

# MUSLIM INTELLECTUALS OR HOUSEMAIDS? The Saudi Perceptions of the Indonesian Domestic Workers

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**Abstract:** Indonesia is certainly the world's largest Muslim country. Its big population however is not capable of offering a big contribution for the world. Indonesia was a major player on the world stage politically and intellectually. But that role has disappeared with the disappearance of Indonesia's most vibrant minds. This paper tries to exploit the rise and the fall of Indonesian role on the international stage particularly by looking at the presence of the Indonesian workers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and how the Saudis perceive these workers. The paper argues that there is an observable development in the way Indonesia and its people have been perceived in this particular part of the world. In the past, they were respected as intellectuals while at the present they are humiliated as domestic workers. This paper analyzes this setback in the Indonesian role and with it the changing perceptions of the Saudis in particular and the Arabs in general concerning Indonesians in the Middle East. At the end, the paper is concerned with showing how that low perception affects the relation between Indonesia and the Arab countries.

**Keywords:** Indonesian scholars, housemaids, diplomacy and Arab Saudi.

## Introduction

The changes of perceptions about Indonesia are generally caused by two factors. First, changes in perception that occurred along with the loss of clerical and intellectual role of Indonesian migrants who settled in Saudi Arabia (*mukimin*). The loss of clerical role is caused by changes in political and religious orientations that occurred in Saudi

Arabia since the 18th century. These changed orientations have marked the reign of al-Saud dynasty which accommodated a total doctrine of Muḥammad bin `Abd al-Wahhāb (1701-1793 AD). Second, the emergence of Saudi Arabia as the petro-dollar country has made this country into the central purpose of job seekers, especially informal workers. Since the 1980's a big wave of Indonesian women workers (TKW) has been flowing into Saudi Arabia. The existence of domestic workers have then dominated the group of Indonesian citizens in Saudi Arabia. In addition, many state officials of Saudi Arabia employ Indonesian women in their homes, both legally and illegally.<sup>1</sup> The number of women domestic workers has reached 700,000 while that the illegal ones could reach three times.<sup>2</sup> On average, every four Saudi Arabia home residents employ one domestic helper from Indonesia.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, news about Indonesia in Saudi Arabia mass media tend to be negative, which in turn further strengthen their impression about Indonesia. Even more, Indonesian female workers are too often associated with prostitution practices in Saudi Arabia. On average they are paid 50 riyals for a date while the prostitutes from the Philippines, for example, appreciated 200 riyals. Indonesian women were often called *abu khamsin* (goods for 50 riyals). There is another nickname given to the women of Indonesia, *siti rahmah*. At first glance this suggests a praise call, namely women who give love. The phrase “*siti rahmah*” is uttered with negative connotations indicating sexual desires.<sup>4</sup> The nickname is commensurate with the term “*Indon*” for Indonesian citizens in Malaysia, or even lower.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Demise of Indonesian Muslim Scholars in Holy Cities**

The condition of the Indonesian migrants is currently in sharp contrast to that of their predecessors in the 18th century until the end of the 20th century. In that era, Indonesians were much respected in Saudi Arabia. They were widely used as religious references with full

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<sup>1</sup> *Kabarbisnis.com*, 24 April 2009.

<sup>2</sup> *Kompas*, 23 August 2009.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Department of Central Statistic and Information of Saudi Arabia the total population of Saudi Arabia in 2009 reached 25.373.512 persons. For details see *Saudi Gazette*, 10 June 2009.

<sup>4</sup> *Duta Masyarakat*, 29 April 2003.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

authorities in the Muslim world, including in the Middle East. Al-Imām al-Nawāwī al-Bantānī (1813-1879) was among those who occupied a high position as the mufti of the Grand Mosque of al-Haram. Indonesian *mukimin* were recognized from their last names, such as al-Batawī, al-Bantānī, al-Jāwī, al-Falimbānī and al-Banjārī.

Two Holy Cities, Makkah and Madīnah then called *al-Ḥaramayn*, are central gatherings for scholars around the world. The Ḥaramayn became international cities where the scholars around world visited to perform the pilgrimage and then stayed to study and develop their religious authority. On average, those who had respectable positions in the Ḥaramayn were foreign scholars from the Indian subcontinent, Persia, Southeast Asia and Africa. Among the renowned scholars of the 17th century which later became the teachers of Indonesian scholars are Ahmad al-Qusyasyi (born 1586) and Ibrahim al-Kurani (born 1667). They were considered central figures because many internationally renowned scholars of their day, including Indonesian scholars, had intellectual genealogies with them.<sup>6</sup> The relationship occurred informally through the patron of teachers and pupils who later developed into solid networks. The bulk of the network was formed by model of sufi orders due to strong interaction between the teacher and the students. Of course, the charismatic Sufi grand teachers in the holy cities were also supported by established religious institutions, such as *halaqah* and *ribāṭ* (a kind of *pesantren*).<sup>7</sup>

The Indonesian *ulamās* or scholars (Jāwī) began to play their prominent role since the end of the 17th century. Abdul Rauf al-Singkili (1615-1693) scholar from Aceh, for example, settled in the Ḥaramayn for 19 years and got the highest authority and leadership of Satariyah order.<sup>8</sup> He was a student of Acehnese *ulamā* from Gujarat (India) Nuruddin Ar-Raniri (d. 1685). During his stay in the Ḥaramayn, al-Singkili studied with al-Qusyasyi and al-Kurani. Unlike his teacher, ar-Raniri, who strongly opposed the teachings of philosophical Sufism, al-Singkili was more moderate in dealing with Sufi teachings. Al-Singkili continued reporting religious debates on the issues of Sufism in Aceh

<sup>6</sup> For further details see Azyumardi Azra, *Jaringan Global dan Lokal Ulama Nusantara* (Bandung: Mizan, 2002), pp.74-76.

