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LOW PROFILE OF ISLAMIST POLITICS IN INDONESIA: EXPLAINING THE 'DEMOGRAPHIC PARADOX'

Abstract

Although Indonesia constitutes the largest Muslim majority country, Islam-based politics remains at a low profile since its independence. This presents a 'demographic paradox' vis-à-vis the conservative interpretation of Islamic ideology as one and uniform in nature for power politics as evident in a number of Muslim countries. This article mainly seeks to explain as to why this is the case. While highlighting the reasons, this article finds that the pluralist nature of the Indonesian society and strong syncretic formation of Islam have influenced the Indonesian government to adopt religious neutral ideology, *Pancasila*. This was reinforced by two authoritarian regimes of Sukarno and Suharto for about four decades, who subordinated the public role of Islam. Although, the fall of Suharto saw the trend of conservative Islamist agenda often expressed in the rise of Islamic piety and violence against the Western interests through extremism and terrorism, this did not reflect in the voting behaviour in subsequent general elections. The popular appeal of Islamist parties has remained confined to a small minority of the vast majority of Muslim population. The post-Suharto governments of Indonesia have also shown firm commitment to promote secular ideals and domesticate the role of Islamists. This puzzle underlines the thesis that Islam is not a monolith and at the same time ideological characterisation by the orientalist and neo-orientalist school of thought ignores many realities especially in the case of Indonesia.

1. Introduction

Contemporary rise of Islamism in a number of Muslim countries involves an intense debate as to why Islamic profile is apparent or prominent in those countries. The orientalists and neo-orientalists, suggest that Islam is inherently linked to 'power and politics' and is opposed to modernity. The general contention of this ideology is that Islam does not allow the separation of religion from politics and is intolerant to other beliefs and minorities. At the same time, the other school of thought, often known as post-colonial studies, emphasises the local issues and circumstances that have prompted the Islamic profile, i.e., the context is instrumental in those Muslim countries. According to some scholars, Islam is a mosaic rather than a monolith and that the Islamic revival can better be understood as a response to local issues and challenges facing Muslim communities. In short, context is critical.[1] For example, in Malaysia, the ethnic rivalry

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[1] This debate is available in Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; "Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All", London: The Runnymede

between the local Muslim Malays and non-Malays associated with the corruption and cronyism as a result of liberal economic policies pursued by the government to improve the conditions of local Malays have contributed to the formation of Islamic identity and agenda in that country.[2] However, none of these schools of thoughts are applicable to the Indonesian case. This presents a puzzle.

Given this backdrop, the main objective of this article is to seek an explanation as to why this is the case. In doing so, it will try to find answers to the following questions:

- What is the trend of Islamist politics in Indonesia in its contemporary political history?
- What led to the low profile of Islam?
- Is it characteristic of other Muslim countries?
- What is the relevance of conservative ideological dimension of Islam in the Indonesian case?

In doing so, this article is organised into six sections. Following introduction, section two gives an overview of the Islamist profile in Indonesia. In that context, this section also identifies the trend of marginal role of Islam in public life. Section three provides an explanation behind the rise of Islamic piety and extremism in the post-Suharto period. Section four highlights that the Islamic piety has little connection with the Islamist politics. Section five attempts to explain the key reasons behind the low profile of Islam and section six concludes the article.

2. An Overview of Islamist Politics in Indonesia: Low Islamic Profile

Indonesia is the largest Muslim country with 248 million people of which 86.1 per cent belong to Islam.[3] The number of Muslim population suggests that Islam would be a determinative factor for Indonesian politics. However, the review of Indonesian contemporary history presents a different story. The Islamic profile has not perceptibly been pronounced in institutions of polity compared to other Muslim countries. The impact of Islam on politics and the state has remained insignificant in relations to the statistical and numerical majority of the Muslim population. The Islamist groups have largely failed in its effort to Islamise Indonesia. Their electoral

Trust, 1997, available at http://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/islamophobia.pdf, accessed on 10 February 2012; Shamsul Khan, "Islamic Fundamentalism in the Asia-Pacific Region: Failures of Civil Societies or Backlash Against the US Hegemony?" in Purendra Jain, Felix Patrikeeff and Gerry Groot (eds.), *Asia-Pacific and A New International Order: Responses and Options,* New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2006, pp. 71-88.

[2] Barry Wain, *Malaysian Maverick: Mahathir Mohammad in Turbulent Times,* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

[3] Among the population, the Muslim constitutes 86.1%, the Protestant 5.7%, the Roman Catholic 3%, the Hindu 1.8%, the other or unspecified 3.4% (2000 census). See "The CIA World Factbook 2012", available at https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/id.html, accessed on 11 March 2013.

performance remained confined between 10 to 44 per cent in the general elections.[4] This is clearly an indication of a "demographic paradox" in the Indonesian context.[5]

Since independence in 1945, Indonesia followed secularism in the state policy and strictly limited the role of religion in state affairs. However, Indonesia has always been under pressure from some Islamist groups to go along traditional Islamist agenda including the establishment of an Islamic state with *sharia* as the basis of the rule of law.[6] Indonesia always saw tendencies of orthodox Muslim movements often expressed in violent demonstrations either against the "infidels" or in an effort to establish an Islamic state.[7] This is evident both in the colonial and post independence periods of Indonesian history. In the colonial period, the more radical form of Islamist movements included the *Padri* movement in Sumatra in 1820s and 1830s by Islamist clerics who returned from Makkah and influenced by *Wahhabi* teachings and made an effort to introduce puritanical Islam in the form of *Wahhbism* in Indonesia. There were also some organised and sporadic Muslim radical movements armed with *jihadi* ideology to liberate Muslim lands from the occupation of the infidels.[8]

