The rising Islamism in Indonesia

With a population of 250 million people, Indonesia is currently the most populous majority-Muslim country in the world. The Indonesian government promotes an official state ideology based on monothelism, pluralism and secularism, but Islam is becoming increasingly visible in social, cultural and political life (Rinaldo 2008). The expansion of Islamic influence is evident in: the increasing number of mosques and the size of their congregations; the popularity of Islamic dress and veiling; the branding of goods as ‘Islamic’, and the use of Islamic symbols and language in the media and public places (Fealy & White 2008).

Today democratic forces compete with a plethora of conservative movements promoting traditional customary laws and religious sentiments, including at one extreme, a call for an Islamic state. However, it is simplistic to divide Muslims in Indonesia as being either “moderate/liberal” or “radical/extremist” (Ricklefs 2008). Even the pro-Islamising forces can be differentiated according to different dimensions such as their basic theology, their interpretation of that theology, their attitude towards other religions and their involvement in politics.

With one quarter of Indonesia’s population being between 20-34 years of age, the expansion of Islam can be seen as part of the dynamics of a rising youth bulge. In this study we examine the relationship between education and Islamisation.

Religiosity and education

The graph below show the predicted probability of wearing a jilbab, of reading religious texts frequently, and of being a member of a religious organisation, by highest education level and controlling for sex and age.

Data and measurement

2010 Greater Jakarta Transition to Adulthood Survey (GJTAS).

- Representative sample of young adults aged 20-34 (N=3,006) living in Jakarta, Tangerang and Bekasi.
- Face to face interviews collected a wide range of demographic and socio-economic information as well as numerous attitudinal measures.
- Analytical sample for this study = 2,689 respondents that were Muslim (89% of the sample).

Bivariate and multivariate (logistic and ordinal regression) analysis is used to examine levels and patterns of religiosity, political participation and attitudes.

Religiosity is a complex multi-dimensional concept that can be measured in many different ways. (McAndrew and Vocus 2011). In this study we examine four measures of religiosity: women wearing a jilbab, being a member of an Islamic religious organisation, frequency of reading religious texts, and self-assessed level of faith.

Interest and participation in politics is measured using several variables, including self-reported interest in politics, membership of political parties, and voting patterns during the 2009 election.

Religiosity: four different indicators

1. Wearing a veil (jilbab):
   26% of women reported wearing a jilbab, and 25% of married men reported that their wives were a jilbab. The probability of veiling was higher among women in their 30s and those with higher levels of education. There may be many motivations to veiling including for religious reasons, to gain respect at work, and to avoid sexual harassment. Several commentators have also highlighted the growing trend in the jilbab being seen as fashion statement, and as a status symbol.

2. Frequency of reading religious texts
   22% reported reading religious texts ‘frequently’, 64% ‘sometimes’ and 14% never. Women, those in their 30s and those with higher levels of education were more likely to read religious texts frequently.

3. Membership of Islamic religious organization
   16% of the sample were members of a religious organization. The majority of these were majelis taklim, which have been increasingly popular in recent years, particularly among women. Majelis taklim perform a range of activities including reciting and interpreting the Qu’ran. Women who were not in the labour force were more likely to be members of such organisations compared to their employed peers, presumably because they had more time to attend meetings.

4. Self-assessed religiosity
   Self-assessed religiosity was measured by a variable asking people to rate their level of faith on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1=not religious at all, and 5=very religious. The majority (65%) reported being in the middle of the scale with a score of 3. Only 2% said that they were not religious at all, and only 6% reported being ‘very religious’. Women were more likely to report higher levels of faith, as were those with higher levels of education.

Conclusion

Levels of religiosity, as measured by our four indicators, appear relatively low. However, there are differences by sex as well as socio-economic status. In particular some public symbols of religiosity, such as wearing a jilbab, are more common among those with higher levels of education. Over the course of the New Order regime, religion became an ever more intensive subject required in schools and university. It is therefore understandable that there is a strong link between education and religiosity, that persists to this day.

When it comes to the relationship between religion and politics there were only weak links. Although those who describe themselves as being more religious were also more likely to vote for an Islamist party, only a minority voted for such parties overall. In an analysis of the 2009 elections, Fealy (2009) noted that “the majority of Muslim voters appear not to regard Islam as critical to their electoral decisions, even though it may be important in their personal lives.” This sentiment appears to reflect the behaviour of our sample of young adults in Greater Jakarta.