THE SHADOW OF ISLAMIC ORTODOXY AND SYNCRETISM IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIAN POLITICS

Ahmad Khoirul Umam
The University of Paramadina, Jakarta
(ahmad.umam@paramadina.ac.id)

&

Akhmad Arif Junaidi
IAIN Walisongo, Semarang
(arif_junaidi2003@yahoo.com)

ABSTRAK


The mapping of political affiliation is important to capture the power direction and its characteristics in the future. Generally, the mass political orientation in Indonesia is not much different than what was outlined by Clifford Geertz in his master piece entitled The Religion of Java. The concept of 'trikotomi' consisting of the Santri, Abangan, and Priyayi, which over the past five decades has been the fundamentally critiqued by various parties. Numerous weak points and fallacy of conceptual framwork then become the entrance to reconceptualize the Indonesian people political orientation. However, the work of Geertz's initial approach should be appreciated as a brilliant in understanding the Indonesian political behavior. With the critical approaches, the Geertz's approaches will again be utilized to map the direction of community in the contemporary Indonesian political orientation.

Keywords: Democracy, Islamic Politics, Political Behaviour, and Political Party.
A. Introduction

The Religion of Java is one of the Clifford Geertz’s masterpieces providing fuel for the debate among social scientists and strongly influencing scholars of Indonesia. For decades they could not escape from the great shadow of the former Professor Emeritus at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton’s persuasive theory and his incredibly powerful work of descriptive ethnography in which the discipline was facing ‘double crisis’ of representation and of legitimation at the time. Geertz is a brave anthropologist confidently defy the tradition of social science technical writing proven by the book’s literatures which were less than two dozen citations only and no bibliography making it no clear objectives and effort to put itself in relation to previous scholarship or ongoing debates in Indonesian society or on Islam.

The Religion of Java is the result of the long time fieldwork in the remote area of East Java namely Pare, Kediri, otherwise called ‘Modjokuto’ that later become an indispensable framework to understand the modern Indonesian political culture based on the description of complicated social interactions reflecting the discourses of nationalism, bureaucratization, socio-political organization which were transforming Javanese society. Geertz emphasized on the schism pattern in the Islam and Javanism relation which was considerably influencing religious confrontation, social conflict, and political behavior of Javanese society. Since religious schism causes political schism later inspiring the concept of ‘political streams’.

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To describe the Javanese socio-political relations, Geertz created a sociological formula by distinguishing three varieties of Javanese Islam namely Abangan (Javanist-syncretist), Santri (orthodox-modernist), and Priyayi (Indic, Hindu-Buddhisht), as well as connected each to a particular social class. As simply defined by Geertz that Abangan is a part of Javanese Muslim tending to be syncretic mix of animist, Hindu-Buddhist, and Muslim community predominantly lived in the remote-rural area. Koentjoroningrat (1985) and Pranowo (1991) stated that the term of Abangan seems to be a highly pejorative stereotype to indicate the Javanist Muslim not adhering strictly to the precepts of religion. Thus, Koentjoroningrat recommended replacing term of Abangan by using ‘Javenese Islam’, Kejawen or ‘Javanist’, and ‘Javenese Religion’. Two recommended terms of Javanist and Javenese Religion would be acceptable as original categorizations of Javanese belief, but not for ‘Javenese Islam’. It would be philosophically problematic in facing the major Islamic Puritanism mainstream believing in the kaffah or religious totality concept protecting Islam from syncretism and animistic ethos.

Santri category is used to identify a more orthodox variant of Islam which was predominantly consisted of merchants and wealthier peasants who are strict adherent of Islamic teachings. Marshal Hodgson in The Venture of Islam (1974) critiqued Geertz’s paradigm in identifying Santri category by using ‘scripturalist perspective’ ignoring the fact of grey areas in the Javenese Muslim social behaviour accommodating Javenese culture and strict Islamic teaching. Bambang Pranowo (1991) described many PKI & PNI’s activists were good Muslims who could recite Al-Qur’an fluently. Geertz’s seems to embrace the vision of Orientalist unequally depicting Islam as a thin by more accommodating and accepting uncritically his modernist santri informants’ narrow views of what is really Islamic and then speculatively rejecting the Islamic practices.