After independence, Indonesia faced similar movement in the name of *Darul Islam* (1949-62) which espoused armed rebellion against the secular government and in favour of establishing an Islamic state. The movement aimed at introducing *sharia* law and establishing Islamic values in the state and polity with "the Javanese ideal of the Just King who would bring in a reign of justice." The *Darul Islam* later adopted violence as a means to achieve their objectives and clashed with the government forces. However, in the face of government repression, the organisation failed to gain broad-based support among the Indonesian people and ceased to exist after it was banned. Its prominent leaders were also captured in 1962.[9] Similar measures were

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[4] Greg Fealy, Virginia Hooker and Sally White, "Indonesia", in Greg Fealy and Virginia Hooker (eds.), *Voices of Islam in Southeast Asia: A Contemporary Sourcebook*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006, pp. 39-50.
[5] Mirza T. Kusuma, "Pancasila: Indonesia's Magna Charta", *The Jakarta Post,* 10 June 2010, available at http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2006/06/20/pancasila-indonesia039s-magna-charta.html, accessed on 20 March 2013.
[6] Maria Pakpahan, "Pancasila Ideology Revisited", 01 June 2010, available at http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/06/02/pancasila-ideology-revisited.html, accessed on 20 March 2013.
[7] Angel M. Rabasa, "Radical Islamist Ideologies in Southeast Asia", in Hillel Fradkin, Husain Haqqani and Eric Brown (eds.), *Current Trends in Islamist Ideologies,* Vol. 1, Washington: Hudson Institute Publications, 2005, pp. 27-38.
[8] The major struggles were organised with Islam as the rallying ground for discontent against the colonial Dutch rule. One of them is the Deponegoro's Revolt against the Dutch in 1825. Deponegoro, a prince and a royal family based in Jogykarta in Java, proclaimed *jihad* to drive the Dutch out of Java, resulted in the Java War (1825-30) that claimed about 15,000 Dutch and 200,000 Javanese lives. The Padri War lasted for 16 years (1821-1837) in West Sumatra with similar motivation. The other bloodiest encounter is the Ajtech War (1872-1908), raging in Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, the Celebes and other islands. It is also known as the longest, costliest and biggest war in Dutch colonial history. In early 20th century, Sarekat Islam was formed in 1912 as a mass nationalist movement with Islam as the basis of solidarity. By 1919, membership of this movement increased to 2.5 million. See Dong S. Choi, "The Process of Islamization and its Impact on Indonesia", *Comparative Civilization Review,* Vol. 34, Spring, 1996, pp. 11-26.
[9] Angel Rabasa, 2005, *op.cit*., p. 27.

taken to suppress the other Islamist groups. For example, *Masyumi*, an influential group, was perceived as threatening factor to the secular regime when its members joined rebel armed groups in Sumatra and Sulawesi in 1958 using violent political Islam as their ideology. The government contained them through the use of force. Later in 1960, *Masyumi* was banned in Indonesia.[10]

However, during the later period of Suharto in the 1990s, Indonesia saw the upsurge of Islamic credentials within the legal and politically acceptable boundaries of the state. The state became a major promoter of Islamic institutions in the form of subsidising numerous Muslim activities. The country saw a gradual process of *santri-isation* (Islamisation)[11] across much of the state. This process became intensified in the wake of the fall of Suharto and the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Since the 1970s, the number of *santri* Muslims has grown considerably as a result of "accelerating Islamisation" mostly in the urban areas. Many of these Muslims have adopted Islamic way of life by praying five times a day, fasting in the month of Ramadan and following other rituals as per the strict prescriptions of Islam.[12] Mackie sums up this trend as follows:

> Islamic prayers are now uttered at the beginning and end of school classes and university lectures and nearly in all public functions. Mosques, religious schools ... and Islamic newspapers, pamphlets and books have multiplied. The number of pilgrims making the haj to Mecca, the principal sign of devout belief, has increased sharply among the well to do. What this has meant in terms of religious belief and actual daily behaviour is hard to assess accurately, but Islam has certainly become a far more prominent element in both personal and national identity. Nothing like that was occurring before about 1970.[13]

At the same time, the steady growth of Islamic education has been noticeable. The number of religious schools and the students has increased in recent years. The country has also seen a growing number of Indonesians studying in the Middle East including Cairo and other cities. A substantial funding has also been made available and channelled from the oil rich Middle Eastern countries including Saudi Arabia. These have had an impact in the growing interests in new thinking on Islam flowing back to Indonesian context.[14] The key point of such religious activism is that the

[10] Jaques Bertrand, "Political Islam and Democracy in the Majority Muslim Country of Indonesia", in Johan Saravanamuttu (ed.), *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia*, London: Routledge, 2010, p. 48.
[11] The *santri-isation,* commonly known as adherence to rigorous practices of Islam, actually began in the 1960s when a backlash against communism began following 1965 and a nation-wide emphasis was given to indicate the avoidance of communist commitment by religious conformity. See Jamie Mackie, "Australia and Indonesia: Current Problems, Future Prospects", *Research Report,* No. 19, Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2007, p. 70.
[12] Greg Fealy et. al., *op.cit*., p. 41.
[13] Jamie Mackie, *op.cit*., pp. 70-1.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 71.

country, once known as the advocate of secularism, has been under constant pressure from the Islamist groups to seek a 'state-favour' to Islam.

