Islamic Civil Society in Indonesia: Analysis of the Accommodative Politics during the Soeharto New Order Regime

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Abstract

This article briefly discusses the accommodative politic of Indonesia’s Islamic civil society from the perspective of ideological background, society and role point of views during the period of New Order regime. During that time, Muslims was the group of societies that mostly experienced suppressions by the regime. To keep their existence, the Islamic civil society used a political approach that was accommodative to encounter the regime’s policy and diffuse within the government. Surprisingly, this ideological politic remained useful and grew during the New Order regime period, leading the main element in triggering the democratization process. The findings of this study show that the peoples’ social background and level of understanding on ideology, politic and sociological reality contributed to the effectiveness of the accommodative politic implementation. Furthermore, the Islamic society played a vital role as “driving” force in the democratization process in Indonesia, indicating that Islamic ideology is apparently in agreement with Democracy.

Introduction

March, 11th 1966 was marked as the fall of President Soekarno’s government regime as well as the beginning era of the New Order authoritarian regime led by the President Soeharto in the Indonesian history. During the period of New Order regime, the government had taken over the control of all the political and economic activities, political parties and social organizations (Sahdan, 2004). The regime was very dominating with their centralized system which extensively regulated the social organizations including the organization establishment, organization activities, doctrine, ideology, etc. Eventually, social organizations are known as the civil society (Gaffar, 2005).

Many studies reported that the civil society would be suppressed under the authoritarian regime governments. This condition would lead to the appearance of weak civil society or even disintegrated societies upon the fall of a regime (Fogg, 2018). It has been known that the Muslim society was the group among the existing civil societies in Indonesia to have had undergone living under the political constraints and suppressions. Differences in political orientation against the government and authoritarian issues were the main factor and reason for the suppressions. Nevertheless, the Islamic civil society was still existed and even significantly grew upon the fall of the New Order regime on May 21st 1998. Nowadays, the growing Islamic society is being so progressive and even transforming into various Islamic organizations having different roles and activities such as Islamic preaching, educational institutions, hospitals, cooperations, business activities, etc.

The development of Islamic organizations after the era of New Order regime has implied that the Indonesia authoritarian system did not apparently diminish the existence of Islamic civil society. In fact, Islamic society has been growing and even more influential to the governmental policy. This finding is clearly in contrast to the current literatures (Weller, 2005; Quadir and Lele, 2004; Roberts, 1985; Remmer, 1985). Therefore, it
is interesting to analyze the Islamic political frame that is so-called accommodative politics in encountering the political suppression by the New Order authoritarian regime.

This study presents a brief analysis of the accommodative politics by the Islamic civil society from the perspective of philosophical background, ideology, role and the implementation points of view during the period of New Order regime and democratization processes. The study was carried out through a depth interview method to the main figures and influential young peoples from the Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah and Al-Washliyah. In addition, Forum Group Discussion (FGD) was performed to gain a better understanding of the relationship of Islamic ideology and democracy, and their key role during the New Order period and so forth.

Literature Review

Islam in Indonesia: Historical Approach

The Islamicization processes in the Southeast Asia countries had been carried out by the Arabian traders during the time of Southeast Asia trading routes from 1450 to 1680 (Khalimi, 2010). Most of the coming Arabian traders were also the Islamic scholars, thus they could preach and attract the local influential figures to embrace Islam as their faith. Nevertheless, Islam had possibly been spread throughout Indonesia before their coming by the Islamic scholars who deliberately preached the Islam religion, as indicated by the tombstone from the eleventh century in East Java.

The role of Islamic scholars was seen from the Islamicization processes which tended to King-centric (Heffner, 2009). All the Kings were preached to accept Islam, hence the Islamicization processes in Indonesia would be easier. According to the archaeological evident (the tombstone in Samudera Pasai) and the traditional photographs (the tale of Kingdom of Pasai and Malay history) which have a precise accuracy about the history of Islam in Indonesia, it can be asserted that the Islamic Kingdoms had been built at the end of thirteen century in East Java.

The spreading out of Islam by the Islamic scholars to the local people was conducted individually (privately) through the Sufistic approaches (Heffner, 2009). This approach succeeded because the native people still believing in myths, hence it was not really difficult to influence the native people and the authorities to accept Islam as their faith.

