Varieties of Religious Authority
Changes and Challenges in 20th Century Indonesian Islam

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TRADITIONAL ISLAM AND MODERNITY
Some Notes on the Changing Role of the Ulama in Early Twentieth Indonesia

Jajat Burhanudin

But, ironically, while print enabled ulama to greatly extend their influence in public affairs, it was also doing serious damage to the roots of their authority. By printing the Islamic classics, and the print run for a major text could be as many as ten thousand copies, and by translating them into the vernaculars they undermined their authority; they were no longer necessarily around when the book was read to make up for the absence of the author in the text; ... Books, which they literally possessed, which they carried in the hearts, and which they transmitted with a whole series of mnemonic aids to memory, could now be consulted by any Ahmad, Mahmud or Muhammad, who could make what they will of them. Increasingly from now on any Ahmad, Mahmud, and Muhammad could claim to speak for Islam (Robinson 1993, p. 245).

The printing press exerted great influence on the way religious authority was created and shaped. The cited quotation confirms what happened during the printing era in the Muslim community in the Netherlands Indies, in which the rise of various voices of Islam by various Muslim leaders — not merely the traditional ulama — became a leading feature.
They engaged in a contest of interpreting and discoursing Islam. In Indonesia, the increase in the number of Muslims “who could claim to speak for Islam” began to occur in the early twentieth century. This proceeded alongside the rise and the development of Islamic reformism in an increasingly modernized colony as the consequence of the Dutch Ethical Policy of the period. And one of the most prominent features of reformism was the advance of the products of printing presses (journals, newspapers, and books) in social and intellectual life.

The use of the printing press meant that Muslims no longer had to turn to a recognized mujtahid only. In one issue of Islam Bergerak (10 June 1917), one of the newspapers published by Hadji Misbach (a leading leftist Muslim activist of the Sarcekat Islam), there was a question from a reader about eating pork when one was starving and could not find any other food to eat. This is only one example of the way contemporary Muslims in the Netherlands Indies asked for religious opinions (istifâa). Journals and newspapers published in that period had a special column for giving fatwas — commonly referred to as tanja djawab (question and answer) — which offered readers the opportunity to send questions to the editors to get an explanation on issues ranging from religious practices to sophisticated subjects of theology and philosophy. Indeed, one salient feature to emerge with the printing press is the changing mode of presenting Islam. In the past, Muslims would have a submitted a problem like the one dealt with in Islam Bergerak directly to the ulama of pesantrens. This had formed part of Muslim religious practice. The difference here is that the question was sent to a newspaper. The fatwa seeker (mustafii) invited an editor, not an ulama, to give a religious explanation.

The role journals and newspapers assume, presented a radical departure in the tradition of kitab writing. In the past kitabs (religious books) had been the single source of Islamic learning in pesantrens and at the same time in the issuing of fatwa (Van Bruinessen 1990; Kaptein 1997). The kitab, therefore, had emerged as one of the basic pillars of ulama’s existence. In the early twentieth century, this position of kitab in the making of Islamic discourse began to be challenged. The printing press emerged as a new source of Islamic learning and a new medium for issuing fatwa. In this regard, the journal al-Imam published in Singapore and al-Munir published in Padang in West Sumatra were pioneers. Appearing from 1906 to 1908, al-Imam was the first journal to introduce the ideas of Islamic reformism to Southeast Asia. And the spirit of al-Imam then became the inspiration for publishing al-Munir (1911–16) which is acknowledged as sowing the seed for the development of Islamic reformism in Indonesia.
NEW ISLAMIC VOICES AND LEADERSHIP: ONE EXAMPLE

A leader whose voice represents the rise of a new configuration of Islam was the Sarekat Islam (SI) leader H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto. His rise to prominence in the SI is an obvious mark of the changing leadership in Islam in the Netherlands Indies. Tjokroaminoto had no experience of studying kitabs in pesantrens. Nor had he joined the Jawi community of people from the Netherlands Indies studying Islam in Mecca or Cairo. Nevertheless, he significantly engaged in the making of Islamic discourses in early twentieth century Indonesia.