3. Explanation of Extremism and Terrorism

The rise of new extremist groups in the late 1990s exposed the country to terrorism challenging its resilience to demands of Islamist agenda. The *Jemah Islamiyah* (JI)[15] and other extremist groups[16] constituted the key extremist and terrorist organisations which were responsible for major terrorist acts including the Bali Bombing of October 2002[17], the bombing of the Marriott hotel in August 2003 and the bombing of the Australian embassy in Jakarta on 09 September 2004. However, terrorism did not turn the country into a safe haven or base for building further network to carry out the Islamist agenda. These militant organisations represent "only a tiny proportion" of the total population and are not linked to major international terrorism network, therefore, not posing a serious threat to the secular fabric of the state.[18] The Indonesian government condemned the terrorist acts perpetrated in the name of Islam and brought the accused under active trial to show its commitment to the secular values. The government response limited the capacity of the radical Islamist groups to grow and commit further violence. Juwono Sudarsono comments, "radical Islamists are actually losing ground in the battle for the hearts and minds of most Muslims in Indonesia."[19]

[15] The JI primarily focused on domestic issues including the Muslim-Christian conflicts and participated in a number of attacks on Christian interests particularly in Maluku and Sulawesi. However, the US 'war on terror' shifted its focus from domestic to international issues. The group envisages a religion-based caliphate encompassing Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines. Following 9/11 the JI began to establish network including the *Darul Islam* and Afghan war returnees throughout the archipelago for recruitment and gained strength in order to instigate damages to the Western interests in an apparent response to the interests of the Islamic *Ummah* as against the US attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, they failed to obtain deep rooted support from among the people. See Jaques Bertrand, *ibid.*, pp. 57-8.

[16] The other groups are *Laskar Jihad* and *Front Pembela Islam*. The *Laskar Jihad* was formed in early 2000 mainly to defend the Muslims against Christian attacks in parts of Muluccan islands. Although the organisation condemned the US attack on Afghanistan, the leaders were opposed to the ideals of Bin Laden for his alleged rebellion against Saudi Arabia. They recruited fighters and sent them to the Christian dominated islands to protect the fellow Muslims. However, their activities were soon contained by the government forces. The *Front Pembala Islam* (FPI) was founded in 1998 and mainly characterised by a campaign against what they considered "immoral" as per the strict interpretation of Islam. As part of their activities, they resorted to raid bars, disco, brothels, alcohol sales, etc. However, they fell short of a threatening factor to the secular character of the state. See Harold Crouch, "Qaida in Indonesia: The Evidence Doesn't Support Worries, " *International Herald Tribune,* 23 October 2001, pp. 1-2, available at http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-east-asia/indonesia/op-eds/crouch-qaida-in-indonesia-the-evidence-doesnt-support-worries.aspx, accessed on 10 March 2013.

[17] Among the terrorist acts, the Bali bombing was considered the most notorious. In the incident, about 202 including 88 Australians and seven Americans were killed. See *The Jakarta Post*, 10 October 2012.

[18] Harold Crouch, 2001, *op.cit.*, p. 1.

[19] Juwono Sudarsono, "The West and Islam in RI", *The Jakarta Post*, 05 November 2003, available at http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2003/11/05/part-2-2-west-and-islam-ri.html, accessed on 20 February 2013.

However, some analysts like Zachriya Abuza argue that the radical Islamists took a root as a "base-of-operations and source for recruits" in Indonesia with international terrorist network including Al-Qaeda. This posed a "potent" and "great concern" to the security in the whole of Southeast Asia.[20] In his book *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, Gunaratna[21] finds such links to international terrorism.[22] Ken Conboy also holds the similar view emphasising Southeast Asia including Indonesia as the 'Second Front' in the Islamist radical's network.

On the other hand, authors like Greg Fealy and Crouch do not subscribe to the above view. Crouch categorically argues that "It is probable that radical Islamic groups have received financial support from Qaida. But evidence is lacking to show that such links have decisively influenced their behaviour."[23] Ricklefs also rules out the extremist fear of some press reports and government documents about the fear on Indonesian Islam and argues that the extremist organisations including JI, Lasker Jihad and FPI, inspired mostly by local issues, have now been "beheaded, shut down or suspended" to rise against the secular government of Indonesia.[24] This is also echoed by Jaques Bertrand who comments:

> 'For the most part, it was JI and related groups that were inspired by radical Islamic ideology to undermine the democratic system and undertake violent acts. It has remained, however, a very small group with relatively little support among other Islamic groups or the Indonesian population at large. The state and the population have condemned terrorism, weakening their capacities. Since 2004, there have been few, if any signs of the ability of terrorists to wage new attacks or to gain any support among the broader population.'[25]

The terrorism in Indonesia is not driven solely by religious motivation. One of the main reasons of such terrorism is related to the "hatred caused by the Western humiliation" to the Indonesian. For example, Indonesians felt left-alone in the wake

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[20] Zachriya Abuza, "Tentacles of Terror: Al Qaeda's Southeast Asian Network", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2002, pp. 427-465.

[21] Ken Conboy, *The Second Front: Inside Asia's Most Dangerous Terrorist Network*, Jakarta: Equinox, 2006.

[22] Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2002.

