

Measuring the Significance of Religious Political Parties and Pluralist Parties in the 1999 General Elections in Indonesia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is written while making no pretensions to offering a scientific account of the relation between politics and religion in Indonesia, but merely conveys an attempt to formulate a couple of reflective questions possibly arising as people talk about politics and religion and their relationship. An extensive and in-depth study is certainly required to analyze so complicated a theme as the relation between politics and religion particularly the one appearing in the form of religious political parties in Indonesia.

Apart from the above mentioned hindrance, this paper is a little bit restrained as well by the writer's wish to gain complete information on the final results of the Indonesia's general elections conducted on last June 7, 1999. This year's general election momentum truly constitutes the touchstone for the entire Indonesian society to create a characteristically more democratic state and nation. This endeavour is urgently needed for Indonesia after having sunk into the mud of a great political and economic crisis for approximately the last 30 years. This crisis revealed a fundamental problem concerning the credibility and authority of the national leader and thus lead to the May 1998 revolution which brought about President Suharto's descent from his presidential chair. The related ensuing political euphoria finally gave birth to the emergence of political parties amounting to more than 100 parties wherein 48 of them took part in this year's elections. In this case, it can be said that the 1999 elections bore some similarities to Indonesia's first elections in 1955 which were prominently characterized by factors such as:

- (a) multi-party phenomenon
- (b) equality in roles of state and society
- (c) political participation of parties strongly religious in character.

The main focus to be dealt with in this paper is how the religious parties play their role in colouring the political world at the national level and how religion will be played in the game of politics in the future. In connection with this idea, we need to pay close attention to and be observant of two matters, namely: how the religious parties behave in the June 7th general elections, and for that case we need as well a little bit of historical description of the role of religious parties and struggling efforts in the past. We will start with a small part of the historical background of religious parties.

a) Indonesia looks like an estuary of various seemingly irresistible international world influences. People say that Indonesia, among other things, has been for centuries a supermarket for various sorts of the world civilizations, religions and ideologies. Meanwhile, the ones which are the political bean sprouts of the nation of Indonesia consist of environments, or better say, circles of tribal life and religious life. Thus the present day political reality of Indonesia cannot be separated from the sprouts of this primordial reality i.e. tribal and religious community. This reality will always rise to the surface, especially when people are overwhelmed by crises. In such conditions, they will look for, find and return to their own original identity. It is truly in their own tribal and religious community circles that they gain the nourishment and attention they need in order to feel they are real human beings. In both social environments, they are appropriately respected, taken care of, and brought up, and this process has continuously gone on from generation to generation for centuries. That is why it can be easily understood how tribal and religious primordial bonds simultaneously create feelings of moral obligation, full pride and dignity among members of society. More about this matter will still be touched upon later in the paper.

b) What has taken place in this month's general elections reflects and gives a picture of the above mentioned case. A political observer, Lukman Sutrisno reveals the fact of the emergence of what are called 'parties of streams' which move on the basis of tribal and religious primordial grouping. The one which is at present ardently defending President Habibie's position is Sulawesi, specifically southern Sulawesi, Habibie's place of origin. Meanwhile, the Islamic parties (the *santris'* parties) are in stiff competition with the *abangan* circles viewed as materializing in Partai Demokrasi Indonesia (PDI) Perjuangan led by Megawati. According to the circulating rumor, more than half of the legislator candidates being put forward by PDI-Perjuangan come from the non-moslem circles, and are mostly non-Javanese. This arouses varied protests among the Moslem people in Indonesia who are considering that the fact is not pursuant to the composition of Moslem and Christian population being in the ratio of 9 to (9:1). Accordingly, the ratio of the Moslem to the Christian legislator candidates there should proportionally be 9 to 1 (9:1) too.

Then, in this year's electoral campaigns, the main figures of the Islamic parties wave banners illustrated with religious symbols, and it is said that, among others, the Moslem people are not allowed to give votes for the non-Moslem legislator candidates. They launch protests to PDI-Perjuangan against the recruitment of the non-Moslem legislator candidates. They are regarded as unrepresentative of the greatest number of votes of the Islamic circles in Indonesia. Long before this, there arose a large scale campaign to resist Megawati's Indonesian presidential candidacy. From the point of view of Islamic doctrines, on the one hand, a woman is not eligible for the position of the state's top leader. On the other hand, people are aware that as Soekarno's child, Megawati's devotion to Islam is a dubious one.

