Islamism and Democratization in the Post 411 and 212 Rallies of Indonesia

'Super Peaceful 212 Rally' congregators do a mass prayer at the Bunderan Bank Indonesia, Jakarta, Friday (2/12)
Source: Antara

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The boisterous but peaceful rallies that occurred in Jakarta on 4 November and 2 December 2016 (commonly referred to as the '411' and '212' rallies respectively) were important phenomenon in the Indonesian Islamic political scene. The alleged defamation of Holy Qur'an by Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) and the formation of the National Movement of the Guardians of the Indonesian Ulama Council's Fatwa (GNPF MUI) attracted many people to participate in the rallies. As was seen, almost all elements of society were involved either organizationally or individually. Indonesian Muslims, which in many cases had been fragmented into many different streams, were united into carrying out one action and under one command during those peaceful actions.

On the one hand, it was truly a great phenomenon for Indonesian Muslims. Many reported that the crowd reached several millions Muslims. Their enthusiasm to join the event using all means of transportations, including some that even walked from such remote areas as Ciamis were seen as heroic and momentous actions. The most interesting thing was that Habieb Rizieq Shihab, the grand cleric of *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI or Islamic Defenders Front), who is normally found on the periphery of Indonesia's political Islam, played a central role in the rallies.

The actions helped cast off the old belief that Indonesian Muslims are too fragmented and polarized to be able to unite. Historically, Indonesian Muslims would only unite once there was a common enemy. The same spirit of Islam and nationalism that existed during the fight against the Dutch occupation in the 18th and 19th century and the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) in the 1960s re-emerged on Indonesia's socio-political arena. That is to say that during the 411 and 212 rallies, Indonesian Muslims regarded Ahok (who is of Chinese descent) as the "common enemy". Some Indonesian Muslims consider Ahok as a symbol of the victory of the Chinese Indonesian, which had long been seen as the tough "rival" for Indonesian Muslims socially and economically.

On the other hand, many Indonesian observers question the relationship between the phenomena of the rallies with the state of democratization in the country. From such a view, the rallies may be considered as part of the process of democratization, i.e., the representation of many elements of society in the public sphere. However, we could also see this phenomenon as a conservative turn, with Islam increasingly being represented by a certain group of intolerant Muslims. This article tries to see the relationship among the phenomena of rallies, Islamism, and democratization in Indonesia.

Covert Intolerance

The rallies in Jakarta and other big cities across the country in support of the demands of the GNPF MUI to *#penjarakanAhok* (imprison Ahok) could not be seen as merely a religious or even political entity. On the one hand, the accusation of insulting the Qur'an is still quite debatable, and the MUI itself, which had declared Ahok's statement as blasphemous, is not a state legislature. As far as the alleged blasphemy case is concerned, there has been no *fatwa* released by the MUI on this issue. The statement issued by the MUI is not in the form of a *fatwa*, but is instead an 'Opinion and Religious Stance of the MUI' *(Pendapat dan Sikap Keagamaan MUI*). Of course there are many religious personal opinions to support MUI, while there are also counter opinions stating that Ahok's statement does not violate Islam let alone the Qur'an.

As far as I am concerned, the accusation of insulting Islam and the Qur'an is mixed with the issue of the existence of Chinese Indonesian in the archipelago. This can be seen by the wide spread on social media of hoax news about the dangers of Chinese descendants in the archipelago recently. The case of the reclamation of Jakarta bay, the influx of Chinese workers etc. are among the major issues that point to the rejection by Indonesian Muslims to greater Chinese influence and power. Although it may be true about the half-hearted Chinese indigenization in the archipelago, the role of Chinese descendants in the country economically should not be overlooked.

In my view, the Jakarta governor election has been seen by many as not merely a political entity. In fact Ahok, who in many cases is actually quite close to some Muslim communities through his programs such as *umrah* prizes and building mosques, has been considered negatively by many Muslims, and his programs are even regarded as politicization of Islam. Nevertheless, the nomination of the incumbent governor Ahok has been seen as triggering an ethnic competition which tends towards ethnic/inter-religious intolerance.

I tend to see all these events as the accumulation of the fear of Muslims that Ahok would win another term. If so, some Muslims worry that he would give more economic opportunities to the Chinese Indonesian rather than to the indigenous Muslims. This leads to the belief *Asal Bukan Ahok* (Not Ahok Anymore) for the governor of Jakarta. This anxiety is understandable as Ahok's electability was quite high in the first months of 2016. Although it may be true that Ahok has done something wrong during his campaign in Pulau Seribu on 6 October 2016, in my view, however, this concern should not then lead to the negative campaign and bullying against Ahok as he has also apologized that he did not mean to be rude to Indonesian Muslims let alone Islam.