<sup>7</sup> Azyumardi Azra, *Historiografi Islam Kontemporer* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2002), p. 123.

<sup>8</sup> Alwi Shihab, *Islam Sufistik* (Bandung: Mizan, 2001), p. 50.

to his teacher, al-Kurani. Even ar-Raniri's fatwa that condemned Fansuri Hamza and his followers as infidels and deserved for the death penalty also gained a special attention from al-Kurani.<sup>9</sup> Al-Kurani answered that the problems of the region called *min ba'd jazā'ir Jāwā* occurred due to the Sufi understanding of Islam was too while the ulama who considered them as unbelievers was too literal in applying the teachings of the Prophet Muḥammad.<sup>10</sup>

Another Indonesian student of al-Kurani was Sheikh Yusuf al-Makassari (born 1626). Al-Makassari was the first *ulamā* who introduced the Naqsyabandiyah order in Indonesia. He wrote many books in Arabic with the writing style like a native Arab. Among his famous book was Safinah al-Najah while his other Arabic books have not been found yet. Within Sufi circles al-Makassari was acknowledged by his credential as a great sufi leader. He did not only gain the authority in teaching the Naqsyabandiyah Qadiriyyah but also Syattariyyah order. For almost 25 years, al-Makassari settled in the Arab world starting in Yemen, Saudi Arabia (Makkah and Madīnah) and then moved to Damascus. Because of his authority in the Sufi realm then he was honored by the title of *Taj al-Shaykh al-Makassari Khawati*.<sup>11</sup> During his stay in the Ḥaramayn he mostly spent his time to study and began to spread his influence upon returning to their homeland and spread Islam to Sri Lanka and South Africa. Yusuf al-Makassari passed away in South Africa and regarded as a major figure in the African continent and also in Sri Lanka.

Abdussamad al-Falimbani (d. 1789) was another Nusantara scholar in the holy cities, a descendent of Hadrami who was born in Palembang. In contrast to Sheikh Yusuf al-Makassari, Abdussamad had never returned to Indonesia and permanently settled in Makkah.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless Abdussamad was a highly admired figure in the archipelago because of his tremendous works written in Malay. Most of his works deal with the thinking of al-Imām al-Ghazālī. Not surprisingly, in the holy cities, Abdussamad was better known with his expertise in explaining the works of al-Ghazālī, especially *Ihyā' 'Ulūm*

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.. 52

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Shihab, *Islam Sufistik*, pp. 178-179.

<sup>12</sup> Azra, *Jaringan Global*, p. 130.

*al-Dīn*. His two works, *Hidāyat al-Sālikīn* and *Sayr al-Sālikīn*, were derived from the ideas of al-Ghazālī.<sup>13</sup>

At the beginning of the 19th century, another great scholar from Borneo settled in Makkah. He was Muhammad al-Banjari Arsyad (1710-1812). The name of al-Banjari was very famous in the Haramain, therefore, now immigrants from Borneo are known as the Banjar people. Al-Banjari spent about 40 years in Makkah and returned back to preaching Islam in his hometown of Banjar, South Kalimantan. According to the oral story, since childhood Muhammad Arsyad had an exceptional expertise in Arabic art of calligraphy. Because of his talented skill, he was chosen as a son of the Sultan of Banjar since he was seven years until he reached the age of thirty. In Makkah he studied religious knowledge under supervision of the great Jawi scholars such as Sheikh Abdurahman bin Abdul Mubin al-Fatani (South Thailand), Sheikh Muhammad bin Zein Faqih of Aceh and Sheikh Jalaluddin Muhammad Aqib ibn Hasanuddin al-Falimbani. He also became a disciple of Sheikh Attaillah, the author of al-Hikam. In Makkah al-Banjari was still recognized as *qārī'* (Qur'anic reciter) and wrote qur'anic verses using the Banjar method of calligraphy. His famous works are *Tuhfat ar-Rāghibīn* and *Sabīl al-Muhtadīn* and many other works written in Arabic to Malay students in Indonesia.

