

Martin van Bruinessen, “Islam – nationalism – transnationalism:
Controversies around Islam Nusantara and NKRI Bersyariah”

Keynote lecture delivered at the conference
“Rethinking the Nation State of Indonesia”,
organised in honour of prof. Yasuko Kobayashi
by the Faculty of Foreign Studies, Nanzan University,
Nagoya, Japan, 17-18 March 2019.

Islam – Nationalism – Transnationalism:

Controversies around *Islam Nusantara* and *NKRI Bersyariah*

Martin van Bruinessen

Just over twenty years ago, Professor Yasuko Kobayashi organised a lecture tour for me in Japan; one of my lectures was published in Kyoto's *Southeast Asian Studies* (37, 1999, 158-175) as 'Global and local in Indonesian Islam'. Once again invited by Professor Kobayashi, for a seminar that has as its theme 'Rethinking the Nation State', I thought it might be a good idea to revisit that paper of twenty years ago and reflect on some of the developments of the post-Suharto era. There can be no doubt as to the importance of Islam in defining the Indonesian nation today; but what is the significance of the nation to Islam as it is practiced in Indonesia today?

Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama

The nation state represents a level of organisation between the local and the global. It has been the conspicuous activities of transnational Islamic movements in the post-Suharto era that made me more aware of the truly national character of Indonesia's large Muslim associations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama. Both had emerged in the colonial era as local associations, based in Yogyakarta and Surabaya, respectively, though the direct reasons for their establishment had to do with transnational developments. In the case of Muhammadiyah, this was the increase in Christian missionary activities, facilitated by conservative Dutch Indies government; in the case of NU, it was the conquest of Mecca and Medina by the Wahhabis, who destroyed graves considered as sacred and banned many traditional practices that were important to the traditionalists.

The mid-1920s were a brief period of active international engagement of Indonesian Muslims, in response to the abolition of the Caliphate by Mustafa Kemal in Turkey and the Saudi overthrow of Sharifian rule in the Hijaz. The All-Islam conferences despatched Indonesian representatives to the competing Caliphate conferences in Cairo and Mecca. But the time was not ripe yet for Muslim internationalism; the Caliphate conferences were disappointing events, which did not yield any lasting institutions. By the end of the decade, Indonesian Muslims had given up on efforts to revitalize the global umma, and focused once again on local or, increasingly, national issues. Sarekat Islam's internationalism gave way to Indonesian nationalism.

The division between reformists and traditionalists was sharpened by the developments in the Hijaz and kept Indonesia's Muslims divided for a decade. By the mid-1930s, however, Mahfudz Siddiq's *Taqlied dan Idjtihad* resolved the major contradiction and brought about an accommodation between NU and Muhammadiyah.

Yogyakarta's Muhammadiyah remained very much a local association, but branches were set up in other towns, each also with a strong local colouring. The Muhammadiyah of West Sumatra (and later that of Pekalongan, which has a large Minangkabau population) tended to be more 'puritan' and averse to Javanese culture than the very Javanese Yogyakarta branch. Similar differences in local culture could be observed in NU, which was a much more loosely organised association anyway. However, there were some processes at work in the direction of national integration of each of these associations, notably the organisation of national congresses, taking place in different localities.

Muhammadiyah was established in response to the then Dutch Indies policies favouring Christianisation, and the activities of Catholic and Protestant missionaries. Dahlan was aware of Egyptian reformist ideas; his successors were not (G. F. Pijper, *Studiën over de geschiedenis van de Islam in Indonesië 1900-1950*, Leiden: Brill, 1977, 105-7, citing Surkatti and Agus Salim). Muhammadiyah was from the beginning primarily a movement of social reform and only secondarily one of religious purification.

The periodical congresses that Muhammadiyah and NU held served the integration of the nation. Pijper writes: "I never received a deeper impression of the extent to which Muhammadiyah with its numerous local branches spanned all of Indonesia, than when I attended, during the Congress in Yogyakarta in 1931, the reception of all delegates from the farthest corners of Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Java, who, each in their own national dress and in their own language, pronounced their blessings of the congress ending with the well-known Islamic formula *as-salamu alaykum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuhu*." (109)

Muhammadiyah and NU became truly national during the New Order period. Their formal organization replicates that of the nation state; both have branches in all provinces and wherever there are large numbers of Indonesians abroad.

Sufi orders

By the turn of the 20th century, Sufi orders had a prominent presence in the Muslim landscape. Especially the Naqshbandiyya Khalidiyya and the Qadiriyya-wa-Naqshbandiyya commanded widespread networks of teachers and followers. Each of these networks covered a region of Sumatra or Java, and was connected with a centre in Mecca, where the most authoritative shaykh of the order resided. Indonesian shaykhs were usually succeeded by a son or close disciple, who was made a son-in-law; however, it was common for even these

successors to seek a new investiture at the hands of the supreme shaykh in Mecca. Each of these orders thus consisted of a set of regional networks with a centre in Mecca.