Struggling to cope with the problem of the relation between political parties and religious life at the level of real political experience has not so far been free from frustration. There are similarities here to the game of football. Despite millions of Indonesian people being crazy about it, Indonesia has never even once won the championship at the Asian level, let alone at the world level. Religion and football are the two matters Indonesian people are most fond of, but both create much frustration, and even worse, lead simply to traumatic experience. All sorts of ideology and religion are regarded as being already completely and perfectly true and right in themselves. However, in a similar way, problems such as the following repeatedly arise, and these questions are in urgent need of answer: why, in organizing its social life, the nation of Indonesia has seemingly always crashed into various failures; why equal justice, economic prosperity and people's welfare cannot be reached pursuant to the ideological and religious doctrines concerned; why the way we, the Indonesian people, have so far engaged in politics but have never been able to lead Indonesia to become a type of nation which is developed, stable and democratic; why the manner we, the Indonesian people, have so far engaged in religion, but have never been capable of bringing ourselves together into a unified happy Indonesian nation. What are the real troubles?

2. RELIGION AND POLITICS

Tentatively described, there are at least three types of alternatives as people talk about the relation of politics and religion in Indonesia. First, the alternative that does not separate religion from politics. Being engaged in religion and politics in this country is more inclined to be seen as a form of total unity, and this tendency thereby fulfills itself almost exactly – like an absolute and inevitable fateful destiny. This alternative offers a comfortable place for those who are obsessively and madly in love with the unified mixture of the two. Separating the two from each other is regarded with certainty as leading to the secular way. Second is the alternative that sepa-

rates religion from politics. This alternative, being regarded as secular by the first one, is firmly determined to choose only either one, i.e. religion or politics, and thus avoids any idea of mixing the two with each other. Third, the alternative that positions religion as a source of moral inspiration to organize political life. This last alternative leads a considerably large number of people, whose religious devotion is not a dubious one, deliberately not to choose religious parties as their homebase, but to prefer to choose other parties which are probably more 'secular' (in quotation-marks) or other parties called pluralist parties which deliberately choose pluralism as their platform. Among the three different alternatives or positions, the truth is still in need of historical validation. However, looking at our present condition we may come to a conclusion: this nation's love for football has not yet enabled them to become champions; likewise, their love for religion has not yet enabled them to be capable of either building a political life which is democratic, or of improving the welfare of society.

As explained above, and as exemplified by Indonesian society, religion occupies the centre of their life. There is no doubt that we live in the midst of a religious society. The real implication for the political life is that within a certain limited border there should be a political acknowledgement of religion. Separating religion from politics will be regarded as absurd, since, on the one hand, it could be interpreted as a sign of being disrespectful to religion, and, on the other hand, it is impractical especially within the framework of gaining political supports from the mass. Although there have been cases of 'secular' parties in Indonesia, which, among others, took the form of socialist/communist parties, (the oldest political party institutions in South East Asia), people nevertheless cannot seem to engage in politics without involving religion.

It is truly a historical fact in this country that any person who wishes to engage in politics requires religious legitimisation and justification. It is also a fact that there is as yet no substitute for religion when it comes to legitimizing anything significant. Significant decisions dealing with the broad scope of many people's needs in life should be religiously legitimized, otherwise, the decision will lose its significance. Therefore, within the context of the life of such a society, religion is truly badly needed as powerful legitimization for all decisions, whether characteristically political or any other kind of decision.

From the above description, it can be concluded that, at least tentatively, one of the roles played by religion in the political domain is to establish the feeling or mood of being secure and being right, or to ascertain that a certain choice or political decision has been made correctly. In this case, we can talk about the feeling or mood of being secure and being right within

the life of groups of the same region of origin or groups of the same ethnic background, or groups bonded or tied together by religious primordialism. In such a situation, however, it is not infrequently that problems arise which are quite difficult to cope with. The feeling or mood of being secure and being right as established by a certain ethnic and religious community very often has to come face to face with similar but opposite ones build up by other communities. So, feelings of distrust among the different communities who, while living together yet remaining unfamiliar with each other, may produce vicious-circle types of political conflicts which are difficult to find the most appropriate ways to cope with. In such a situation, it is not advantageous or easy for them to be critical of their own tribal and religious community of origin. Political parties of streams which are rooted in primordialism will be inclined to belong to political groupings which are characteristically closed, and still worse, absolute. Indonesian political life at the present stage or phase is much influenced by ethnically and religiously primordial conceptual orientation, and is seemingly still not yet capable of creating intergroup relations which are open in character and thus capable of producing a kind of mutually trusting relations among social groups of different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Here is an example as an illustration: once, during the period for the process of socialization of PAN (National Mandate Party) led by its general chairman Amin Rais in Surabaya in early April 1999, there was an interesting dialogue between Amin Rais and a participant. Among the Chinese business people there arose an honest and direct question. The following question was addressed to Amin Rais: 'How can I trust you'. This is an honest question but hard to answer. After launching a few smiles Amin gave a similarly direct and honest answer: "I am quite aware of the background of the question. That question is truly also my question addressed to you and to every body else. Won't we build a kind of mutual trust? Such a matter, i.e. trust, is the product of a process; and mutual trust is a step in which our legs should be swung together", thus Amin Rais gave his approximate answer.