Al-Nawāwī al-Bantānī was the most admired Nusantara's scholars who had the highest clerical career in the Holy Cities. He was not only respected by the Jawi community but also among scholars in the Ḥaramayn. In addition to running a religious circle (*ḥalaqah*) in the Ḥaramayn, al-Nawāwī al-Bantānī was also appointed as a mufti of al-Ḥaram. Al-Nawāwī al-Bantānī himself earned a highest religious authority in Makkah and granted the title of *Shaykh al-Ḥijāzī* (the prince of scholars in the two holy land).<sup>14</sup> During his life, al-Nawāwī al-Bantānī was invited by Shaykh Ibrāhīm al-Bayjūrī, the grand mufti of Egypt to give a religious lecture at the mosque of al-Azhar. Some of his famous works were *Tījān al-Durar* (theology), *Sullam al-Najāh*, *Kāshifāt al-Sajāh*, *Sullam al-Tawfīq*, *al-Thamrah al-Yānī'ah 'alā Riyādh al-Badī'ah*, *Tawshīkh 'alā Fath al-Qarīb*, *Nihāyat al-Zayn* (Islamic Jurisprudence), *Qaṭr al-Ghayth*, *Tanqīḥ al-Qawl* (prophet's tradition),

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

*Minhāj al-Tbād* (Sufism), *Uqūd al-Lujayn* (household matters), *Murah Labid aw al-Tafsīr al-Munīr* (Qur'anic exegesis) and others.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to Al-Nawāwī al-Bantāni, a highly productive Indonesia scholar was Shaykh aMaḥfūdh al-Turmusī (1842-1920). He came from Tremas, Pacitan, East Java. He wrote a few comments on comments (*basyiah*) of some source books of Shāfi'ī jurisprudence, such as al-*Minhāj*, *Fath al-Wabbāb* and al-*Iqnā*. Some comments were later known as *Hāshiyat al-Turmusī* and written in several volumes. He also wrote al-*Siqāyah Marḍiyah fī Asmā' al-Kutub al-Fiqhiyah Ashāb li al-Shāfi'iyah* (the encyclopedia of Shāfi'ī jurisprudence school), *Manhaj al-Naẓhar fī Manẓūmat Abl al-Āthār* (methodology of Ḥadīth), and al-*Fawā'id al-Turmusīyah fī Asmā' al-Qirā'ah al-'Aṣriyah* (Qur'anic reading skills).

Through the training of al-Bantani and al-Turmusi then appeared two great scholars in the Saudi in the 20th century, Sheikh Ihsan Dahlan al-Kadiri al-Jamfasi (Jampes, Kediri, East Java) and Shaykh Yasin Muhammad bin 'Isa al-Fadani (Padang). Al-Jamfasi was the author of *Sirāj al-Tālibīn 'alā Minhāj al-'Ābidīn* consists of two volumes containing commentaries on the work of al-Imām al-Ghazālī and *Manābij al-Amdād*. The book have ever used as one of teaching materials and reference (*muqarrar*) at al-Azhar. The unique thing about Shaykh Ihsan Dahlan was he had never settled in the Arab world for long period of time except for a brief visit for the purpose of the pilgrimage but his ability in writing in Arabic was remarkable. The Book of *Sirāj al-Tālibīn* was not only published in Indonesia but printed by publishers from the Middle East and Africa. In Africa, his book has been widely used in Morocco and Mali. People who read the book of Sheikh Ihsan Dahlan do not know that the author is an Indonesian because it is written al-Jampasi al-Kadiri instead of al-Andunisi.

Al-Fadani (1917-1990) was expert in Ḥadīth and Islamic jurisprudence of Dar al-'Ulum Makkah. He wrote many volumes of Ḥadīth, *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *taṣawwuf*. The books he wrote, among others, are the book of al-*Fawā'id al-Jannīyah 'alā Bahīyat al-Farā'id fī al-Qawā'id al-Fiqhiyah*, *Hashiyah 'alā al-Naẓā'ir wa al-Ashbah fī al-Furū' al-Fiqhiyah*, *Fath al-'Allām Sharḥ Bulūgh al-Marām* and al-*Durr fī Sharḥ Sunan Abī*

<sup>15</sup> Ahmad Ginandjar Sya'ban, "Jejak Langkah Ulama Nusantara di Timur Tengah" *Eramuslim.com* (accessed on 19 June 2009).

*Mandūd Dāwūd*. Furthermore, the grand mufti of al-Azhar, Muhammad Ali Gomaa, even lean his genealogy of Ḥadīth on Fadani who was known as a modest and humble scholar.

It is difficult to trace when people from *Bilād Jawī* began to gain such high respects in Makkah. Historical records of Makkah, for instance barely described the role of Nusantara's scholars and migrants who for centuries has sent groups of pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The history of Makkah only paid attention much more about the existence of Indian people who were described as wealthy communities.<sup>16</sup> Snouck Hurgronje during his visit to Makkah in 1885 recorded as many as 8000-10000 Malay people living in the Haramayn and gave great influenced on the spiritual life in their homeland.<sup>17</sup> Most of them were knowledge seekers, teachers, tour guides and Sufi leaders.<sup>18</sup>

It is quite strange that the records of Makkah do not contain the history Nusantara contributions to dynamics of religious activities in the holy cities therefore their existence merely based on orally told by local communities and observations of European travelers. Fortunately, the works of Indonesian scholars mentioned above were already written in Arabic and circulated in the Arab world and Africa, especially since the 18th century. In fact, until the beginning of the 20th century the presence of Nusantara scholars and migrants still counts. This can be evidenced by the granting of the demands of Indonesian delegates of the Hijaz Committee in 1925 by the kingdom of Saudi Arabia to preserve the Prophet Muhammad's tombs and his Companions. The success of the Indonesian revolution diplomacy in the Middle East as well as the middle East supports toward the struggle of the Indonesian people because of their respects to Indonesian communities in the Middle East.<sup>19</sup>