The Saudi conquest of Mecca put an end to many Sufi practices in that city; holy graves were razed, and the public performance of Sufi ritual was severely curtailed. As a result, the various regional networks in Indonesia lost their centralizing and co-ordinating Meccan connection, and along with it the periodical 'correction' of practices that had acquired increasingly local cultural colouring.

The rise of modern associations, moreover, tended to marginalize the Sufi orders. These associations offered many of the social services that Sufi orders had provided, and in a more rationalized form. Muhammadiyah and Persis criticized many of the rituals that Sufis engaged in and mocked the veneration of charismatic shaykhs; in NU, charismatic and traditional authority continued to be recognized, but none of the great leaders of NU in its first quarter century were themselves Sufi shaykhs.

By mid-century, however, we witness the emergence of formal associations incorporating Sufi orders. The first of these, PPTI, was initially a West Sumatra-based political party dominated by the Naqshbandiyya, which, in part thanks to Sukarno's patronage, succeeded in bringing a range of local tariqa networks under its umbrella. By the early 1960s, its membership spread across the main islands of the Archipelago. In the 1970s, another association, the Jam'iyya Ahl al-Tariqa al-Mu'tabara, came to overshadow it. Like PPTI, it was led by a politically astute Sufi shaykh who developed the association into a vehicle of state patronage. When he associated himself too closely with Golkar, however, and campaigned on its behalf in the 1977 elections, other politically minded operators engineered the defection of a large number of his associates. This resulted in the existence of two Sufi associations of similar names, JATMI (affiliated with Golkar) and JATMAN (associated with NU). Both had branches all over the country (and none abroad).

One highly charismatic shaykh who did not join either of these associations (although he had been affiliated with PPTI) was Abah Anom, whose TQN was by far the largest Sufi network, with numerous groups of followers all over the country, in all major cities, and among all social classes, including the highly educated. The TQN was coterminous with the Indonesian nation state: wherever there were Indonesian Muslims, one could find branches of the TQN. This included such places as Singapore; but the followers there were typically also Indonesians.

The underground Islamist opposition: Darul Islam

The alternative Indonesian state, Darul Islam, appeared to deny nationalism in favour of Islamic identity. The movement had a number of regional branches, each with their specific identities, combining local, ethnic identity with an orientation towards global Islam. However,

the Darul Islam did not appear to have contact with any of the global Islamic political movements (notably Ikhwan). It was a homegrown Islamist movement, with a homegrown ideology (Kartosuwiryo did not have good Arabic). Observers have wished to perceive regionalism and separatism in the DI rebellions. The motivations of leaders were mixed; in the case of Kahar Muzakkar and Daoed Beureu'eh, disappointment in not receiving coveted positions was part of them, and regional issues no doubt played a part in the mobilisation of support. But the movement explicitly identified itself with the Indonesian nation state, using Negara Islam Indonesia as its self-designation. After the physical suppression of the movement in the early 1960s, it continued an underground existence, and became active in regions where the DI had not existed before, such as Central and East Java.

The DI of South Sulawesi indirectly spawned the Hidayatullah movement, which in the 1980s spread out from East Kalimantan to other islands and now has a network almost literally from Sabang to Merauke.

From local to national: the 'santrinisiation' of the *abangan*

Judging by the outcome of the 1955 elections and the debates on the Jakarta Charter in the Constituent, less than half of Indonesia's Muslims identified with Muslim politics or wanted to see the Shariah endorsed by the state. We cannot conclude from those figures how many of them were actually carrying out the canonical obligations regularly, or how many adhered to the syncretistic beliefs and practices that since Geertz were known as *abangan* (*kejawen, kebatinan, kepercayaan*). These were moreover probably not mutually exclusive categories. It is safe to say, however, that by mid-century the *abangan* (and their equivalent beyond the Javanese society) constituted a significant percentage of the population – in the same order of magnitude as that of *santri* or more strictly practising Muslims. Politically, both the PNI and the PKI had their strongest support among those *abangan*.

One of the most remarkable developments of the New Order period (1966-1998) is the virtual disappearance of the *abangan*. Remarkable, because Suharto and many of his closest associates were themselves *abangan* and nurtured a deep suspicion of stricter Muslims.