In such an answer, there is implied the political position chosen by Amin Rais as a leader of a pluralist party that makes public an idea of constructing a new political platform for the varied ethnic and religious groups. The relationship between religion and politics is not negated or denied but transformed into a moral one. A political decision is not justified on the basis of similar religious beliefs but on the basis of similar religious morality.

"Mutual trust" as aspired to by a pluralist party is not founded on the similarity of religious dogmas or doctrines, but on the religious moral commitment to a political decision. In this kind of relation, politics is not based

on religious symbols but on the universal human values as conveyed by religion, acceptable to all. In such a position, religion is not separated from politics, but both are connected by a bridge of morality. The interests of religious communities and tribal communities should not be each polarized and then played off one against the other.

3. RELIGIOUS PARTIES

There are several factors which give rise to the emergence of religious parties. First, religion itself has its own theological supports to reach the ideals which are constructed on the basis of the religious thoughts in which they believe. Second, political ties among members make religion a binding-factor to support the leader of the religious community. The religious people feel more free and comfortable if they have a political leader born in their own community, but lose trust whenever politics is dominated by other religious groups. In this case, there is a type of religious sentiment that cannot trust different religious people or people regarded as embracing no religion or the secular people.

One problem which frequently surfaces deals with the two main streams of thought as represented by Islam and Christian circles. Islam has the opinion that religion and state are one and unseparated, while Christianity tends to have the opinion that, based on the religious and political experience of the West, religion and politics or state should be separated. Colonial history plays its part as well to determine the nuance of difference between the two. The Islam circles since the beginning of the 20th century feel threatened by three enemies arising from three sides, namely, colonialism which is regarded as a manifestation of the interests of Christian Politics; socialist ideology as spread by Henk Sneevliet; and the Western-educated nationalists frequently called 'secular nationalists'. From the real political forces there is created a political compromise in the form of 'modus vivendi' – Pancasila. However, that fact does not lessen the ideological aspiration of Islam struggling continuously to build the Indonesian state on the principles of Islam.

From the experience of the third world, it is acknowledged that religion is more than ritual preoccupation. Religion plays an important political role in the creation of a society which is secure, developed and prosperously enjoying welfare. That is why in many cases it can be seen that there is a great effort to construct a political ideology founded on certain religious faith. The emergence of religious political parties since the period of national movement, like the various fragments of Sarikat Islam, is, I think, a sign of the existence of great and serious efforts to build religious consciousness that is combined with the consciousness on political tasks and engagement. We know that Haji Agus Salim is the one who laid the cornerstone of Islamic ideology in Indonesia, an ideology that arouses aspirations for and demands

the creation of Islamic parties accompanied by a work programme and a workplan which is characteristically Islamic. Here, what I mean is that there is a religious party which is not merely making recruitment of certain religious masses (Islamic people) its goal, but which also wishes to build society on an Islamic foundation and ideology. What happens is not merely limited to the parties being legitimized by the support of the verses taken from the holy book Al Qur'an, but it is also made complete by the presence of ulama and religious leaders at the party level. The goal is often clear i.e. to create an Islamic state.

Likewise, in non-moslem circles, especially Protestant and the Roman Catholic, similar characteristics also appear. The creation of Protestant and Catholic parties is not merely intended to recruit the Christian people in Indonesia, but also to struggle for their unique and special interests on the basis of a characteristically religious morality and on the basis of characteristically religious intention. Therefore, at the present phase of social life, religious parties in Indonesia still remains exclusive. This is due to the fact that the level of life of Indonesian society cannot be higher than the present conditions permit. Politics in such a societal context is adjusted to the people's needs by those who like to advance on the political stage. They are still of the idea that primordial homogeneity will make it easier to meet the needs of their own group or community.

In the post-new order era of reformation, 3 parties have blossomed into 48 parties. This phenomenon is not merely an expression of political euphoria, but more than that, it has a strong foundation in the society's life. Among 48 parties, there are a considerable number of parties, directly or indirectly, related to certain religions. Take an example, Partai Krisna (National Christian Party) and PDKB (Nation Love Democratic Party), both of whom rely for their mass recruitment on areas which are called Christian pockets, both in Java and especially outside Java in places such as Ambon, Irian Jaya, East Nusa Tenggara, North Sulawesi, North Tapanuli, etc. The party organizers and caretakers in charge of various tasks and jobs are recruited from those living in the areas concerned.