Shaykh Muhammad bin Isa al-Yasin Fadani of Indonesia was the last Indonesian ulama whose works have been circulated in the Middle East. Since the death of al-Fadani in 1990 and the demise of Darul Ulum School in Makkah the role of Indonesian has faded and even disappeared altogether. The collapse of Darul Ulum School indicates

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<sup>16</sup> Snouck Hurgronje, *Kumpulan Karangan Snouck Hurgronje* (Jakarta: INIS, 1996), p. 124.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p 53

<sup>19</sup> Hasan Zein, *Diplomasi Revolusi Indonesia di Luar Negeri* (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1980).

the loss of opportunities for Indonesian scholars to actualize their religious knowledge and authority. Azyumardi argues that many factors that cause the loss of the clerical role of Indonesian descent in Saudi Arabia.<sup>20</sup> Firstly, Indonesian cleric's Sufism oriented practices is clearly incompatible with the formal teaching of religion in Saudi Arabia. Arab Saudi government has adopted the teaching of Wahabi that regarded the teaching of Sufism as not in accordance to the pure Islamic doctrines. Secondly, the kingdom has issued regulations that tend to centralize religious educational institutions and restrict religious activities of non-Saudi immigrants. Furthermore, there is a kind of government's regulation that prevents non-Saudis migrants to enter the state college. Religious publications in the Saudis are strongly controlled by the government so that it is not easy to publish works of scholars who are non-Saudis and their understandings are against the formal Islamic teachings in Saudi. As a result, the works of Indonesian clerics began to disappear and if it is available usually sold clandestinely.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Domination of Indonesian Domestic Workers**

Along with the disappearance of the role of Indonesian ulamas in Saudi Arabia, other influx of migrants from Indonesia came for the pilgrimage. They usually came long before the time of ḥajj but they used only *umrah* visas. Among them wished to perform the ḥajj with insufficient budget and tried to get informal jobs to survive. Not a few who settled in the mosque of al-Haram with very limited budget. Some were reported sick and starving because they did not want to come out from the mosque to avoid polices' arrest.<sup>22</sup>

It was reported in October 1978 that two truckloads of Indonesian citizens stopped in front of Indonesian Embassy in Riyadh. They were people who came to Saudi Arabia for ḥajj but their visas had expired. On average they did not have return tickets so that the embassy refused their arrival. Hundreds of Indonesian citizens were sent back to Saudi's prisons along with thousands of prisoners from various countries since the Indonesian authority in Riyadh were unable to handle them. Most of them did not want to be returned back to

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<sup>20</sup> Azra, *Jaringan Global*, p. 142

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> *Tempo*, 28 October 1978.

Indonesia and wished to stay the time of ḥajj comes. Even more, those were arrested by Saudi polices did not realize their mistakes. They were the victims of travel agent brokers who cheated them at home. They were uneducated people who came from remote villages in Indonesia only motivated by the desires to fulfill religious obligations.

Most of these people came to Saudi Arabia only with one way ticket. How could they enter Saudi that required round-trip tickets for foreigners? It turns, they actually had return tickets but when they arrived at the Saudi airport their tickets were taken back by intermediaries. In a report of *Tempo* magazine October 28, 1978, some Indonesians from Cianjur, West Java just sold their lands to be able to come to Makkah. They only spoke Sunda and claimed to sell their land after being persuaded by an *ajengan (ulama)* their villages. Unfortunately, they did not have opportunity to perform ḥajj because the Saudi government issued a new regulation called the 1977 Muharram policy that ordered on forced repatriation of any foreign nationals who have no residence permit.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from the issue of Indonesian citizens who intended to perform the pilgrimage without legal permits, since 1978 the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has opened up opportunities for foreign workers to fill labor market in Saudi Arabia. The first wave of workers from Indonesia was still dominated by male workers who worked in large construction companies and shopping centers. Some cafeteria at Jeddah airport, for example, also employed many Indonesia workers.<sup>24</sup>

The economic changes in Saudi Arabia as the country's petrodollar have increased the range of development and tremendous economic growth. Production and exploration costs are quite low, especially in Saudi Arabia and it increased profits and income for Arab countries in particular from the oil sector. Saudi Arabia has been producing oil

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> The differences between the first Indonesian immigrants who came to Arab Saudi in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> and who came in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are mainly distinguished by their motivations and social backgrounds. The first came to Saudi were motivated by knowledge seeking interests and the motivation to preach Islam after completing pilgrimage and received religious knowledge. There were mostly religious persons and clerics. Whilst the second were ordinary people motivated by the wish to perform hajj did not intend to pursue knowledge in Holy Lands. In addition to the second immigrant in the mid of the 1980<sup>th</sup> there was another type of Indonesian immigrants who came to Saudi for economic reasons.

since 1923 through the Aramco Company but it increasingly developed since World War II. In 1973-1974 Saudi Arabia's income rose dramatically, especially after the soaring oil prices during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Therefore Saudi Arabia, which was formerly known as dry and barren area later turned into a region filled with natural resources, especially oil, making the region increasingly attracted the attention of the outside world.