[23] The broad motivations and operations of JI are different from that of Al-Qaeda. For example, the Qaeda's struggle is global in nature and its leadership are interested to export its fight anywhere in the world. However, the JI's focus is strictly local i.e., to replace the government with Islam as its ideology. While Al-Qaeda pushes for a greater role in Southeast Asia, JI limits its activities over the structure of the government. See Alonzo Surette, *Jemaah Islamiyah in South East Asia: The Effects of Islamic Nationalism on the Indonesian Political Climate.* Unpublished thesis, Webster University, St. Louise, Missouri, USA, 2009.

[24] Merle Rickfels brings out an analogy with that of the *Baader-Meinhof* gang of West Germany, which emerged in late 1960s and 1970s. At times, they were popular with the 10-20 per cent public support in opinion polls. However, in the face of firm action by the secular government, the public support for the gang declined sharply and the leaders were captured in 1972. The main leader, Andrean Baader, committed suicide in 1977, causing a permanent blow to the organisation. See Merle Ricklefs, "Islam in Indonesia", *The Australian Financial Review,* Review Section (10-11), 7 February 2003, pp. 1-2.

[25] Jaques Bertrand, 2010, *op.cit*., p. 60.

of the end of the Cold War where the US used to consider them as an important ally and sided with them in the fight against communist threat. However, after the Cold War, Indonesia suffered an economic crisis in 1997 and they had to "crawl in front of the USA, the Western financial institutions to get help".[26] They had to comply with the conditions imposed by them, many of which were considered derogatory to them. Another example of their sense of humiliation was the Western pressure to separate East Timor from Indonesia through referendum, which fuelled their alienation from the West. This sense of loss of dignity actually invited reactions from some sections of the Islamist groups through the terrorist means.

Mark Mancall gives a different explanation to the rise of terrorism in the Indonesian context. Since the Dutch colonial rule, a policy was adopted called *transmgrasi* (transmigration) of Javanese people to other islands including the eastern parts of Indonesia in order to redress the population pressure on Java. In the post independence period, this policy was also continued. However, these new Javanese migrants often found it hard to survive in competing with the existing Christian population in the eastern parts with limited resources including the land. This actually initiated a clash of interests, leading to communal conflict between the Javanese Muslims and the local Christians. Such conflict often developed into a *jihad* on the part of some Muslims to fight the Christians through organising groups and recruits with Islamist ideology. So the root of Islamists led terrorism is the communal clash of interests in the eastern parts of Indonesia particularly in Moluku, Sulawesi and the Spice Island.[27]

4. Islamic Piety not Related to Voting Behaviour

Although the post-Suharto period was open to what is being argued as "a surge of religious freedom and experimentation, including *dakwah* and Wahhabi influences", Indonesia broadly remained committed to secular values as its state ideology.[28] While it is true that the later days of Suharto saw some signs of rising Islamic values, Indonesian state has not committed to Islamic ideology and remains insulated from the influence of Islamist activism. The Suharto regime, being constantly accused of several corruption charges and being faced with internal divisions within its administration, sought the support of some Islamist groups by sponsoring Islamic activities, however not beyond the secular limits. The growing discontent from among the urban middle class Muslims was mainly not with the secularisation, but more relating to the government policies and practices including the corruption charges. This is aptly evident in the general election's results in 1999, 2004 and 2009. The electoral performances of the Islamist parties were no higher than it had been

[26] Timo Kivimaki, "Terrorism in Indonesia", *NIAS: Asia Insight,* Issue 3, 2003.
[27] Mark Mancall, "The Roots and Societal Impact of Islam in Southeast Asia" [Interview by Anthony Shih]. *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs,* Vol. 2, Spring, 2002, p. 117.
[28] Unlike Malaysia, the religious courts in Indonesia are subordinate to the Supreme Court. See Fealy et. al., 2006, *op. cit*., p. 47.

in the elections of 1955 and 1971.[29] This clearly indicates no increase of appeal of the Muslim political parties despite the signs of upsurge of Islam in the Indonesian context.[30] Although following the fall of Suharto, Indonesia saw the proliferation of political parties with Islamist agenda, this, however, did not radically alter their level of acceptance to the common people.[31]

The growing piety among Indonesians does not indicate the cause of concern mainly because it has not automatically translated into the increase of electoral votes for religious parties.[32] It is true that the average Indonesians have gradually chosen "Islamic pietism" in recent years, often reflected in the increasing number of Muslims performing Islamic rituals including regular prayers diligently, fasting during the month of Ramadan, participating in Qur'anic studies and following "Islamic products" like *sharia* banking and Muslim clothing. Nevertheless this created a contrasting trend i.e., the "rising religiosity and falling support for political Islam" through rejecting the political parties that support Islamic ideology.[33] This indicates that most religious Muslims do no longer consider the electoral support to political Islam as their religious commitment, disapproving the link between their faith and confessional behaviour through voting.[34] As Greg Fealy asserts:

> 'The declining vote for these parties deserves close analysis for what it tells us about popular attitudes towards religion in politics. 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.'[35]

Why could not the Islamist parties make significant headway in electoral performance? Islamist parties in Indonesia suffer shrinking confidence among the voters of which Muslims are predominant. The main reason of their failure to attract voters is their inability to address the "pressing socio-economic issues" in