Indonesia Islam has long been cited as having different characteristics compared to that found in the Middle East; Indonesian Muslims are very plural and open in terms of intra and inter-religious diversity. That is to say that no single group of Indonesian Muslims has a monopoly over Indonesian religious interpretation especially in the public arena. Although Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) always have different interpretation on certain issue, however, they always understand that their differences could produce many positive features.

On the issue of whether Ahok's statement defames or insults Islam is part of religious interpretation on public life, as has been long practiced, the "*fatwa*" of the MUI cannot be considered as the sole religious interpretation in Indonesia's religious life. It seems to me that the demand of the rallies to jail Ahok tends to compel a certain religious interpretation in public life. Although Ahok to some degree could be considered as wrong, whether it could be considered as insulting Islam is still questionable. As good citizens, Indonesian Muslims should obey the rule of law and leave the matter to the court to handle it.

Islamism and Democratization

Globalization and modernization played a central role in the widespread of Salafism. In the Indonesian context, there are also more Middle Eastern graduates, which altogether play a significant role in the growing conservatism and Islamism seen in the country. Literalism, as the most obvious characteristic of Salafism, has led Indonesian Islam to become

more conservative and tending towards Islamism.

Indonesia, however, has long been known for its feature of tolerant and irenic Islam. The reformation of Indonesia in 1998 shifted Indonesian Islam to be more open as directed by Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) and Nurcholish Madjid (Cak Nur). The discourse on the creation of an Islamic state and the demand of the Jakarta Charter for example almost disappeared from any fora. Rather, the discourse is more on the acceptance of Pancasila as the ideology of the state, the United State of Indonesian Republic (*Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia*), inter-religious dialogue etc.

In the last two decades, we can see that Islam is also more visible in the public sphere. This can be seen in the increasing visibility of many symbols of Islam such as fancy mosques in many big cities, Shari'ah banks, Shari'ah hotels, more fancy Islamic schools, Islamic outfits, Islamic programs on TVs etc. Nevertheless, it is hard to consider all these phenomena as a conservative turn of Islam in Indonesia. At the same time, nowadays public Islam is dominated by conservatives especially on the internet and social media. In this sense, I am concerned that conservatism would be more obvious in Indonesian public sphere.

Although the "*fatwa*" of the MUI on the allegation of insulting Islam is possibly correct, the emergence of the National Movement of the Guardians of Indonesia Ulama Council's Fatwa (GNPF MUI) is slightly misleading. Many people do not really understand the position of *fatwas* of the MUI under Indonesian law. The hashtag during the rallies, *#tangkapAhok* (arrest Ahok) and *#penjarakanAhok* (imprison Ahok), even somewhat symbolize the compelling nature of certain groups of Muslims toward the authorities. As the discourse and polemic on the "*fatwa*" of the MUI and positive law continues on many media channels, the public eventually understands that the "*fatwa*" of the MUI is not a part of positive law, and is just a statement.

As an institution which could issue a legal opinion, the position of the MUI is quite similar to *Majelis Tarjih* of Muhammadiyah or *Bahtsul Matsail* of Nahdatul Ulama (NU). A *fatwa* is a legal opinion which does not bind any Muslims except those that willingly obey themselves. It is almost the same as the fatwa of *Majelis Tarjih* that forbade smoking for Muslims. The *fatwa* of the organizations does not bind any Muslim even for its own members. The same thing can be said for the *fatwa* of the MUI that prohibits expressing Christmas greeting and attending Christmas ceremonies, which is not binding on all Muslims. In fact, a *fatwa* is simply a religious opinion which could be used by any legislative institutions to issue a positive law. As such, the opinion and religious stance regarding the case of alleged defamation of the Qur'an may have a lesser position.

Another interesting point of the rallies is that it was carried out using democratization mechanisms. The rallies, which involved millions of people, signifies that the other democratization mechanisms may not work properly such as through their representatives in parliament. Nevertheless, Indonesian Muslims should learn that there are abundant mechanisms of democracy which could be their means of voicing their aspirations.