Born on 16 August 1882 in Bakur, a small town in Madiun in East Java, Tjokroaminoto came from a Javanese aristocratic family (ningrat). This background can be traced back to Kasan Basari, a leading ‘alm of eighteenth century Java and the leader of Pesantren Tegalsari of Ponorogo, who after marrying the daughter of the Ruler of Surakarta had joined a Javanese aristocratic family. His grandfather, Mas Adipati Tjokronegoro, had been bupati (regent) of Ponorogo, while his father, Raden Mas Tjokroamiseno, had been wedana (chief district officer) of Madiun.

Like other ningrat families of that period, the young Tjokroaminoto had a Western education. In 1902 he graduated from a Dutch school, the OSVIA (the Training School for Native Civil Servants), in Magelang, having completed a seven-year course that opened the way for a priyayi career. Thus, at the age of twenty, Tjokroaminoto began his career as a pangreh praja. He became a clerk at the regency of Ngawi. In 1905, after three years, he left the office and began a new career in the urban centre of Surabaya in East Java. Here, he was employed at the Cooy & Coy firm while completing evening classes from 1907 to 1910. Then he worked as an engineer at the Rogjampi sugar factory in Surabaya.

It was while being employed at the sugar factory that Tjokroaminoto was approached to join the Sarekat Islam. In May 1912, he officially became a member and then led the Surabaya branch of the Sarekat Islam. This was his debut as a politician. In December 1912 Tjokoaminoto also became the manager of the commercial company of the SI, the Setia Oesaha, that backed the SI activities including the publishing of Oetoesan Hindia one of SI's leading organs. His political role continued to grow in importance when he was entrusted with the crucial task of converting the SI branches into local SIs. This move had become necessary after the colonial authorities — due in part to the involvement of SI members in anti-Chinese riots (Azra 1994, pp. 27–53) — had refused to grant legal recognition to a newly-proposed statute of a nationwide SI, drafted by Tjokroaminoto in 1913. Batavia only
Contributing to Wahab Chasbullah’s prominence was the fact that he had a significant amount of economic capital. As has been noted (Fealy 1996, pp. 7–8; Noer 1973, pp. 229–30), besides being a religious teacher, Wahab also engaged in the trading of mainly agricultural products from Tambakberas, rice and wheat. Later, he extended his commercial activities to include sugar and precious stones. One of his most successful business ventures was his hajj agency. He started working as a pilgrim shaykh for his father-in-law. Later, after his father-in-law had died, he successfully managed the firm and then became a major agent for the Kongsii Tiga Shipping line. Yet at the same time, Wahab Chasbullah used his economic skills to empower the ulama network. In 1918, he helped establish Nahdatul Tujar (Nahdat al-Tujar, or the Awakening of the Traders), an association for commercial networking among Muslim traders of Jombang and Surabaya with Hasjim As’ari as its chairman and Wahab Chasbullah as its treasurer and legal adviser (Fealy 1996, p. 7).

It was this Wahab Chasbullah, with his leadership skills, broad network and thriving business, who played a major role in voicing the ulama’s interests in the changing landscape of the Netherlands Indies. With the spiritual support of Hasjim As’ari, Wahab Chasbullah greatly contributed to connecting the world of ulama of the pesantren with the modern world. The importance of Wahab Chasbullah’s efforts are none the more evident than in the formation of an ulama association in 1926, Nahdatul Ulama (NU). With the NU, the engagement of the ulama in defining Islam for Indonesian Muslims intensified, and their creating their religious authority enhanced. In addition, one other important point that should be paid attention to here is the transformation of the ulama’s intellectual life, as will be revealed in the short biographies of two other ulama, Ihsan Jampes and Ahmad Sanusi.