[29] Despite the largest size of the Muslim population, the Islamist parties did not gain more than 44% of the total votes in any of the general elections. They also failed to amass pressure on the government to Islamise the Indonesian constitution and state. See Fealy et. al., *op.cit*., p. 44.
[30] The only Islamist party, Justice Prosperous Party (PKS), made a substantial progress in the elections. It obtained 1.36 per cent in 1999, while 7.34 in 2004 and 7.8 in 2009. However, this individual progress is mainly due to its clean, pro-reform policies and its campaigns against corruption. Its moderate posture also helped to attract the urban middle class. The leadership made a number of compromises on Islamist agenda and maintained a pluralist orientation. See Greg Fealy, "Indonesia's Islamic Parties in Decline", *Inside Story: Current Affairs and Culture from Australia and Beyond* on 11 May 2009, available at http://inside.org.au/indonesia%E2%80%99s-islamic-parties-in-decline/, accessed on 11 March 2013.
[31] Jamie Mackie, *op.cit.*, p. 71.
[32] Kikue Hamayotsu, "The End of Political Islam? A Comparative Analysis of Religious Parties in the Muslim Democracy of Indonesia", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs,* Vol. 30, No. 3, 2011, p. 153.
[33] Greg Fealy, *op.cit*., p. 1.
[34] Berno, "Political Islam in Indonesia – A Threat to the Pancasila State?", available at http://bernardoh.wordpress.com/2009/11/04/political-islam-in-indonesia-a-threat-to-the-pancasila-state/, accessed on 20 November 2012; Greg Fealy, *op.cit*., p. 1.
[35] Greg Fealy, *op.cit*., p. 1.

the Indonesian context. Although, the Islamist parties profess a complete code of life, they have not presented any effective model to resolve the material problems of the Indonesian people. According to a survey conducted by Indonesian Survey Institute, there exists an inverse correlation between perceived 'Islamicness' and the competence and ability to bringing back the country on track of prosperity.[36]

5. Why Political Islam is not on the Rise?

Having highlighted the low level of Islamic profile, we will now look at the reasons why Islam-based politics has not assumed a significant concern in the Indonesian context. Of particular importance of the above discussion is that the demographic dominance of the Muslims does not determine the behaviour of most Indonesians and the state has remained committed to secular values. The following discussion brings out the case as to why Islam is not determinative.

5.1 *Recognising the Plurality of Indonesian Society*

Indonesia consists of varied ethnic groups, languages, social organisations and cultures in an archipelago stretching from the islands of Sumatra, Java, Bali, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku and Papua. The country is one of the extended archipelagos with about 13,677 tropical islands spreading over 3,300 miles, having diversity with about 325 ethnic or cultural groups. They are in fact, also different in dialects and divided into 18 language groups. In such heterogeneity, "the ideal of unity is extremely difficult to accomplish."[37] Plurality has become the very texture of Indonesian society in the context of such diversity. This has actually led the Indonesians to promote the principle of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, or unity in diversity[38] to lend credence to this multiplicity. Although Indonesia is pre-dominantly a Muslim country, the promotion of this principle was mainly intended to represent the secular values and a "workable arrangement" to recognise differences and diversity within the country.[39]

[36] *Ibid.*
[37] Dong S. Choi, 1996, *op.cit*., p. 19.
[38] That is why a strong national leadership should now seriously embark on the implementation of *Pancasila* values. The first step to make is the realisation of the nation's motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* or Unity in Diversity. It means the respect for the place and freedom of the individual in harmony with the need of social unity. It also means the recognition of the importance of each ethnic and religious group within the national unity. *Pancasila,* therefore means harmony and not conflict in life. See Mirza T. Kusuma, *op.cit*., p. 1.
[39] Pakpahan, 2010, *op.cit*., p. 1; Judith Nagata, "Authority and Democracy in Malaysian and Indonesian Islamic Movements", in Johan Saravanamuttu (ed.), *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia*, London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 18-44.

This recognition was reflected in the adoption of *Pancasila*[40] as its national ideology in the country's constitution to show the hybrid nature of the society. One of the principles of this ideology is the belief in 'One God'. However, it does not specify what the name of God is, indicating it very open to all. For example, the Muslims interpret it as Allah while it is God to the Christians.[41] The underlying message of this ideology is its religious neutrality leaving little space for the role of Islam in public life. The other objective is to achieve national cohesion among the different groups of Indonesians. The promotion of *Pancasila* thus serves two purposes. One is to diminish the tension between the role of Islam and the secular national state and the other is to prevent disintegration within the state.

The recognition of such plurality negates any opportunity of using Islam as the monopoly by any ethnic group. Accordingly, all ethnic groups sans Islam are minorities.[42] Unlike Malaysia, there is no official recognition of privileged relations between religion and ethnic groups in Indonesia. No religion is singled out or acknowledged constitutionally or by any legal provisions to claim any state sponsored concessions.[43]As Johan Saravanamuttu observes:

> 'In Indonesia, since the state is secular and based on Panchasila, which does not specify any official religion, the dividing issue is based less on competing discourses about the definition and meaning of the Islamic state, as in the case of Malaysia, than between a state that is quasi-secular and groups that advance political agendas that have Islamist goals or Islamic ideology.'[44]

The country's constitution reflects the plural nature of the society and the state upholds the secularism as its innate ideology. When the Jakarta Charter[45] containing Islamic provisions was drafted upon demands of some Islamist groups, the moderate and ethnic groups opposed to it arguing that the Islamic agenda would make the integration a problematic. The Christian groups already gave a warning that they would leave the state if the Jakarta Charter was adopted. The rejection of the