The emergence of the Arab countries as one of the new economic powers in the international community has made this area as one of the prospective international market in terms of commodity and services markets. Improved infrastructure and industrial development needs, providing training and education as well as rejuvenation of military equipment and defense invited many industrialized countries to seize competitive market and establish cooperation with the countries of the Middle East. Similarly, extraordinary income from the oil industry gave birth to newly rich businessmen in the Middle East which were then invested in the companies outside the Middle East region, particularly the United States and Europe. In addition to the need for foreign workers who worked in oil exploration companies and construction, Saudi Arabia also opens up great opportunities for domestic workers. Improved economy of the country have created a culture of people who do not want to take care of household affairs and relied on foreign workers. Domestic helpers and driver become one of the much-needed service in Saudi Arabia and Indonesian domestic workers filled this opportunities.<sup>25</sup>

In the mid-1980s the Indonesian government through the Minister of Labors, Retired General Soedomo, began to send Indonesian women workers to the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia.<sup>26</sup> Indonesia had been experiencing rising unemployment and economic upheaval caused by the falling price of oil. It was expected that by sending more domestic workers to Saudi Arabia would generate foreign exchange and reduce unemployment. Since that time Indonesian domestic workers have overwhelmed Saudi Arabia. The following table shows the number of Indonesian workers abroad that are still dominated by unskilled workers.

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Hendrar Pramudyo, 9 February 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

**Table 1:** Indonesian Worker in Saudi 2005-2010

Year	Type	Skilled	Unskilled	Total
2005	Male	136.607	12.658	149.265
	Female	60.267	264.778	325.045
2006	Male	136.607	12.658	149.265
	Female	60.267	264.778	325.045
2007	Male	112.975	25.025	138.000
	Female	64.520	477.480	542.000
2008	Male	N.A	N.A	N.A
	Female	N.A	N.A	N.A
2009	Male	78.963	24.255	103.188
	Female	24.955	504.029	528.984
2010	Male	78.831	21.984	100.815
	Female	39.075	337.867	376.942

Source: The National Bureau for Placement and Protection of Indonesian Workers (BNP2TKI).

### The Images of Indonesia in Saudi Arabia

Indonesian immigrants who were mostly respected ulamas in the holy cities, now dominated by the housekeepers and immigrants who have brought social problems in Saudi Arabia. The former Minister of the Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, Maftuh Basuni used to say that in the past Indonesian *mukimin* were respected as the knowledge seekers but now most of them are workers who have no knowledge of anything. Even more, they not only have created problems for Saudi's government but also committed crimes as well as bothered the pilgrims from Indonesia.<sup>27</sup> It is sad to see the fact that many *mukimin* have conducted theft and disturbances to Indonesian pilgrims. Therefore, the issues of immigration violations, crimes and prostitution are often suspected to Indonesian migrants. Unfortunately, the increase of Indonesian students in Saudi Arabia from year to year has no impact on changing the negative images of Indonesia. Moreover, they are often found holding student permits but not use them properly, many of them even do not go to study learn at all.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Eramuslim.com*, 6 September 2006

<sup>28</sup> *Antara*, 12 December 2007

### *Housemaids and Drivers*

To analyze the Saudi perceptions of Indonesians, it is better to know how Indonesian citizens in Saudi Arabia feel about their daily interactions with Saudi citizens and how Saudis look at Indonesia. Most Saudis view that Indonesia has beautiful natures comparing to Saudi Arabia. Muḥammad Basnawī, a citizen of Saudi Arabia, described his impression of Indonesia as the largest Muslim country consists of many islands. However, Basnawī who is an entrepreneur and chairman of the Saudi Arabian Amateur Athletic Federation saw Indonesia often experience disasters and calamities. Furthermore, he expressed his impression about Indonesia.

Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world. Indonesia is also a very beautiful and green country, composed of islands and oceans. Unlike our country that is hot and arid. But you country is very often hit by disasters and calamities.<sup>29</sup>

The impression conveyed by Basnawī is the general view of educated Saudi people. He knows Indonesia based on information obtained during his visits to Indonesia and his contact with Indonesian businessmen. However, he also admitted that Indonesian domestic workers in Saudi Arabia live in miserable conditions and many are treated badly by their employers. According to Basnawī, educated and religious persons usually treat housemaids well but still the way of Saudis look Indonesian still low.<sup>30</sup> Saudis acknowledge that Indonesia is a beautiful country with polite people but overlook the quality of its population.<sup>31</sup> Abdullah Khaidir, a teacher at an Indonesian school of Riyadh stated:

In general, the Saudis only see positive towards Indonesia in terms of behavior or attitude that is friendly. As for the other sides, such as science and technology, politics, industry and security they tend to disregard us, although not too low.<sup>32</sup> Apparently, the impression of Indonesia relating to economic development, politics, science, technology and security still tend to be negative.

