

# **IDSS SEMINAR NOTES**

## **IDSS Seminar on The Conservative Turn in Indonesia: Politics and Education**

**Guest Speaker: Professor Robert Hefner\***

*Professor of Anthropology, Boston University*

**24 July 2006, Monday**

**2.00-4.00pm**

### ***Introduction***

Professor Robert Hefner began by emphasising the important role of education, in particular the Islamic education, which was affecting politics and social life of the Indonesian society. There was always the subtle relationship between politics and Islamic education in Indonesia. Hence this was the reason for the choice of the topic.

Notwithstanding the criticism against Indonesian transitional democracy, Indonesia should be credited as the largest democracy in the Muslim world. However, this had not been widely recognised except by Iran. Khatami, the former President of Iran, in his Look East Policy, saw Iran as an important lesson for democratisation in Muslim countries.

Like any democratisation movement, Indonesian intellectuals had played an important role in the democratic transition of the country where the strong link between the intellect and the mass had contributed significantly.

On the development of democracy in Indonesia, Hefner viewed the country's achievement in implementing democratic election since the fall of Suharto as impressive. What struck him most about it was the voters' behaviour. The results showed that Indonesian voters were strikingly moderate. They offered little support to sectarianism, ethno-religious politics and Islamist's parties. Overall, only two percents of the vote went to the Islamists despite the wave of Islamic resurgence and the increase in religiosity which the Indonesian society was experiencing. The situation in Indonesia bore similarity with the situation in Turkey. The press as an important institution of democracy showed vigour and possessed great journalistic community, capable of balancing between popular appeal and serious discourse. Even the Islamic education in his analysis contributed significantly in the development of the democracy. The Islamic education system in Indonesia was not monolithic and was the most diverse in the Muslim world.

Despite Indonesia's success in democratisation, it had its downside. The opening up of political space had witnessed the outbreak of terrorism, paramilitary movements and sectarian violence among others. This however, was not unusual in a country that was in transition from authoritarianism to democracy. As an intense minority group in the fringes, they have caused problems in society and this have caused great disservice to their agenda. Instead of getting more support, they were marginalizing themselves.

What was more worrying in the current political climate was the exploitation of undemocratic elements amongst Muslims or non-Muslims of the democratic process.

Hefner referred to the increase of laskarisation or paramilitarisation of ordinary politics. The coercive politics employed by these elements had evolved beyond ethno-religious issues. It now covered day-to-day issues such as the recent anti-pornography movement. An example of these elements that Hefner mentioned was the emergence of Front Pembela Islam (FPI). Like other Indonesian moderate Muslims, Jaringan Islam Liberal (Liberal Islam Network - JIL), another fringe group, was concerned with this development. JIL itself did not enjoy broad support and was widely disliked by the mainstream. It was not the centre of democratic movement in Indonesia.

The reason to worry was because, in reality, politics was not always about the majority. In democracy, minority groups did influence politics through strategic actions and would make a difference.

This became more important when one looked at the level of resilience the groups had proven so far against the authoritarianism of the previous Suharto regime. During such period, the groups developed networks, became decentralised and operated informally and secretly. The post-Suharto period on the other hand, showed that the groups emerged as victors. From the Social Movement Theory, the groups had achieved a great success. However, they had not been able to translate the achievement into electoral success yet. One of the factors that contributed to the proliferation of these groups today was the weakening of the state, which benefited them. As some of the issues that the groups take up were religious in nature, the mainstream Muslims who were traditionally conservative were reluctant to come down hard or criticize them openly, a phenomenon which Hefner termed as epistemological deference. The image of the previous authoritarian secularist regime often played to the advantage of the groups and contributed to their effectiveness.

In the long term, this development could undercut the great achievements made so far, if it were to continue unchecked.

### *Discussion/Q&A*

- **The impact of events outside Indonesia on local politics**

Events outside Indonesia such as war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the recent Israel's attack on Lebanon did not have an enormous impact on local politics but they were significant because they provided the intense minority groups with political oxygen.

- **The implementation of syariah movement**

The movement was non-radical but certainly conservative with a cosmopolitan character that offered a variety of views. From the historical point of view, it was an attempt to fulfil a long-held aspiration. In this regard, Hefner was of the view that there was no need to fear the syariah. It was essentially a point of reference for Muslims and thus, was important and could not be simply dismissed by outsiders. Although the support towards implementation of some aspects of the syariah was impressive, it was important also to note that there was considerable depth of disagreement which was significant with regards to the interpretation of syariah. All along the support for the syariah was towards its general interpretation and not the detailed discussion known amongst scholars. This was partly due to the epistemological deference of the society. The issue therefore, had nothing to do with the syariah per se but its interpretation. It was also equally important, not to forget that Indonesia had a strong tradition of moderation and plurality.

- **Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS)**

The speaker expressed his disagreement towards a survey of an Indonesian organisation, which points out the drop of public support towards PKS. Hefner was of the view that the drop was temporary reflecting general frustration of the current condition. PKS would remain successful and could garner in Hefner's estimation, the maximum of 20% of the popular votes.

- **The role of celebrity ulama**

They were popular but not politically significant. Most of them did not appeal to the masses as they only targetted special segment of the community. Although the majority of them avoid political issue and were careful not to contradict pro-syariah movement, it was not correct however to say that they were apolitical or did not have political agenda. In fact, they followed political development closely.

- **Collaboration between the power elites and the intense minority groups**

The collaboration existed but did not involve all groups. Hizbut Tahrir and Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia were not favoured by the power elites. One group that had a strong collaboration with the power elites was FPI. However this was very much restricted to Jakarta only. Many regional power elites were frustrated by the central government tolerance towards FPI.

### **Conclusion**

Hefner ended his talk with an optimistic view of the Indonesian democratic transition process. Few lessons that could be learned were the intense minority group would occur in other part of the Muslim world if democratisation took place. The notion of one man, one vote, at one time was distressing because democracy was inherently embedded in all human civilisations. It was not a creation of modern civilisation. Like any conservative society, the pro-syariah movement must be viewed as an attempt of a society to live based on principles that they believed in.

Recorded by:  
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*Robert W. Hefner is Professor of Anthropology, Associate Director of the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs at Boston University, where he directs the program on Islam and civil society. Professor Hefner has carried out research on religion and politics in Southeast Asia for the past twenty-eight years, and has conducted comparative research on Muslim culture and politics since the late-1980s. He is currently directing a project for the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs on "Madrasas, Modernity, and the Future of Muslim Higher Education." Earlier, he directed a multi-country, collaborative project on "Civil Democratic Islam," also for the Pew Charitable Trusts, focusing on prospects and policies for civic pluralism and democracy in the Muslim world. During 1998-2001, Professor Hefner directed a collaborative project for the Ford Foundation on "Southeast Asian Pluralisms: Social Resources for Civility and Participation in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia." He has served as consultant on Muslim and Southeast Asian for government and no-governmental organizations, and is the invited editor for the sixth volume of the forthcoming New Cambridge History of Islam, Muslims and Modernity: Society and Culture since 1800. Professor Hefner has published more than a dozen books, as well as several major policy reports. His most recent published works are Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratisation in Indonesia (Princeton 2000) and, as editor, Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism,*

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*Contestation, Democratisation (Princeton 2005). Other recent books include, as editor, The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia (Hawaii 2001), Democratic Civility: The History*