[40] The *Pancasila* includes five basic principles which were adopted in the Constitution in 1945. Since then, the Five Principles have become the blueprint of the Indonesian nation. The Five Principles are: belief in one God, just and civilised humanity, Indonesian unity, democracy under the wise guidance of representative consultations and social justice for all the peoples of Indonesia, available at http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/440932/Pancasila, accessed on 23 November 2012.
[41] Mark Mancall, *op.cit*., p. 116.
[42] Nagata, *op.cit*., pp. 18-20.
[43] The original constitution recognises five religions – Islam, Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism and Hindu-Bali. In 2006, Confucianism was included in the list. See, Nagata, *op.cit.,* p. 35. In Malaysia, Islam has been officially singled out as the state religion. See Barry Wain, *op. cit.*
[44] Johan Saravanamuttu, "Introduction: Majority-Minority Muslim Politics and Democracy", in J. Saravanamuttu (ed.), *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia,* London: Routledge, 2010, p. 7.
[45] The Jakarta Charter was drafted in 1945 which allowed the inclusion of Islamic values including the mandatory requirement of the President be Muslim and introduction of Islamic laws in the state. However, this was rejected in view of the diverse nature of the fledgling state. See Fealy et. al., *op.cit*., p. 47.

charter and later marginalisation of political Islam reinforced Indonesia's commitment to plural and secular values. Kusuma thus asserts:

> 'Pancasila puts Muslims, Christians, Hindus and Buddhists on an equal level. That is not only a revolution in Islamic thinking but also a translation of the mystical ideas of the great Sufi Muslim Ibn Arabi into a political program. Sufi Islam's tolerance and its rejection of any dogmatism has become a basis of political reality in Indonesia.'[46]

The *Pancasila* also brings out another important paradox of an Islamic polity. According to Islamic interpretation, in a Muslim rule or Islamic society non-Muslims are treated as *dhimmi*[47] who enjoys protection from the state in exchange of taxes or other means of sacrifices. However, the *Pancasila* ideology is an exception to this rule in the Indonesian context. The non-Muslims are not considered as 'second class citizens' but they are regarded as citizens of equal standing as far as the constitutional and legal rights are concerned. This offers the adoption of an inclusive policy by the Indonesian state.[48]

5.2 *Influence of Syncretistic Nature of Islam*

Islam in Indonesia is largely characterised as syncretistic in formation blended with local customs. Before Islam came into contact, there existed a powerful culture where Buddhism and Hinduism took firm root in ancient times. According to Clifford Geertz, in about 400 A.D. Hinduism and then Buddhism began penetration in the Java and in about 1500 A.D. Islam came through sea trade.[49] Authors like Rabasa hold that Islam spread to Southeast Asia including Indonesia mainly through the contacts of Arab Muslim traders in the middle ages and conversion of the local elites through peaceful means of preaching and *sufi* influence.[50] Dong S. Choi gives an explanation of three theories as to such preponderance of Islam through peaceful means.[51]

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[46] Mirza T. Kusuma, *op.cit*., p. 1.

[47] This *Pancasila* definition of monotheism is a clear-cut deviation from the traditional Islamic *dhimmi* principle. A *dhimmi* may be defined as a person with accountability and inviolability, granted human rights and constitutional rights. In classical Islamic jurisprudence the term *dhimmah* means accountability and inviolability, which is usually termed personhood in modern legal discourse. *Dhimmah* is also commonly understood as "protection", "treaty" and "peace" because it is a treaty that puts non-Muslims under the protection of Muslims (it is the concept of the rights of minorities), but used to be understood as second class citizens. See Mark Durie, *The Third Choice: Islam, Dhimmitude and Freedom*, USA: Deror Books, 2010.

[48] Mirza T. Kusuma, *op.cit*., p. 1.

[49] Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.

[50] Angel Rabasa, *op.cit*., p. 27.

[51] According to Dong S. Choi, there are three dominant theories that explain how Islam became preponderant in Indonesia. The first theory is the role of the *sufi* missionaries who mainly came from South India and Bengal mainly as preachers, teachers and politicians. They penetrated deep into the society including the villages and served as the agents of the rulers. These *sufis* preached Islam in line with the local traditions and belief system. For example, they advocated the "religious retreats" and minimised the strict rituals of Islam. The local people found convergence with the new religion much with their folks and traditions.

However, before the advent of these religions, the Javanese showed their conviction to animist traditions. The impact of Islam was about five hundred years while the other traditions are thousand years old. This has actually made Indonesian Islam "remarkably malleable, syncretic, multivocal and multilayered."[52] The underlying reason is that the length of Islam is less than that of the other traditions.[53]

The key implication of this syncretism is that Islam marked the face of the Indonesian character on the surface. However, it did not alter the very basic cultural textures and skeleton of the Javanese society.[54] This in a sense creates the notion of a tolerant, accommodative and flexible culture.[55] In another sense, the Indonesians were open to other incoming religions and took the necessary ingredients in accordance with their own fundamental folk traditions or beliefs to constitute a new synthesis.[56] Dian M. Safitri maintains:

> 'In history all over the world, religions have had to enter syncretism with local cultures so that they could easily be accepted by local societies. In Indonesia, particularly in Java, such amalgamation has proven effective in disseminating Islamic precepts. Yet, something else emerged from this fusion of Islam, Hinduism, and Javanese culture, termed abangan, which is incompatible with real Islamic tenets regarding ethical monotheism. Despite some criticism of abangan, many Javanese still practise it due to their pride of Javanese culture and the endeavour to perpetuate their ancestors' beliefs.'[57]

