono of KISDI and Anwar Haryono from DDII are behind GARIS. These Islamist groups are numerous and varied considerably but are loosely connected by shared histories of having ties with either survivor of Darul Islam movement or Tanjung Priok massacre. They organize through the many *pesantrens* and the *majlis taklim* that they carry out regularly. Their

leaders have followers in the number of tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands.²⁵

In contrast to the scattered and decentralized groups in West Java, the Islamist groups in South Sulawesi are more coordinated and revolved around *Komite Persiapan Penegakan Syariat Islam* (KPPSI) and *Forum Umat Islam* (FUI). Interestingly, KPPSI does not register its members and internally is elitist in nature. Like their counterparts in West Java, KPPSI also has ties to Darul Islam movement. Abdul Aziz Kahar Muzakkar, the chairman of its executive body, is the son of Kahar Muzakkar, the leader of Darul Islam movement in South Sulawesi.

What both the Islamist groups in Sulawesi and West Java have in common is their political lobbying endorsing politicians that they deem will support their Islamist agenda. FPI, for instance, issues *maklumat politik* or political declaration in the run-up to elections and send this declaration to journalists through emails complete with a hyperlink to pages in online Qur'an.²⁶ The Islamist groups also try to work closely with state elites to draft Sharia bylaws by presenting the elites with *naskah akademik* or academic feasibility studies of these bylaws.²⁷ In addition, the Islamist groups organize public gatherings, workshop, and mass rally in the form of *Tabligh Akbar* to show support for religious legislation. All these lobbying activities demonstrate that the Islamist groups are very coordinated and thus promising for politicians to tap into their resources once they encounter the society in the run-up to elections. The issuance of Sharia bylaws is the outcome of this marriage of convenience between politicians aiming at winning over electorates and the Islamist group as the most coordinated community organizers.

Conclusion: A Step Forward in the Literature

Buehler's heightened attention to the Islamization of politics, *apropos* Anderson's suggestion, arguably is a promising direction in the study of

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-102.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 133-141

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 147.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

religion and politics in Indonesia. His assumption in approaching contemporary Indonesian Islamist politics is arguably better-equipped in meeting Anderson's challenge than Hadiz's secular assumption. Buehler's temporal focus to post democratization Indonesia, however, perhaps constitute a shortcoming in his overall argument. His empirical cases concern only the issuance of Sharia bylaws at the subnational level after 1998. This empirical focus, as a consequence, excludes a larger dynamic at the *national* level pre-1998. One would not be too far-fetched to argue that state-religion relations in Indonesia have been shifting considerably toward the accommodation of the Islamist agenda at least since the early 1990s. This shift is brought into relief most clearly in the establishment of ICMI and the accommodation to 'regimist Islam' during the later days of the New Order.²⁸ Buehler's argument, unfortunately, does not travel well to explain shifting relations between Islam and the state during the New Order at the national level mainly due to the absence of the institutional effect of democracy on the intra-elite competition.

These minor comments on the assumption and argument of the two books are not intended to discount their serious contribution to the study of religion and politics in Indonesia. Hadiz's and Buehler's approach of seeing Islamist politics in Indonesia through the optics of, respectively, populism and state-society relations should be received as a long-overdue intervention in a literature long saturated by culturalist and, more recently, institutionalist arguments.²⁹ Following Buehler, the literature can take more seriously the gain made by Islamist activist in the proliferation of Sharia bylaw as an important outcome to be explained. From both Hadiz and Buehler, the literature should engage fresh analytical and methodological approaches in scrutinizing

Islamic politics in Indonesia. Students of religion and politics in Indonesia should welcome the insights and theoretical contribution of the books, which have moved the ball forward in the literature, with delight.

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²⁸ See Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

²⁹ See Iqra Anugrah's trenchant critique to the literature of Indonesian Islam in Iqra Anugrah, "Recent Studies on Indonesian Islam: A Sign of Intellectual Exhaustion?", *Indonesia*, No.100 (October 2015), pp. 105-116.

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