But of course the vast majority of those killed in the anti-communist campaigns of 1965-66 were also *abangan*. Because of the commonly made association of Communism with atheism, many *abangan* sought to associate themselves formally with one of the recognized religions. Mass conversions to Christianity or Hinduism were reported from predominantly *abangan* regions, but the gradual adoption of *santri*-type practices was probably more pervasive (and some of the Hindu or Christian converts later reverted to Islam). At festivities, non-Muslim performances such as *ludruk* and *wayang* gradually gave way to collective readings of Mulud or Manaqib, or to the Orkes Melayu and then to entertaining sermons (*tabligh*). When I started my field research in West Java and East Java in the mid-1980s, I

found that in many villages that had previously known a variety of secular entertainments, the major social events were sermons and Mulud readings.

Slametan, the archetypical *abangan* ritual in Geertz' description, continued but there was a gradual shift in meaning. Reformists preferred to speak of *syukuran* and redefine it as a ritual of thanking God instead of propitiating spirits. This development was part of a broader shift from attention to local spirits and local beliefs towards an orientation towards a universal concept of God, not tied to a specific place. (Cf. Horton's theory of conversion in Africa, applied by Hefner to Islamisation in East Java.)

Urbanisation, universal education, and the teaching of scriptural Islam in the national curriculum, in a form compatible with Pancasila, all contributed to the spread of the five pillars of Islam. Radio and television contributed to the mediation of a national, non-fundamentalist Islam. The expansion of IAINs to all provinces, and employment of IAIN graduates as teachers, judges, bureaucrats, contributed to the institutionalisation of an Indonesian, national, Islam. In the 1990s, Suharto co-opted previously disaffected Muslim activists and incorporated them into a network of statist Islamic institutions: *Kompilasi Hukum Islam & Pengadilan Agama*, ICMI, Bank Muamalat, Republika.

The New Order's Islamic underground

The most important Islamic opposition throughout the New Order period was affiliated with DDII, which in orientation was also national but was a major channel of transnational connections. It was through groups and networks directly or indirectly affiliated with DDII that knowledge of and concern with major international issues of the Muslim world was cultivated: the Palestine issue, the Afghan jihad, the Iranian revolution (framed as the Shi'`i threat by media close to the DDII), the Bosnian civil war.

The most direct exposure to events and discourses in the Middle East was through study in Egypt or increasingly Saudi Arabia (the latter country distributed scholarships for study at Median Islamic University). Most students at the Azhar were NU-affiliated and returned with a strengthened and more learned attachment to the same religious and intellectual tradition of their environment; a minority became well acquainted with the ideas and practices of the Muslim Brotherhood. It was however especially Medina that was the hub of Muslim Brotherhood influences (during the 1970s and 1980s) and later, when the Brotherhood fell out of favour, puritan Salafi teachings. Returning, they set up semi-underground networks on campuses or non-campus mosques.

Another, smaller number of Indonesians – recruited among NII networks – travelled to Pakistan and received some exposure to the Afghan war, along with military training and ideological indoctrination. The best-known of these was the group led by Abdullah Sungkar

and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, which in the 1990s broke with their old NII comrades and established JI.

All of these movements were at least to some extent under the influence of authorities based outside Indonesia, and in that sense represented a departure from the trend towards the consolidation of a national Indonesian Islam.

Flourishing of transnational Islamic movements in the post-Suharto period

The period of transition from authoritarian rule to democracy allowed previously clandestine movements to come out into the open. The Muslim Brotherhood showed itself first as the student association KAMMI and then as the political party PK / PKS. A rival Islamist group, also campus-based, revealed itself to be the Indonesian chapter of the Hizb ut-Tahrir. Two networks of Salafis, aligned with ulama in the Gulf region (and one of them financed by a major Kuwaiti foundation) consolidated themselves and established their own schools. A third, more activist, Salafi network originally based in South Sulawesi, Wahdah Islamiyah, established well-organised branches in several cities in Java.

After a few years, there were increasing complaints from Muhammadiyah and NU that these transnational movements were infiltrating them and attempting to take over mosques and schools. In the case of Muhammadiyah, this concerned especially PKS; in that of NU mainly HTI. In most cases, it was not really infiltration from outside, but it was youth from Muhammadiyah or NU families who joined these transnational movements and were agents of change from within. This process took place on an even larger scale in the smaller associations Persis and especially Al Irsyad, many young men of which studied a few years in Medina or other places in the Arab world and returned as Salafis – or at least as more Salafi than earlier generations.

For about a decade it was as if 'national' Indonesian Islam was giving way to, or being taken over by, more dynamic internationally oriented movements affiliated with major transnational movements: the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Salafism, and the resurgent movement of traditionalist Hadrami sayyids; and for a small radical fringe, Al Qaeda or ISIS. What distinguished these movements from the established 'national' associations is that their leading authorities were outside the country and in most cases non-Indonesians and therefore not subject to Indonesian law and out of reach of law enforcement. This was most clearly so in the case of Hizb ut-Tahrir's Indonesian chapter (HTI), which explicitly denies the legitimacy of the nation state and its electoral politics. Of the Salafis, it was the group that styled itself as Laskar Jihad that showed its obedience to authorities abroad both in starting and giving up its involvement in the conflict in the Moluccas. All these movements adopted dress styles, facial hair, and vocabulary that self-consciously distanced themselves from regional and national Indonesian traditions.