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<sup>29</sup> Interview, 4 February 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Asdi Noer, 6 February 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Hendri Soharjo, 9 February 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Abdullah Khaidir, 8 February 2011.

A respondent in Jeddah, Abdullah M. Umar, described his feeling during his daily contacts with Saudis in which tend to neglect Indonesian citizens. Indonesians are often represented as illegal immigrants, the perpetrators of witchcraft and disobediences against religion because they are eager to commit immoral acts and other legal violations.<sup>33</sup>

These conditions have brought great impacts on the perceptions and attitudes of Saudis toward overall Indonesian citizens in Saudi Arabia. In general Indonesian citizens are better known as the non formal working class and not as professional workforces. The majority of Arabs who have not known Indonesia except from their housemaids at home often see Indonesia as a poor country because it has sent their citizens abroad to work in Saudi as maids. It turned out that the numbers of Saudi Arabian citizens who only know about Indonesia from their maids are much more than those who know it well. According Djuwita Tanjung, an English lecturer at the King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudis rarely try to read news about Indonesia. They tend to generalize that Indonesian people are similar to their servants. As a woman who has many experiences interacting with Saudis she concludes that the Saudis' perception of Indonesia as stated below.

They look down on people Indonesia because most of them have maids from Indonesia. They generalize that all Indonesia people are as stupid as their maids at home.<sup>34</sup>

It is very hurting for the Indonesia citizens in Saudi Arabia to face reality in which most Saudis have ignored Indonesians. Often they judge an Indonesian man as a driver and a woman as merely a housemaid. Leon who has lived in Saudi for years also explained the same thing.<sup>35</sup> Kāmiluddīn al-Mumtāz, a student at the Faculty of Engineering King Saud University also added that most of the Saudis see Indonesians as domestic workers and easily treat their Indonesian maids in human because the Indonesian government does not have enough power to protect its citizens.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Interview, 5 February 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Interview, 6 February 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Interview, 8 February 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Interview, 8 February 2011.

The views and attitudes of some Saudis toward their maids and drivers have given influences on how they see Indonesia in general. Furthermore, domestic workers in Saudi are identical to slave. The feelings to be considered as lower class as represented by the slave-landlord relationship are not only perceived by Indonesian migrants in Saudi but are also acknowledged by the Saudi's community itself. For instance, an English-language Saudi newspaper, *Saudi Today*, raised the issue of "slavery in the modern age" and identified Indonesia as the largest contributor to this type of slavery.<sup>37</sup> In its article entitled "In the current slave trade, Indonesia the largest exporters" it clearly mentions that the sending of domestic female workers abroad is part of a slave trade. Indonesia is considered the largest exporter of slaves. This news seemed to provide a justification that the practice of slavery in Indonesia is somehow common whereas the government supports the "slavery" only for gaining state revenues.<sup>38</sup>

The loss of freedom is a hallmark of a domestic worker who is similar to the practices of slavery in the past. Households in Indonesia are the biggest users of "modern slavery" and the most dependent to the housemaid. The excess of labors in Indonesia has encouraged the government to send their female labors to other countries, including Saudi. The government has never tried to get them out of this "slavery practice." Instead, it has glorified the female domestic workers in Saudi as the heroes of foreign exchange. There are too many interests involved in this issue (labor agents, the government and landlords).<sup>16</sup> Ironically, the government of Indonesia have been reluctant to stop sending female workers. In contrast, the Kingdom immediately stops receiving domestic workers from Indonesia after getting harsh criticisms from public in Indonesia.<sup>39</sup> Finally, even though it is regarded too late, the Indonesian authority stops sending female workers after one Indonesian female worker were beheaded in Saudi, on 18 June 2011. According to Kāmiluddīn, an Indonesian student at King Saud University, the lower position of Indonesia have caused the

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<sup>37</sup> *Saudi Today*, 25 November 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Sulistiyowati Irianto, *Akses Keadilan dan Migrasi Global: Kisah Perempuan Indonesia Pekerja Domestik di Uni Emirat Arab* (Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2011), p. 16.

Saudis often treat Indonesian female labors badly as he expressed in the following statement.

Migrant workers in Saudi Arabia are assumed to be treated whatever they like. Saudis feel that when they hurt Indonesian workers, the government [Indonesia] has no power prevent it.<sup>40</sup>

It is undeniably that the abuses of Indonesian maids resulted bad injuries even deaths often occurs in Saudi Arabia. It is because the violent activities also often happen to Saudi's families. A research conducted at schools in Riyadh as reported by the Riyadh newspaper revealed that almost 85% of school children in Riyadh had experienced violence in their homes either by done their parents or siblings.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, absence of protection for domestic workers in Saudi Arabia then increasingly encourages employers to commit acts of violence to their housemaids.

Moreover, the prevailing religious traditions of Saudi Arabia consider a woman who travels alone abroad for economic purpose as a shameful woman. Culturally the existence of maids in Saudi Arabia is understood as a violation of the teachings of Islam for letting a woman without a legal companion (*mahram*) working abroad. Yet the presence of Indonesian women in Saudi is also part of religious violations and has hampered the image of Indonesia in Saudi. In everyday conversation, people of Saudi Arabia have often questioned the responsibilities of Indonesian men who permit his wives to work abroad.<sup>42</sup> Asdi Noer, a citizen of Indonesia said,

The government should take an immediate action to withdraw all female migrant workers from Saudi Arabia, and simply place male labor forces. Earning livelihood is basically he was responsible of man. Due to the nature of a woman who is so weak, she is regarded like items that can be used by anyone...<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Kamiluddin.