Likewise the Islamicization through formal approaches like aqeedāh (faith), shari‘āh (Islamic jurisprudence), ubudiyāh (worship), muamalāh (social relationship), etc., the Sufism was undergone domestication processes along with the Animism, Hinduism, and Budhaism. This process then led to arise of Syncretism. A number of cases demonstrated the attempts to uphold or purify the Islam as a religion, as such the case of Syekh Siti Jenar whom had been punished by Wali Songo and the burning of scriptures belonged to Hamzah Fansuri and Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani.

The attempts to purify the religion increased along with the increasing number of Indonesia peoples willing to learn about Islam in the Middle East Countries. On the other side, the spread of Wahhābiyah movements had implied to high concern on fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). As the consequence, the Padre War was happened in the West Sumatera. The attempts to purify and teach the real of fiqh had driven arise of Islamic civil societies and Islamic boarding schools in Java and Sumatera.

Islamic Civil Society in Indonesia: Definition and Perspective

A civil society can be defined as a groups or organization that is formed by a community to achieve certain goals and benefits for society (Munabari, 2017). In general, a civil society is comprised of voluntary, independent (self-reliant) character and commitments to obey the norms and doctrines (Hikam, 2000). Contextually, the Indonesian civil society is considered to be equal against the civilized society. The concept of civilized society was initially known from an Anwar Ibrahim’s lecture which was delivered at the Jakarta Istiqal Festival on September 26th, 1995 (Kusmanto, 2020). Eventually, the civilized society concept has been an interesting major topic and frequently discussed by many Indonesian scholars such as Nurcholis
Madjid, Dawam Rahardjo, Emil Salim, and Amien Rais. Some authors asserted that the civilized society as the Muslim civil society or the civil Islam (Heffner, 2009).

A civil society can be defined as a voluntary organization which is different as compared with the civilized society which has the authority to manage the life-pathway of tribes, peoples or the nation. The civilized society tends to possess the character as a policy or city of state or a government that is associated with the governmental elements such as the existence of Islam as the ideology and the law constitution according to the agreement which is so-called as Mitsāq al-Madinah (holy agreement).

An Islamic civil society is an established organization in which the ideology is sourced from the Islam and devoted to creating the best peoples in a society (Khairu Ummâh) by referring to Qur’ân (Kusmanto, 2020). The current Islamic organizations in Indonesia are Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, Al-Jam’iyatul Washliyah, United Islam (PERSIS), Al-Irsyad, Nahdlatul Wathan (NW), and other organizations which so-called the Islamic Society Organizations (Moslem Organization). These organizations attempt to develop Khairu Ummâh, especially through preaching and education efforts (Khalimi, 2010).

The Islamic civil society is different as compared the conventional civil society, although they both have identical characteristics and functionalities. It definitely lies on the Islamic concept, whereas the Islamic civil society shall move following God’s order (Al-Umari, 2000). All the human activities must refer to Qur’ân in order to attain the God’s blessing (Salleh, 2017). It is noted that the Islamic civil society is as the united peoples or organization that is connected by the Qur’ân, Islam and the brotherhood as Muslim.

Therefore, Islamic civil society can conclusively be defined as an established organization based on the fundamental concept of Islamic ideology, Qur’ân and the brotherhood as Muslim. It is essentially devoted to gathering all Muslims in a united society to achieving the glory as well as to gain the Allah’s blessing, emphasizing the distinction of Islamic civil society and the common civil society.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approaches

Qualitative description approaches were carried out to analyze the qualitative data of accommodative politics of Islamic civil society during the time of the New Order regime.

Data Collection

Data collection methods used were observation, interview, literature review and documentation, and forum group discussion (FGD), respectively. The FGD was carried out to analyze the data obtained from the observation and interview stages.

Data Analysis

The obtained data were analysed by using the following stages: 1. Data Description In this stage, the collected data were described and classified according to the data category. 2. Data Analysis In this stage, all of the categorized data was analyzed based on the theoretical thinking of accommodative politics. The theoretical approaches and observation data were aligned, and briefly discussed and analysed.

Results and Discussion

The Existence of Islamic Civil Society during the New Order Regime

During the President Soeharto’s regime, economic activities were strive through a capitalistic economic model, especially to boost the industrial sectors. The government mobilized the community as part of the country’s development processes by sacrificing the peoples’ political rights to accelerate the economic growth. The economic growth was indicated by the development of the good-replacing industry against the imported goods. As the consequences, the government was dependent on the bureaucracy flows (military and civil), engineers, and foreign capital investments to stabilize the domestic capital accumulation, economic growth
and market development. The military and engineers played a major role to ensure the achievement of a satisfying level of economic growth and political stability.