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done by *abangan* and *priyayi* as un-Islamic.\(^7\) The Geertz’s point of view later has been accused as a part of Geertz’s contributions to the relative marginalization of Islam in Indonesian discourse.\(^8\) It is more contentiously phrased as what Azyumardi Azra (2003) mentions the “myth of *abangan*” which means that Javanese or Indonesian and generally Southeast Asian Islam is not really Islam.\(^9\)

And the last category of the trichotomy is *Priyayi* which is used to point an elite heritage strongly influenced by Hindu-Buddhist principles of earlier Javanese courts associated to aristocrats committing to well behaved in language, arts, behavior, intuitive mysticism perpetuated by colonial administrative bureaucracy in the modern era.\(^10\) In this context, the principal weakness of the Religion of Java becoming a unequivocal critique is located on Geertz’s fatal careless in classifying *Priyayi* as one of religious categories rather than a distinction of social class in the social stratification of Javanese society.\(^11\) As stated by Hefner, *priyayi* is not appropriately credited as

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\(^10\) Geertz, 1960, Op.Cit, p. 5-6

religious culture but a social class represented by aristocrats as opposed to ‘wong cilik’ or ordinary and proletariat people. Hence in the religious categorization, priyayi can be identified into both abangan and santri.

Those have been strengthened by Nakamura’s research finding many priyayi have been strict adherents of Islam including the family of Javanese palace either Surakarta or Jogjakarta palace. Another unique phenomenon countering Geertz’s sociological formula come from Pesantren Tegalrejo, Magelang systematically written by Bambang Pranowo in which the Islamic boarding school was established by a priyayi namely KH. Abdurrahman. He is a descent of Pangeran Diponegoro’s family well-known as Jogjakarta palace’s family. The pesantren was founded among kejawen and there is a blend of Islamic orthodoxy and mystical features where santri also respectfully accommodate and tolerate the abangan tradition such as maintaining the belief of wali as a part of the Javanese belief system (Koentjoroningrat, 1985: 319), and also performing jatilan and wayangan in pesantren’s akhirusanah or annual graduation celebration.

The critique on the priyayi categorization is scientifically acceptable proven by Geertz’s confusion in transforming the religious schisms into the ideological-political grouping in which Geertz kindly tended to sacrifice and hidden priyayi and more emphasize on santri and abangan categories only (Effendy, 1998: 38). Apparently, Geertz seemed to be in difficulties for explaining priyayi as a part of religious categories, because the strong religious-cultural distinctions can be clearly found in abangan and santri’s religious tradition only. William Liddle (1977) affirms Geertz’s confusion by elaborating Geertz’s previous stand in his another book entitled the Social Context of Economic Change: an Indonesian Case Study (1956) in which Geertz clearly focused on abangan and santri categorization only.

The critique tends to be true when Geertz’s ideologically political grouping of the three variants resulting two political orientations of abangan and santri only. Thus, it is possibly reasonable to justify that priyayi was used by Geertz, as strict Weberian, just for complement to adjust Weber’s trichotomy concept.

of social classes, or possibly to distinguish his thesis from Robert Jay’s ‘Religion and Politics in Rural Java’ (1963) clearly emphasizing on the religious and political schism of abangan and santri only. Geertz’s apology of trichotomy was done by explaining that political maneuver process played by the political streams of Javanist and orthodox Muslim producing a political alliance between abangan and priyayi opposing to santri.\textsuperscript{14} His argument seems to be reasonable since both abangan and priyayi tend to be reluctant to the santri’s exclusive characteristic. Ricklef (1979)\textsuperscript{15} argued that the inclination of self-consciously antagonistic relation between abangan and santri has occurred after the movement of purification Islam otherwise called Islamization of Java historically triggered by strains of the Madiun massacres and the tragic bloodshed of 1965 stimulating tension between Javanist consisted of Indonesian Communist Party’s followers and orthodox Muslims forced Javanese to determine their stands whether as pure Muslim or Javanist.\textsuperscript{16} 