<sup>41</sup> *Ar-Riyadh*, 25 February 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with TKI Jeddah, 12 February 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Asdi Noer.

### *Saudi Newspapers Coverage*

There are two important Saudi Newspapers, *al-Sharq al-Awsat* and *Arabia Today*. Overall the images of Indonesians pictured by Saudis news are still negative. The negative news are usually exposed by Arabic language newspapers while the English version tend to be neutral in their coverage. The Arabic language newspaper is read by the majority of readers while the English-language media is usually read by a limited segment of readers who understand English and hold higher levels of education.

*Al-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper more often reports about Indonesia on issues relating to politics (47%), social culture, including education (34%) and economy (19%). *The Saudi Today* somewhat show different trends in composition of news about Indonesia's political news (19%), social culture, including education (53%) and economy (28%). The following table illustrates the composition of both newspapers.

**Table 2:** Classification of *al-Sharq al-Awsat* and *Arabia Today*. Based on News Types (Edition January-December 2010)

News Type	al-Sharq al-Awsat		Saudi Today	
	Number	%	Number	%
Economy	11	19%	24	28%
Politics	27	47%	17	19%
Social	16	28%	45	51%
Culture	2	3%	0	0%
Education	2	3%	2	2%
Number	58	100	88	100

Based on the above table, it shows that *al-Sharq al-Awsat* mostly report political issues in Indonesia whilst *The Saudi Today* gives much attention to social issues. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* with more readers in fact has contributed to give negative images about Indonesia through its political news whilst *Saudi Today* has kept balance in covering Indonesia. As majority of Saudis read the Arabic newspaper rather than English one, the perceptions of Indonesia are mostly negative. As a result of course it is conceivable that a majority of Saudi Arabia have not received objective news. After analyzing 58 news taken from *al-Sharq al-Awsat* during the period of January to December 2010 it reveals that this newspaper reported negative news worth as much as 30 articles (52%), positive news as many as 13 news (22%) and neutral news 15 news (26%). In contrast, *Saudi Today* provides a different

picture. Although its readers are more limited *Saudi Today* is more neutral and objective in reporting Indonesia. There are about 88 related news about Indonesia in 2010 and obtained a positive news story as much as 22 (25%), negative news as much as 12 news (14%) and news that is neutral as much as 54 news (61%). The following is a classification table based on the news tone in two newspapers in Saudi Arabia within the period January to December 2010.

**Table 3:** Classification of *al-Sharq al-Awsat* and *Arabia Today*. Based on Value / Tone of News (Edition January to December 2010)

News/Tone	al-Sharq al-Awsat		Saudi Today	
	Number	%	Number	%
Positive	13	22%	22	25%
Negative	30	52%	12	14%
Neutral	15	26%	54	61%
Number	58	100%	88	100%

What kind of news that contribute most to negative images of Indonesia in 2010? By analyzing the content of the Saudi's newspapers it is clear that political news featured by *al-Sharq al-Awsat* places the first position in covering negative side (56%), positive (7%) and neutral (37%). Since most political issues on Indonesian reported negatively so general Saudis view Indonesian politics in improper perceptions. Indonesian country is reported politically unstable whilst in contrast in the period of 2010 Indonesia has been getting praise from the international community relating to the political achievement and the democratization process. Instead *Saudi Today* that is read by more well-informed and educated readers revealed positive news in politics 53% and negative news as much as 30% and the remaining 17% is neutral. Nonetheless, political news of Saudi Today is still small comparing to social issues. The following table shows the political news that is dominated by negative issues as reported by *al-Sharq al-Awsat*.

**Table 4:** Classification of *al-Sharq al-Awsat* and *Arabia Today* on Politics. Based on Value/Tone of News (Edition January-December 2010)

Politics	al-Sharq al-Awsat		Saudi Today	
	Number	%	Number	%
Positive	2	7%	9	53%
Negative	15	56%	5	30%
Neutral	10	37%	3	17%
Number	27	100%	17	100%

What is usual negative political news reported by the newspaper? Most news that are accounts of negative tone in politics are issues relating to terrorism in Indonesia. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* in general reported various acts of violence and terrorism in Indonesia. The most often news which get the spotlight were the arrest of a Saudi Arabian citizen suspected of involvement in funding terrorism in Indonesia, although the court later freed him because it found no strong evidence. News about the political cooperation and foreign relations between the Arab countries in the Middle East is the second type of political coverage. However, the foreign relation's news, are mostly the political cooperation between Indonesia and other Arab countries, in particular Yemen, Qatar and United Arab Emirates but not Saudi Arabia. In addition, the issues of corruption in Indonesia become political news that deal with domestic politics. Of course the news tried to picture the practices of corruption, barberries, and collusions between authorities, businesses and political elites. To further exacerbate the image of Indonesia in Saudi Arabia. The following table indicates the coverage of political issues of two newspapers.