In meantime, the overwhelming control continually strive to block any efforts of a political party to use an ideological religion or to compose a structural political strength based on the ideological religion. As the preventive actions, the regime often used physical force and ideological prevention in discouraging the party’s efforts.

Indeed, Islam was merely acknowledged as the normative principles associated with its ritual worship such as pray and fasting, but not as a political ideology or doctrine. In the regime perspective of views, the existence of Islam as a political ideology might lead to radical Islamic organizations that would threaten the government legitimacy. It was found several political movements that employed Islam as the ideology, such as Darul Islam/Indonesia Islamic Army (DI/TII) and another organization that so-called as Jihadish Commando (Katimin, 2007).

In 1970s, the regime, therefore, constrained all the political activities of any societies or organizations to prevent the political instability and movements through reducing the number of political parties. The first attempt was conducted by merging all the Islamic organizations into a party namely the United Development Party (PPP); secondly, the merging of all nationalist parties into a single party namely the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI), then the remaining party was Golkar as the government supporting party. The political undermining to civil society, particularly to the Muslim society was continued whenever the regime declared and emphasized Pancasila as the only ideology of the state in 1973.

In spite of those political constraints, the regime also applied public-interest policies such as the marriage bill of 1973, the legal lottery (Awarded Social Fund Contribution/SDSB), the free faith as written on the Great Outline of State Policy (GBHN) or at the General Assembly of the People’s Consultative House (SU MPR) 1978, and the ban of school holidays during the fasting month (Ramadhan), showing that the religion was not influential to the state policy making. The dynamic relationships of regime and Muslims in the early 1970s remained tinged with tension and confrontation, thereby positioning Islamic organizations being marginalized in the political processes of the New Order era.

Accordingly, the Islamic civil society carried out an accommodative political strategy to keep the organization existence. Through this political strategy, the Islamic society would be more moderate (tawassuth) on responding the government policies which were thought to disregard the Islamic values. The protest and refusal would be done either outside of the organization or through the political party. This strategy was carried out to avoid direct conflicts between the regime and the Islamic civil society. Eventually, the Islamic civil society emerged as a movement that fighting for Islamic values enforcements and developed into a real political force. Thereby, the regime often exercised control over civil society, especially those which used the religion as the organization ideology and doctrine.

The hegemonic control of the regime to the civil society will hamper efforts to develop in the processes of political development and the creation of a democratic society. The government hegemony is strengthened through its bureaucratic structure and mechanism (O’Donnel, 1986).

The findings are in agreement with Remmer’s study which reported the authoritarian regime in Latin American. He noted that the authoritarian regime would weaken and fundamentally reform the civil society, hence the civil society would be a major obstacle to the democratization processes. The process did not only mean to change the ruling power, but a complex process of changing political institutions, political practices, and the transformation values. On other words, the fundamental changes would be more difficult during the transitional period as a consequence of the long period of an authoritarian regime (Remmer, 1985).

Roberts also reported that the political activity of the lower level society in Latin America had been diminished by the authoritarian regime that employing various ways i.e. ideological hegemony, co-optation, manipulation, authority restriction, threatening and violations, and economic downturn. Those ways were intended to construct inequalities in the public income. Therefore, it was very difficult to obtain the public
support before the democratization processes, hence the mobilization efforts were indeed necessary (Roberts, 1985).

The Accommodative Politics by Islamic Society in the New Order Regime

Sustaining their existences during the period of New Order authoritarian regime is considered as one of the fruitfulness of the accommodative politic implementation gained by the Islamic civil societies like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, which are known as the largest existing Islamic organizations in Indonesia. Sociological aspects and moderate attitudes of Islamic peoples toward the regime’s policies imparted to the successful respective condition. In contrast, the accommodative politics would be meaningless without such of the moderate attitudes (Schnabel and Hjerm, 2014).