The result was an acute perception of the Arabization of Indonesian Islam. Many Muslims belonging to the moderate mainstream, and even more so the non-Muslims, feared that moderation, interreligious tolerance, and the local colour of Muslim practices were giving way to an austere and aggressively fundamentalist variety of Islam that they associated with the Arab world and its conflicts. Nationalists feared that large sections of the Indonesian *umma* (Muslim community) were carried away by transnational concerns and rejected loyalty to the nation state (NKRI) and the national ideology Pancasila. Several surveys appeared to indicate that a high percentage of Muslims agreed with the discourse if not the methods of the more radical groups, leading to even graver concern among the 'moderates.'

Accommodation and response

Although it is too early to make a definitive assessment, there have been many indications that the transnational movements of the early 21st century will, like the puritan reform movements of a century ago, shed some of their radicalism and reach some form of accommodation with Indonesian cultural and political practices.

The spiritual leader of the PKS, Hilmi Aminuddin, announced that he took part in Mulud readings in his kampong (a tradition fiercely criticised by many puritan reformers). Following a period in which they dressed in 'Islamic' white and black, the party's members of parliament have taken to wearing batik again. (And especially in matters of corruption, the party very soon adapted itself to existing practices, disappointing those who had hoped it to be 'cleaner' and more idealistic than the establishment parties.)

The largest and most successful of the Salafi networks (in the literature often referred to by the name of their Kuwaiti sponsor, *Ihya al-Turath al-Islami*), initially distanced itself much from mainstream society, which it considered as sinful. However, it has gradually accommodated itself with the state and has become more open towards the surrounding society. Its madrasas teach the government curriculum for general (non-religious) subjects and provide diplomas that facilitate integration in wider society. They even have some joint activities with the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

The HTI, which in theory considers democracy and elections as un-Islamic and parliament as an illegitimate body, held several demonstrations in front of the parliament building, thereby implicitly legitimizing it; and in several elections it allowed its members to vote (in order to prevent an even more undesirable outcome). HTI became so deeply involved in Indonesian politics (though mainly in street politics), that the central organization had to discipline the Indonesian chapter and expelled the leading political activist from the organization.

Although the concept of the Unitary State of Republican Indonesia (NKRI) is incompatible with the Hizb's concept of a global caliphate, HTI refrained from stating this explicitly and flirted openly with the Indonesian military, inviting the army to intervene against the current secular government and help establish an Islamic state.

The somewhat quaint slogan 'NKRI BerSyariah' – i.e. an avowal of loyalty to the nation state on condition of its becoming an Islamic state, and denying the equal status on non-Muslim citizens – originated with the vigilante group FPI (Islamic Defenders Front) but appears to have a wider resonance. It is, as it were, shorthand for the appeal to a military-Islamist alliance. The FPI is, despite their activists' penchant for white, vaguely Gulf Arab dress styles, is not influenced by Salafism, and it is local rather than transnational in orientation, except to the extent that it is led by Hadrami sayyids and has occasionally expressed sympathy for international Muslim causes (including, briefly, Al Qaeda and ISIS).

It is true that these few signs of a desire to be part of the nation state are as yet very partial and inconsistent and give no reason to expect a more accommodating attitude towards non-Muslims on the part of the transnational movements.

It took Muhammadiyah and NU long to decide what attitude to take towards the transnational movements, in spite of the perception that these represented a real threat to their very existence. By 2015, when both had their periodical congresses, they had formulated responses: "Progressive Islam" (*Islam Berkemajuan*) and "Islam Nusantara", respectively. The meaning and implication of these slogans – we cannot yet speak of programs – are contested even in their own organizations, but they represent attempts to formulate Indonesian Islam and its modest and relatively tolerant traditions as valid expressions of the faith, which do not need to be purged and Arabized. Both concepts are essentially defensive in nature, formulated in response to the transnational movements' criticism of local practices. They do not easily lend themselves to aggressive proselytizing and reasserting the superiority of local ways, and therefore it is the radical transnational purifiers who continue to set the terms of the debate.

Conclusion

The close association of Islam and nation, which existed for most of the period of Indonesia's independence, has been seriously challenged during the past twenty years. Many of the dominant voices in public debate belonged to transnational Islamist movements, which have found it remarkably easy to be seen as legitimate. They successfully carried out a campaign of Islamisation of society, at the expense of religious minorities, and enabled by politicians who were not Islamist themselves but were afraid of being labelled as anti-Islam. Most ended up, however, making some concessions to the nation state.