Islamic ideas versus secularism: The core of political competition in Indonesia

The implementation of sharia law in Indonesia has been increasing ever since democratization in 1998. The country’s Kompas newspaper reported in August 2015 that there are currently 443 peraturan daerah (local regulations) related to Islamic law.1 This growth of Islamic ideas in Indonesian politics challenges the secular ideology that the nation’s foundation was based on, yet this Islamic challenge to secular Indonesia is not a new phenomenon; competition between Islamic and secular ideas has existed during every phase of the republic’s development. In reality, this rivalry is at the core of Indonesian politics.

Islamic ideas and secularism in Indonesia’s pre-independence

Islamic and secular philosophies have developed and competed in Indonesian politics since even before independence. In the pre-independence era, the idea of ruling the society based on Islamic teachings can be traced back to the Pdn movement in Minangkabau, West Sumatra. This was a movement by Muslim clerics, who had recently returned from Mecca and wanted to implement sharia into Minangkabau society. This caused conflict between the nobility and the traditional chiefs who wanted to retain Minangkabau customs. The Pdn movement was a non-political movement that focused on doctrinal and normative issues, such as bid’ah (innovation), polytheism, tomb veneration, correct attire, and the use of products made by non-Muslims.2

The first time that the conflict between Islamic and secular visions also appeared in the political arena was the issue of Sarekat Islam’s (SI) organizational platform. In its early years, one of the SI’s biggest problems was whether to change its organizational platform into an Islamic one or for it to remain secular. This deliberation was a political argument with the notion of nationalism as the foundation of the republic. For Islamic leaders, such as Aqil Salim, Mohammad Natsir, and Ahmad Hassan, nationalization was considered to weaken the Islamic concept of ‘Ummah’, and would lead to chauvinism. Salim believed that Sukarno’s idea of nationalism was chauvinistic andocolous to the fatherland’s ideals, leads to competition and rivalry for the acquisition of wealth, honour and pride, to the suppression, enslavement and danger of the fatherland of others without regard to rights and justice.4 In contrast, Indonesian socialists such as Sukarno and Cipto Mangkusumitsu, appreciated nationalism for its potential to gain independence, and for its ability to bring together in one nation, people from different ethnicities, holding diverse ideologies, with various faiths or religions. By the late 1930s, the Islamic group started to come around to the idea of nationalism as well. Prior to Indonesia’s independence in 1945, another debate arose between the Islamic and the secular groups. The Islamic group rejected the then five principles: secular nationalism, liberalism, republicanism, and nationalism. For them, the reason for this was that “Islam was being treated as if it were no more important than any other of Indonesia’s other ethnic religions”. The debate concluded with, firstly, the release of the Jakarta Charter that contained the statement: “belief in God with the obligation for adherents of Islam to carry out Islamic law”. However, the Charter was never implemented because it was rejected by an array of Indonesian that were dominated by non-Muslims. Later, in 1948 as well as in the early 2000s, Muslim groups again attempted to apply the Jakarta Charter, but, on both occasions, its implementation led due to insufficient support from others. The second and third conclusions of the debate were the change of “God” into “God almighty”, and the switch of people to be the first principle of Pancasila, rather than the fifth.

Islamic ideas and secularism after Independence

After the Declaration of Independence on 17 August 1945, conflicts between the two ideologies continued. In 1949 Kartasasmita, a Javanese Muslim, declared the establishment of a Democratic Republic of Indonesia in West Java. It was his expression of disappointment over the Renville Agreement between Indonesian and Dutch leaders. After his declaration, Kartasasmita gathered support from some local leaders. Ahmad Fatah of Central Java joined in 1950, while Kahar Muzakkar of South Kalimantan declared his affiliation in 1951. They were followed by Daud Beureuh of Aceh in 1953, while Khair Muzakkar of South Sulawesi declared his affiliation in 1951. Amir Fatah of Central Java joined in 1950, while Kahar Muzakkar of South Sulawesi declared his affiliation in 1951. The government succeeded in crushing the movement. Most of the Islamic notions that manifest themselves in local sharia law, as listed above, refer to normative issues, such as morality, attire, and faith. Furthermore, these sharia regulations can be grouped into three categories: those that regulate public order and social problems, such as prostitution, gambling, and alcohol consumption; those that are related to religious skills and obligations, such as reading the Quran and attending Friday prayer; and those that are related to religious symbols, such as adhering to Islamic dress codes.” This indicates a shift from the early period of the Republic where the dynamics were about ‘big issues’, for instance, the Indonesian Communist Party and nationalism. In reality, this rivalry can be seen as the start point for radical Islam and its beliefs.

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