The moderate senses (al-Iqtishād) mean as a straight path, or balanced in all affairs, or not excessive or subtractive, neither incriminate nor facilitate nor anything beyond the limit (Latief and Nashir, 2020). Sociologically, the Muslim peoples in Indonesia perceive the moderate senses as an attitude that is not excessive, not rigid, does not feel the most self-righteous, an attitude that appreciates diversity or tolerance (tasamuh). Saiful Mujani noted this kind of Muslim peoples as the democratic society that was predominantly existing and living in Indonesia (Mujani, 2007). Therefore, Islamic society might accept the government’s policy that was thought inappropriate with the Islamic aspirations to avoid potential conflicts against the government.

The ideology of this moderate stance is sourced from the understanding of human relationships (insāniyyāh) without referring to the ideology or Islamic principles. However, the Rabbāniyyāh relationships shall be carried out according to Islamic law (shari‘ah). It is noticeable that the moderate attitude usually relates to Muamalāh activities without leaving Qurān and al-Sunnah as the most fundamental references.

The Fundamental Aspects of Islamic-Accommodative Politics

The peoples of Indonesia have experienced living under the suppression and constrains during the Dutch imperialism. However, the suppressions were not severe as compared to the New Order authoritarian regime because of the most civil societies declared their organizations as a religious social organization rather than a political organization. Although, they eventually involved in political activities as a result of the holistic understanding of Islam. A doctrine that becomes Islamic guidance, and governing all aspects of human life, including politics.

Despite as one of the Islamic doctrines, the political activity was also considered as part of preaching (da‘wāh) to Islamification of all human’s life aspects. Therefore, the involvement of Islamic figures could not be avoided in a political activity. Their involvement imparted a short-term benefit like the acquisition of powers that was useful to develop their organization and to fostering political systems with Islamic values.

The accommodative politics were performed to avoid a direct involvement of the organization within the political activity during the imperialism period so that the organization would remain visible as a religious social organization. On the other side, the figures or members of the Islamic society that involved in the political movements, carrying out their activities through a political organization which having certain political agenda without bringing their Islamic entities. In turn, they affiliated into the organizations which fighting for freedom and independence. Therefore, the Islamic civil society was still existed and growing as a religious social organization, although many of its members were involved in the fighting against the colonialization.

The similar accommodative politic was also performed during the Soekarno’s regime period after Indonesia successfully attained their independence in 1945. The Islamic civil society then established an Islamic party to accommodate all the Muslim community interests when they unsuccessfully put Islam as the state ideology.

The suppressions were felt harder when the New Order regime took over the state from the Soekarno’s Order regime. All of the government policies were aimed to marginalize the Islamic community and to constrain the Muslim interests such as the merger of all Islamic parties into a single party, the prohibition of Islam
as the political ideology, the imposition of Pancasila as the only ideology for all organizations, marriage law that was in contrast against the Islamic shari'ah, the issue of faith-based believers, the prohibition of wearing headscarves in government institutions, and the holding Social Fund Contributions (SDSB) which was actually a gambling practice. Moreover, there was no freedom for Muslim society to talk about their interests and opinions. The regime tried to control peoples’ mind including in the preaching activities. The government policies disappointed the Islamic civil society. Upon the fall of Soekarno’s regime, the Islamic society expected to have a bigger role in fostering the peoples, but it turned out to be worse when the new regime took over the state.

The elites of Islamic society then understood this situation and be cautious. Thereby, they had resorted the accommodative politics into the New Order regime by reaffirming their identity as a religious social organization without having an affiliation to any political party. Hence, it would be the individual right of any members or figures who were involved in a political party regardless of its Islamic society background.

Nevertheless, the Islamic civil society had not completely left politics. They would give a response to any political or administrative activity that was thought against the Islamic principles. It was reflected through critical attitude by the Islamic figures from NU, Muhammadiyah, etc. Some renowned Islamic figures like Abdurrahman Wahid and Amien Rais frequently gave critical responses to the government policies that were deemed inappropriate with the society’s interests. It showed that Islamic civil society followed the whole of nation life development and performed the preaching for upholding the truth (amar ma’ruf nahi munkar).

**The Implementation of Islamic-Accommodative Politics**

Finally, the Muslim society attitudes were accommodative regarding the government policies, especially to the bill of marriage law. However, they still showing an expression to refuse the existence of free-faith believers that was at the same time also being discussed along with the marriage bill in the parliament (Latief and Nashir, 2020). The existence of free-faith believers was thought improper with the religious life of peoples in Indonesia, hence their representatives in the parliament baulked this free-faith existence.