4. PLURALIST PARTIES

The emergence of pluralist parties reflects a response or perhaps correction to the religious parties that are vulnerable to all kinds of political manipulation. The party's homogeneity is inclined to be easily engineered by the political elite, and inclined to be free from control mechanisms and from the self-criticism that is essential to the effort to avoid monolithic political culture. If religion merely plays the role of a political party, it will be cut into pieces, not only due to the varied interpretation of it but also due to the interests of the political elite in the religion concerned who are fighting for

power. When religion is personified into the elite of the party and is reduced simply into ideology, religious totality and the union of its followers will be threatened and degraded. In this connection, it will be quite difficult for religion to play its role as the peace-maker, the religious elite can no longer move freely to do political reconciliation because they themselves get involved in fighting for sectional interests among the internal groups of the same religion. Conflicts of political interests will be transformed into religious conflicts. Such conflicts will decrease the credibility of religion for the people and for society.

Personification and representation of religion in political parties will in the end result in religion falling into the trap of power games in parallel to the logic of power concerned. This will truly result in the failure of religion to be capable of acting as a control mechanism because religion as an institution loses its healthy distance from the power and from the application of power in daily life. Power distance is simultaneously moral distance. As far as it is concerned with efforts to build morality in politics, religion should offer strong and tough moral inspiration, not the other way round, i.e. Where religion is merely used as a political vehicle. A politician (both secular and religious) may say that “everything is politics”, but religious expert might say that “politics is not everything”. Religion cannot be reduced to merely a constituent of politics, or still worse, a political accessory. Politicizing religion is basically subordinating it to the interests of power. There is another matter that is not merely politics or power. There is another matter beyond politics.

Compared to a stream, politicizing and ideologizing religion is like playing in the upper reaches of a stream. A small mistake will result in the water becoming turbid and contaminated for all those downstream. This in turn will make the stream users contaminated too. Looking for religious moral inspiration in doing politics is like playing downstream, far below the source. So, even though there is a mistake, it will not destroy the water source of the whole stream. The remainder of the stream can still be saved, and the stream users can continuously take the water safely according to each user’s need.

Religious ideologization and politicization is too deep an intervention in the upper reaches of the stream. It will make the water source turbid and this in turn will cause troubles for those whose life relies on the stream water. Expressing political commitment through religion in the form of religious parties threatens religion with the burden of political contamination. Religious parties carry religious dogmas or doctrines into their politics. In contrast to the position of religious parties with their religious dogmas, pluralist parties engage in religious praxis in the form of relying on moral com-

mitment in and to the day-to-day political life. Pluralist parties does not carry the whole religious dogma and doctrines over into the life of the party, but they transform the religious message they have got into political morality.

Pluralist parties make no pretensions to representing religion in the world of politics, but are merely preoccupied with efforts to read and catch the religious message and to apply religious moral values in politics. Pluralist parties do not act in representation of any religion or religious belief in politics. Therefore, pluralist parties do not play the political games in an absolute manner. Religious mandates in politics are accepted as an effort to uphold religious morality in political life. Politics remain open and “negotiable” in character. And that is one of the essences of politics in real life. That is the fundamental difference between the starting points and performance of a religious and a pluralist parties. In short, in the name of religion, religious parties do everything for the sake of fulfilling their own political interests, while in the name of religious morality, pluralist parties do their best to create a healthy and credible political life.

5. CLOSING REMARKS

Being observant of political movements having taken place since the era of protonationalism in the whole area of Indonesia from Aceh, Tapanuli, Kalimantan, Java, Sulawesi up to Ambon in early 19th century, it is found that for the Indonesian people religion has been “the most intimate friend in their struggle for freedom from the bondage of colonialism. Likewise, in early part of the 20th century when the modern national movement was born, religion proved itself as a friend in need, the closest friend indeed. Even until now religion remains an unchangeable chaperon for this nation to enter into a societal life which is just and fair, prosperous and filled with welfare. Denial of the role of religion in politics is the same as the denial of the historical roots and existence of this nation.

After successively undergoing great turbulence and upheavals for nearly two centuries, the most crucial question worth raising for the Indonesian people is: how to find a new format for the relationship between religion and politics in this country. Especially in the era of reformation, in this uncertain period on the verge of the 3rd millennium, a new format to create an appropriate relationship between religion and politics is badly needed in order that on the one hand religion is not put aside, and on the other hand political life could be truly constructed to bring prosperity and well-being to society. If the alternatives are between the politicization of religion and the moralization of politics, the second alternative is seemingly more promising. The creation of Pluralist parties in order to apply political morality on the basis of religious values is seemingly significant as well. At this crossing-

point, on the one hand, the world of politics may free itself from its role as an arena for fighting between different religious beliefs, and on the other hand, universal religious morality can really function as a driving force for the creation of a society which is emancipatory and democratic.