They did not have to change their own practices when they converted. Islam thus made an easy access to the hearts and minds of the people. The second theory is the role of the merchants who came from the Middle East and came into contact with the local rulers of Indonesian coasts or ports and impressed them with their knowledge, products and skills. Gradually, they formed alliances with the rulers who converted into Islam often to court their support against rival kingdoms. For example, the coastal rulers used the merchants to resist the pre-Islamic kingdom of Majapahit (1293-1389). Once the local rulers converted, the local subjects also followed them. The merchants also found settlement in the coastal belts through marriages and building infrastructures and enterprises. Thus Islam made an inroad in Indonesia. The third theory is the value of Islam interpreted to the common people as worthy. They found in it individual and social justice, which was absent in the then "village-scaled societies". Islam provided an ideological basis to address both their spiritual and social demands. However, all the three theories were at work to explain the spread of Islam in Indonesia. The key point is that Islam came to Indonesia peacefully not by force. See, Dong S. Choi, *op.cit*., pp. 12-3.

[52] Riaz Hassan, *Inside Muslim Minds*, Carlton, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 2008.

[53] Abdul G. Muhaimen, *The Islamic Traditions of Cirebon: Ibadat and Adat Among Javanese Muslims*, Canberra: ANU Press, 2005, p. 1.

[54] Java is the most populous island where about 60 per cent of the total Indonesian people live. It is the centre of Indonesian history during the Hindu-Buddhist-Muslim-Dutch periods. The Javanese are dominant economically, politically and culturally. Riaz Hassan notes that Indonesian Islam is largely blended with the social structure of Java where images and metaphors of the local culture became dominant in it. Riaz Hassan, *op.cit*., p. 9.

[55] Angel M. Rabasa, *op.cit*., p. 27.

[56] *Ibid.*

[57] Dian M. Safitri, "The Amalgamation of Javanese Abangan, Islam, Taoism and Buddhism in the Sam Po Kong Shrine", *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs,* Vol. 11, No. 1, 2011, p. 153.

While Islamic tenets are subject to different interpretations from different cultural, historical and intellectual circumstances, the Javanese also incorporated the Islamic traditions in their own way what appears as "the divergence in contexts".[58] Such blending is not uncommon in the Middle Eastern Islamic literature which referred to the mutual influences between religious traditions. This has actually determined the Islamic flexibility in the Indonesian context. Consequently, the pressure for greater orthodoxy towards Islam may have "distasteful intrusion" in the spiritual lives of the Indonesian people.[59] As a result, Indonesian Islam remains "proud and confident of its syncretic blend with national and local traditions as well as of healthy eclecticism with the liberating values of foreign influences" that rules out the possibility of being trapped into any religious radicalism.[60]

5.3 *The Diversity within Islam*

The diversity of the Islamic community in Indonesia is remarkable. The categorisation of this community is also very complex. Based on Islamic piety, this community has drawn a sharp distinction between what Geertz in his famous book *The Religion of Java* (1960) indentified as *abangan* and *santri*. The first category is relating to the syncretistic traditions which represent the pre-Islamic elements, largely from the Buddhism and Hinduism.[61] On the other hand, the *santri* Islam is associated with strict interpretation of Islam. The followers seek to observe the rituals and practices as enshrined in the scriptures. For them, Islam is a key to the day-to-day lives of the Muslim.[62]

Among the *santri* Muslims, there are traditionalist and modernist groups. They are divided on doctrinal interpretations and practices of the Islamic prescriptions. The traditionalist group is led by *Nadhatul Ulama* (NU) which was formed in 1926 by K. H. Hasyim Asy'ari and K. H. Wahab Chasbullah and now has a membership of about 40 million Muslims of which most are from Java. This group mainly seeks to preserve the local customs while practising the traditional medieval Islamic scholarship.[63] On

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[58] Mirza T. Kusuma, *op.cit*., p. 1.

[59] Most Javanese people consider the relationship between one's God and one's soul as essentially an internal and sacred matter. This actually negates the orthodox interpretation of compulsion and force as per the rigid form of Islam. See Mirza T. Kusuma, *ibid*.

[60] Juwono Sudarsono, *op.cit*., p. 1.

[61] They are not the strict adherents of the tenets of Islamic interpretations. Before the advent of Islam, the non-Islamic folk-beliefs and elements had a strong presence in the archipelago and their Islam accommodated these elements in their own way as against the strict adherence to the orthodox Islam. This group is often referred to as the Javanese Muslims, the largest ethnic majority in Indonesia. This term is also used to refer to the less observant Muslims in other ethnic groups in the country.

[62] For example, they pray five times, fast during the month of Ramadan, pay the wealth tax *(zakat)* and if possible perform pilgrimage to Mecca. See Greg Fealy et. al., *op.cit.,* pp. 30-40; R. William Liddle, "New Patterns of Islamic Politics in Democratic Indonesia", *Asia Program Special Report,* Vol. 110, Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, 2005, p. 6.