**Table 5:** Classification of Political Issues of *al-Sharq al-Awsat* and *Arabia Today* (Edition January-December 2010)

Politics	al-Sharq al-Awsat		Saudi Today	
	Number	%	Number	%
Terrorism	15	56%	4	24%
Cooperation	4	7%	1	5%
Domestic	10	37%	12	71%
Number	27	100%	17	100%

Furthermore, social issues only occupied small portion of coverage by *al-Sharq al-Awsat* but become the main news for *Saudi Today*. *Saudi Today* mainly reported natural disasters in Indonesia throughout 2010 ranging from earthquakes, tsunamis and volcano eruptions that occurred in Java and Sumatra. No wonder that the Saudis people get strong impressions about Indonesia as a country that most often obtain calamities and natural disasters. However, it is uncommon that social issues relating to the tortures and inhuman treatments experienced by Indonesian maids in Saudi Arabia during 2010 did not much reported by the Saudi's newspapers. In fact, the case of Sumiati, for instance, on 8 November 2011 gained most coverage from Indonesian media but not for Saudi's newspapers. Within period of

November and December each newspapers, *al-Sharq al-Aswat* and *Saudi Today* only reported the accidents three times. *Al-Sharq al-Amsat* even did not give details of the case but more highlighted the polemic between the Indonesian government and the agency workforce in Saudi Arabia. Indonesian concerns were more understood as the demand for better salary and treatment rather than detailing the issues of human rights violations done by some Saudis people. It seemed that there is gap between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia in approaching the case of Indonesian housemaids. For Saudis, many Indonesian housemaids who run away from their landlords are mainly perceived as the effort of Indonesian maids to gain highest salaries whilst for Indonesian government they are understood as the efforts to escape from Saudis tortures and inhumane treatments.<sup>44</sup> Instead of highlighting the tortures suffered by Sumiati, the Saudi newspaper tends to explore the role of Saudis in providing job opportunities for millions of Indonesians living in Saudi.

For instance, *al-Sharq al-Amsat* reported that 80% of Indonesian maids who run away from their employers are mainly motivated by greater income.<sup>45</sup> Of course, the news is in contrast to the fact that most Indonesian domestic workers complained about the unpaid salaries and other violence acts from their landlords. They tried to escape from inhuman treatments done by Saudi employers but sometimes they even face worse situations.

When she fled from the employer, on the streets she could be raped by the Arabs, Bangladesh, Indians, Pakistanis, Afghans, Philipinos and even Indonesians. And indeed this is very painful and degrading for Indonesian women and lowers the dignity of the entire Indonesian nation.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

Indonesia's position in the eyes of Saudi Arabia in the context of current foreign relations has not demonstrated a parallel position. The government of Saudi Arabia has not yet seen Indonesia as an important and equal partner. This issue occurred partly because of negative perceptions of Indonesia prevails in Saudi Arabia resulted

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<sup>44</sup> *Sharq al-Amsat*, 12 September 2010.

<sup>45</sup> *Sharq al-Amsat*, 19 January 2010.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Asdi Noer.

from the existence of Indonesian female domestic workers as well as negative coverage of Saudi newspapers. The major media in Arabic, *al-Sharq al-Awsat* shows more negative tones in its coverage about Indonesia whilst the English newspaper published in Saudi, *Saudi Today*, shows more objective and neutral. However, the influence of Saudi Arabia's English-language media is not yet strong due to its limited readers.

Attempts to improve the relationship between Indonesia Saudi Arabia can be done by lifting the image of Indonesia in Saudi Arabia, in particular by stopping sending unskilled labor to Saudi Arabia and replacing them with skilled ones. Through this approach it is hoped that the bargaining positions of Indonesia toward Saudi will increase. The role of Indonesia's diplomacy will not be meaningful if the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia still regards Indonesia as a country whose position is not equal. After all, the issue of Arab culture in looking at Indonesian female workers as a representation of the "slavery practice" must be addressed seriously.

Opportunities to enhance the role of diplomacy are still broadly open, especially in economics, culture and education. These opportunities should be further optimized by multiplying the promotion and dissemination of information on Indonesia in order to balance the negative political news which tends to disregard Indonesia. In general negative political issues that take the largest portion of the Saudi newspapers' coverage are become barriers for Indonesia in strengthening its political image both at home and abroad. However, the coverage by English newspaper in Saudi which has educated readers represented by the Saudi Today certainly offers a new hope for Indonesia to be understood in more objective ways that is for from stigma.

Last but not least, to fill the loss of Indonesian intellectual figures in Saudi, the Indonesian government should seriously empower the potential scholars. Indonesian scholarships should be distributed to children of *mukim* in order to explore the religious sciences and encourage them to dedicate themselves in pursuing religious knowledge in Saudis and become respected *ulama*s there. With their skills in Arabic language and culture, they are expected to interact with Saudis in more respectful ways. In addition, their ability in mastering current religious discourses in Saudi will enable them to be

acknowledged within Saudi religious circles that finally help improve the reputation of Indonesia in the Middle East and Islamic world. []

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