IHSAN JAMPES AND AHMAD SANUSI: MAINTAINING KITAB WRITING

Kitab writing was one of the main concerns of the ulama of the pesantren. They wrote many kitabs in various fields of Islamic knowledge which continued to be a source of pesantren learning. In the beginning of the twentieth century, kitab writing constituted one leading feature of the ulama reformulating tradition and hence their engagement in the modernized Netherlands Indies. Turning to the issue of the printing press, the ulama benefited from the technology of printing. Indeed, the printing press — which had been rejected by the Muslims due to its secularizing impact in the sacred transmission of Islamic learning — became an inherent part of the intellectual life of the Muslims in the modern era. Moreover, instead of
script. In Ahmad Sanusi's view this transliteration was allowed, while the Pakauman considered it forbidden. Facilitated by the newly-founded "Comite Permoesjawaratan Menoelis al-Qur'an dengan Hoeroep Latijn" (Committee of deliberation concerning the writing of the Qur'an with Latin script), a debate was held in Sukabumi on 25 October 1936. The main debaters were Ahmad Sanusi and Uyeq Abdolelah, representing two different and conflicting views of the transliteration dispute (Iskandar 2001, pp. 192–206; Basri 2003, pp. 237–40). Other issues of debate with reformists concerned for instances *ijtiad*, *taqlid*, *taqlin* (prompting at the grave), and *ziyara* (visiting the graveyard) (Iskandar 2001, pp. 206–66).

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The experiences of the leading ulama I have presented demonstrate the way the ulama adapted to the condition of modernity of the Netherlands Indies in the early twentieth century. Their experiences confirm the acknowledged capabilities of ulama to negotiate changing circumstances.

Print technology provided them with facilities to not only participate in a modern way of life which the reformist faction had already began to embrace, but also to strengthen the emerging ulama network. Here, I would argue that the rise of the printing press contributed to the creation of an "imagined" ulama community in Indonesia. This ulama community continued to develop, to the extent that they formed a leading faction in the continuous effort even until today in defining Islam for Indonesian Muslims.

Of course, with the rising use of print and then electronic media as well as the advance of mass higher education, the ulama of the pesantrens today are not the single makers of Indonesian Islam. Many new Muslim leaders, coming from different socio-intellectual backgrounds, have emerged in contemporary Indonesia. The new Muslim leaders are mostly graduates from universities, in addition to the pesantrens. Some of them have even studied in Western countries. Such Muslim leaders present new Islamic ideas which are different, albeit not always, from those of the ulama of the pesantrens. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the ulama have ceased to present the Islamic voices. Using ways and methods adapted to modernity, the ulama significantly participate in the making of contemporary Islamic discourses.

The Indonesian experience provides us with ample evidence of the continued pivotal role of the ulama. Modernity appears to have contributed to enabling the ulama to use a more effective way to define Islam and in turn enhance their authority. Nowadays, the ulama participate in diverse roles, going beyond their traditional domain in the religious institution in the
villages. In addition to their role as the leaders of the pesantrens, some Indonesian ulama are now also engaging in presenting Islam through print and electronic media, which in the past has been associated exclusively with reformist Muslims in the cities. Moreover, the ulama also participate in such big national political events as the general election, showing their continued influence and role within the Islamic community.

To be mentioned in this regard is the continued increase in the number of Islamic learning centres, the pesantrens, which have been regarded as one of the basic pillars of ulama’s existence. Data at the Ministry of Religious Affairs show that in 1977 there were about 4,195 pesantrens with a total number of students (santris) of 677,384. In 1981, there were 5,661 pesantrens with 938,397 students. In 1985, the number of pesantrens reached 6,239 with 1,084,810 students. In 1997, the Ministry of Religious Affairs counted 9,388 pesantrens with a total number of students of 1,770,768.

It is clear that the ulama have been able to maintain their existence in the changing Indonesian Muslim society. They can no longer be understood as representing the old-fashioned Islam of the past, the so-called traditional Islam, as the early modernization theories assumed. Instead, the ulama serve the tradition by responding to the new demands of modernity.

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