Indonesian Muslims should also learn from the events that their unity in the rallies could be used to unite their political aspirations. As previously known, politics always become an inseparable part for Muslims. We have witnessed that among the euphoria of Indonesian Muslims after the reformation was the mushrooming of Islamic political parties, i.e., 15 parties in 2009, 7 parties in 2004, and 9 parties in 2009. Although there are only 5 Islamic political parties nowadays, they still have the potential to polarize Indonesian Muslims. Eventually, I tend to argue that it would be more appropriate and fair for Indonesian Muslims to use the spirit of 212 to unite all powers in politics to struggle for their objectives through democratic mechanism.

Finally, the rallies and many other conservative actions which may arise in the future could be seen as the democratization process. I also agree with Sindhunata (2000) who stated that all social tensions and conflicts that happened prior or post-reformation of Indonesia is part of the democratization process. In the same way, the rallies are part of the consequence of democracy where the public sphere is more open for any groups, including the conservatives. While there are many social observers who worry that Indonesian Islam is turning to be more conservative, I tend to argue that this seems unlikely. The democratization process of Indonesia is also possible for those groups who want to make Indonesia a theocratic country, reject democracy, or for those in favor of democracy and the nation-state of Indonesia. In addition, the recent phenomena could also be considered as an indication of existing religious diversity. Although the Social Hostilities Index (SHI) and Government Resctriction Index (GRI) is still quite high (Pew: 2015), I believe that Indonesia's democracy is just being challenged and still could be a role model that showcases the co-existence of Islam and democracy.

In the long run, Islam should signify its vital force for socio-political transformation (Muhtadi: 2013). Some modernist organizations such as Muhammadiyah and NU have played a significant role in boosting civil society as the foundation of civil Islam. As far as conservatism and even radicalism in the country is concerned, they comprise only a tiny number of Muslims and so far do not endanger the democratization process of the country. Therefore, the rallies should not end up with religious anger on the streets, but Islam should exist in the society as a force for socio-political transformation for the country.

The future of Indonesian Islam will be the co-existence between Islam and democracy. While some conservatives and even scholars still question the applicability of Islam to democracy, there are many variants that support the co-existence of Islam and democracy such as theistic democracy, Islamic democracy, *Ilahiyah* democracy etc. They even cynically and suspiciously claim that the above co-existence as *contradictio interminis*. Many conservatives suspect democracy as a Western value that is not suitable for Muslim societies, whereas many scholars question how minority rights could be fulfilled once norms of a certain religion become the foundation of a state.

In this respect, I share my view with Asef Bayat (2011) who says that the problem nowadays is not on the compatibility of Islam and democracy, but lies on the ability of Muslims to run democracy. Further, he coins a new concept i.e., post-Islamism as a new political manifesto to synthesize Islamic norms with the ethos of democracy.

Public and Civil Islam

Inevitably, Indonesia is neither a theocracy nor a secular country. However, spiritual and religious values have become the norms of daily life in the country. One of the good legacy of the New Order is that public Islam in Indonesia is free

from religious interpretation of any single group of Muslims. That is also to say that there is no sole religious interpretation in Indonesian public life.

The narrative and counter narrative discourse has always happened in public sphere including in social media. Such war of narratives always happened as a contestation of religious interpretations. Well known as a moderate Muslim country, Indonesian Muslims have to maintain the public sphere from any authoritarianism of religious interpretation as it could incite tensions and even conflict between religions. The mushrooming of Shari'ah Regional Regulations (*Peraturan Daerah Shari'ah*) in many provinces in the country has consequently led to the rise of Biblical Regional Regulations in Papua. In the same way, the issuance of the defamation "*fatwa*" by MUI could also incite other religious decree by other religious counterparts. This of course could lead to endless tensions which could endanger inter-religious life in Indonesia.

In contrast, Indonesian Muslims do need more on the substance of religious values to make the religion they adhere to not too dry from the very spirit of Islam. For most Indonesians, the relationship between religion and the state is final. Therefore, the role of the state is being challenged more on the functional of religion, i.e., to drive Indonesian Muslims to be more pious either personally or socially. Religious values and spiritualism to some degree is always needed for the formation of the nation-state of Indonesia.

As a rising democratic country, Indonesia should adapt the voices of the grass root in order to keep on the track of democracy. Indeed, the government should not only regard majority rights as its source for values, but also must not overlook minority rights. Historically, it has been proven that Indonesian Muslims are quite adaptive in accepting better values. Many socio-religious organizations have demonstrated their role in constructing civil society in the country. As far as I am concerned, democracy is not all-or-nothing at once, but it is continuously incremental. I share my views with Hefner (2000) who states that Indonesian Muslim societies will have their own dreams through democracy as it takes dialog and contextualization with local culture including Islam.

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