Geertz’s dichotomy of santri and abangan political streams later has become a pivotal popular framework to understand Javanese society, politics, and religion, even to analyze the pattern of elite competition supercharged with ideological rivalry and party mobilization in the Indonesian political constellation. Muslims who self-identify as santri might be more open to Islamic party platform than those who identify as either abangan or priyayi. Abangan is tended to be credited to the base of the major non-Islamic parties campaigning on liberal, nationalist, and socialist and other types of ideological platforms of the past particularly the communist PKI and nationalist PNI of the 1950s. On the other hand, santri is politically associated to Islam parties using Islamic imagery or promoting Islamist ideas of the past represented by Masyumi and Nahdlatul Ulama of the 1950s. In this stage, it can be more clearly understood that Geertz actually just want to look Indonesian politics as the battle arena of ‘syncretism’ and ‘orthodoxy’.

\textsuperscript{16} Jay, Robert T. \textit{Religion and Politics in Rural Central Java}, Cultural Report series, No. 12, Program in Southeast Asian Studies, (New Haven, Yale University, 1963), p.16.
The political stream dichotomy is later more complicated after occurring the extreme political fragmentation in the santri community of ‘pro-Islamist’ and ‘anti-Islamist’ factions resulting two middle political poles of traditionalist santri represented by Nahdatul Ulama (NU) and modernist-conservative santri shown by the Consultative Assembly of Indonesian Muslims (Masyumi). The factionalism in 1955 election has become a critical watershed in the development of Indonesian political culture (Barton, 2008: 11). The political landscape objectively indicated that religious orientations had become a pivotal preference determining people’s political affiliation shown by the Islamic parties’ highest electoral appeal of 44 percent while the secular.17

The quiet similar political inclination occurred in the election 1999 after significantly social and political turbulences of the reform movement. Barton (2008) argued that the voting patterns of election in 1955 and 1999 have scarcely changed at all when it comes to ‘syncretism’ and ‘orthodoxy’ sentiment by choosing between Islamic parties of 1999 represented by PBB, PBR, PK(S), PPP and non-Islamic parties such as PDIP, Golkar Party, Demokrat Party, including PAN and PKB which have consciously remained open and multi-faith parties with nationalist ambitions.18 The non-Islamic parties mostly commit to Pancasila as their ideology adopting special emphasis on the concepts of religious belief, humanity, unity, democracy, and social justice without promoting Islam. But, the Barton’s argument is countered by Liddle and Mujani’s thesis convincing that political streams had ended in 1999 election proven by the massive split voting phenomenon in which many Muslims politically supported Megawati and her PDIP which is popular as the base of abangan affiliation. The question is whether the political streams framework popularized by


Geertz still relevant for analyzing the contemporary Indonesian political context?

B. The Shadow of Political Streams and Pragmatism

One argues that political stream may be precise to analyzing Indonesian political development in the early national independence, while the recent political Islam has been transformed and diversified. Beside that, the recent Indonesian Muslims tends to be more politically rational in which their political preferences are no longer determined by religious stream sentiment. Political Islam’s characteristic also dramatically changes which is no longer equivalent to Islamism aspiration of pro-syari’ah and promoting agenda of Islamic law formalization anymore but tends to be more pragmatist. 19

It is true that the process of Santrinization emphasizing on the Islamic pietism dramatically improve in the contemporary Indonesia. Fealy (2008) noted that “Islam is penetrating far more deeply into people’s lives than ever before and Muslims are expressing their faith in a multitude of ways” such as more diligently attending to regular prayer, fasting during Ramadhan, joining into Islamic study groups, and consuming ‘Islamic products’ like syari’ah banking and Muslim clothing. 20 The situation is much contradictory with the shrinking trend of Islamic parties’ electoral appeals in election 1999, 2004, and 2009. The Muslim voters’ popular attitudes indicate that they no longer convince voting as “confessional” practice considerably correlated to their faith principal.