Many Islamic civil societies expressed their refusal against the existence of free-faith believers, as it would lead to the rise of a new religion. This free-faith believer should be fostered to embrace a religion recognized by the state. Nevertheless, the existence of this group of believers was legally admitted by the government as the group of peoples that had to be nurtured by the state religions.

It should be realized that there were political interests to keep the existence of this group of believers. The government regime obtained political support from them in both bureaucratic and military circles which were the source of Soeharto’s power. Thus, it is not surprising the suppression on the Muslims community was because of the strong position of the free-faith believers within the New Order governmental structure.

The New Order regime constrained all the societies’ everyday activities including preaching activity in the mosques and religious lectures. The rule was made to be complicated for obtaining a legal permission in holding large meeting or other religious activities. The civil and military bureaucracies would examine the lecture’s theme and content, as well as the speakers and audiences that involved in the activity. They could simply cancel the planning event if it was felt in contrast to the governmental aspirations.

To deal with the New Order regime hegemony, Islamic civil society approved their figures to engage in the political activities solely as a part of the "accommodative" politic strategies. This conducted strategy was aimed to obtain a political position within the party, government and parliaments, facilitating a political access for the Islamic society to influence the government policy.

They also encouraged their figures to involve in the bureaucracy to get an access to the bureaucratic power and influenced the policy formulation processes. This accommodative strategy had been done by the Islamic civil society since the 80s, thereby in the 90s several important political roles had been dominated by these circles. Apart from involving in the bureaucracy, they also actively engaged in the political party like PPP, PDI and Golkar. Through this political way, they could ultimately keep the existence of Islamic civil society and even succeeded to establish educational institutions as a part of the efforts to empower Islam and civil
society. As a result, many leaders, scientists and important Islamic figures graduated from the Islamic institutions.

It shall be noted that the political movements of Islamic society were emphasized on preaching (da’wah) activities and the efforts to empowering the existence of Islamic community. For example, Amien Rais established the Da’wah Laboratory of the Saladin Foundation in Yogyakarta on October 13th 1986 as a preaching and discussion forum to accommodate the Islamic political values. The da’wah efforts and community empowerment had successfully influenced the government policy concerning the Islamic principle implementations. The involvement of Islamic figures within the bureaucracy altered the government regime perception on the Islamic society.

In 90s, there was a dramatic change in the political policy of the authoritarian regime. The regime attempted to embrace the Islamic forces to support Soeharto’s development efforts and then put it as a source of the state political legitimacy. This was because of the moderate attitude of the Islamic society that is the essence of accommodative politics. Although this military regime was very strong, persuasive action would always be necessary for the government to gain a legitimacy from the majority of Muslim society, and this was successfully used by the Muslim society to get closer to the authorities.

The Islamic civil society used the persuasive approaches to the New Order regime to obtain the benefits so that they could keep the existence of their organization, increasing the number of members and branches in the different cities. Their activities were expanded into hospitals, orphanages and parents, cooperation, printing and other activities to empower the peoples in all aspects of life. Therefore, when the Soeharto’s regime suffered fall they did not turn into a weak state. Many Islamic elites are the founders in the establishment of Islamic and nationalism ideological parties and influential on the political life in Indonesia. The moderate stances of Islamic civil society have made itself accepts democracy, providing an opportunity for the Islamic civil society to implement the religious principles, and influence the government policy concerning the Islamic interests.

Conclusion

The accommodative politics by the Islamic civil society from the perspective of philosophical background, ideology, role and implementation points of view during the period of New Order regime and democratization process has been briefly analysed. The peoples’ social background and the understanding level on ideology and politics contributed to the implementation of accommodative politics. The Islamic society played a vital role to driving the democratization processes in Indonesia, implying that the Islamic ideology is apparently in agreement with the Democracy.

On the other hand, it is also noted that the moderate attitude usually relates to the Muamalat activities without leaving Qur’an and al-Sunnah as the most fundamental references. As a result, the Islamic civil society is still existing and even significantly growing upon the fall of the New Order regime. Nowadays, the growing Islamic society has been so progressive and transformed into various Islamic organizations with different roles and activities such as Islamic preaching, Islamic educational institutions, hospitals, cooperations, business activities, etc. A lot of positive contributions have been given by the Islamic civil societies to improve the society’s welfare, especially in education, health and economic sectors.

Reference