Most of Muslim voters convince that Islam platforms are not critical for their electoral preferences, even though Islam may be crucial for their personal lives. Indonesian Muslims tend to endorse secular politics separating public service from religion, rather than Islamic politics, proven by the Indonesian Survey Institute (2007)’s survey showing 57 percent of respondents prefer to secular values in politics while 33 percent support Islamic platforms. Based on the perspective, Wanandi (2002) arguably justify Indonesian Islam is

inherently more moderate than Islam elsewhere in the world.\textsuperscript{21} In case of election 2009, generally voters including Muslims endorse good governance growth, reduction of the unemployment and poverty rates as the major key to electoral sentiment rather than religious stream sentiment (Xinhua, February 7, 2008).

One argues that today political Islam is characterized by diversity in and pragmatism over Muslim aspirations.\textsuperscript{22} In the lame presidential system since 1999 to 2009 caused by the absence of a dominant party causing the elected executive government haunted by the specter of bitter opposition in parliament. In that situation, both Islamic and non-Islamic political parties controlled by opportunist leaders tend to pragmatically looking for political safety and economic profit by joining into coalition hoping accommodated into the government body. Parties including the Islamic parties expected to conduct their both tactical and strategic roles based on pragmatic consideration rather than ideologies, platforms, and political values. Effendy (2009) sees the phenomenon as the positive effect of the withering away of politics of streams in which ideology, socio-religious, and traditional values shaped the characteristic of political behavior. The next question is whether both the atmosphere liberal democracy resulting sphere of political pragmatism and the change of Muslims’ paradigm totally demolishes the phenomenon of politics of streams?

The fact of political pragmatism and the change of Muslims’ paradigm can not one hundred percent be used to characterize and identify the recent Muslims’ political behaviors. It is considerably true that there are enormous social and political changes influencing Muslims’ political awareness. It is also correct that political pragmatism has become a soul of Indonesian politics. But it must be acknowledged those can not make the political symbol and political identity based on the political stream understanding totally disappear. Since it is undoubted that politics is frequently defined as the worldview frequently projected or represented into the choices of symbol, identity, and communalism.

C. Conclusion

For instance, the community of *abangan* would be persistently reluctant to join with orthodox Islam political base such as PKS. Their political preferences would be dropped to the secular or nationalist political parties such as PDIP, Golkar, or PDIP. PKS as the right wing of Islam would be problematic to set up a permanent political coalition with PDIP as the pole of left wing of secularist-nationalist. Meanwhile Nahdlatul Ulama’s political cadres (traditionalist-inclusive) would be also consistently reluctant to collectively set up a permanent coalition with Muhammadiyah’s political mainstream (modernist-conservative) because of the institutional sentiment, even less with PKS’s cadres (radical revivalist) which basically have many differences in the religious paradigm and interpretations of political Islam either pro-Islamist or inclusive-pluralist.

That political behavior seems to be inevitable in the Indonesian political landscape. Thus, even though stream politics would be not significant determinant factor influencing electors’ political preferences, it would be still reasonable to justify that Geertz’s political stream framework is actually still relevant to be “one of the analytical instruments” to understanding the political constellation right now. But, of course, it needs other more contemporarily analytical instruments to capture meaningful politics and the current political configuration comprehensively and objectively. On the other words, Indonesian politics can not escape yet the long shadow of Geertz’s persuasive theory and incredible ethnography haunting the contemporary political facts. ***
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