[63] Traditionalists continue to adhere to the Syafi'i school of legal interpretation, which is taught by charismatic ulama (scholars and teachers), in thousands of boarding schools (called pesantren) throughout

the other hand, the modernists known as *Muhammadiyah*[64] consider the traditional practices as impure and want to cleanse the faith by returning to the pristine teaching found in the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet. They also seek to apply the modern advances and concepts as long as it does not contradict the key Islamic teaching. This organisation now claims to have about 30 million members throughout Indonesia.[65] Although both these organisations seek to confirm the Islamic rituals in different doctrinal directions, they have in general shown their moderate posture on politics and eschew extremism.[66]

However, while the traditionalists are known as "political quietists" the modernists' view governance of social life in accordance with the Islamic rituals. Among the modernists, there exists two trends, one is known as the liberal or moderate and the other Islamist. Most modernists fall into the liberal category while a small minority belong to the Islamism trend. The moderates reinterpret the Qur'an and *Hadith* in the context of modern problems and circumstances. They are interested to look at sacred rituals distinct from the secular values and keep the state outside the purview of religion. However, the Islamists try to assert themselves differently with regard to the state. They view every aspect of human and social life should be administered in accordance with Islamic prescriptions. Nevertheless, the Islamist Muslims are a minority within a minority and has remained a "peripheral phenomenon" in Indonesia.[67]

Even within the Islamist parties[68], there are two groups: Islamist and pluralist parties. The Islamists proclaim Islamic identity and seek to establish Islamist agenda in their campaigns and goals while the pluralist parties have adopted religious neutral state ideology, *Pancasila*, as their basis and eschew *sharia* based agenda. Of the ten such parties, seven are Islamist and three constitute pluralist in their posture on Islam. Such distinction is important mainly because the party ideology and moderate posture draw the level of popular support. The seven Islamist parties obtained 17 per cent of the total votes while the pluralist parties received 12 per cent. This is a decline by 5 per cent and 3 per cent in that order from the 2004 election. In the 1999 election, these figures were 16 per cent and 24 per cent respectively. The key point is that the Indonesians have made a difference in their voting behaviour between parties which

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the archipelago. In Java and in few other regions the largest and most politically influential traditionalist organisation is Nahdlatul Ulama or NU (The Awakening of the Religious Scholars and Teachers).

[64] Muhammadiyah, founded in 1912, has membership of about 25-30 million.

[65] Modernists tend to be more urban and Western-educated than traditionalists. They are greatly influenced by such nineteenth and early twentieth century Middle Eastern thinkers as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, abjure the Syafi'i and other classical schools in favour of direct reading of the Qur'an and Hadith, (sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad). Considerably fewer in number than traditionalists, modernists are scattered throughout the archipelago, with the greatest concentrations in Yogyakarta and West Sumatra. See R. William Liddle, *op.cit.,* p. 6.

[66] Greg Barton, *op.cit*., p. 115.

[67] R. William Liddle, *op.cit*., pp. 6-7.

[68] The main Islamist parties are the National Awakening Party (PKB), Justice Prosperous Party (PKS), PPP (Development Unity Party), PBB (Crescent Moon and Star Party) and National Mandate Party (PAN).

follow pro-*sharia* Islamist ideology and those who are secular in outlook.[69] Such a distinction constructs the Islamist agenda into "stagnant and limited to a very small minority of the Islamic community".[70]

Moreover, many of the Islamist parties have suffered internal tensions varying from ideological interpretation of Islamist agenda to rivalry among party leadership. For example, PKB, an influential Islamist party, has been faced with internal feuds between competing groups and has changed four chairmen since 2004. Its charismatic leader, Abdurrahman Wahid, former president of Indonesia, has been alienated from the party leadership and he was critical of the present leadership during the 2009 election. This actually resulted in the shift of votes among the rural Javanese Muslims, known as party's solid support base, from PKB to other parties. Similarly, PPP has been deeply divided into two groups along the line of two main Islamic organisations, *Nahdlatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah*, and its leadership has experienced cleavages arising out of personality and sectional clashes.[71] The Islamists suffer cleavages within their Islamic agenda and have greatly failed to present a consolidated one Islamic platform for the Indonesians.[72]

5.4 *The Role of Authoritarian Secular Regimes*

For most of recent history, Indonesia was ruled by two prominent authoritarian regimes of Sukarno (1950-65) and Suharto (1967-1998). These two regimes strongly promoted the ideology of *Pancasila* as an instrument to marginalise the role of Islam. They always used the state machineries to subordinate Islam in the public discourses. The keys to their strategies were policies to limit the activities of the Islamist movements ranging from persuasion to using force in order to contain them. Judith Nagata highlights such two strategies:

> "One method was to incorporate Muslims into a controlled electoral process, like PAS in Malaysia, and a sequence of religious political parties were created, from Masyumi to the PPP (United Development Party), all as coalitions of several religious groups more easily manageable by the government. Another strategy was Suharto's co-optation of the most prominent (and possibly subversive) Muslim intellectual[s] and students in a government managed organizations, Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI). By this means, even students overseas were kept under permanent, in indirect, control. Arguably, Suharto was master of an authoritarian democracy at the time, in anticipation of a political Islam yet to materialize."[73]

[69] R. William Liddle, *op.cit*., pp. 5-7.
[70] Greg Fealy, *op.cit*., p. 1.
[71] *Ibid*.; Berno, 2009, *op. cit*., p. 1.
[72] R. William Liddle, *op. cit*., pp. 5-7.
[73] Judith Nagata, *op.cit*., p. 36.

The regimes in fear of an Islamic revival applied restrictive policies on the Islamist organisations that supported the establishment of an Islamic state.[74] The amalgamation of all Islamist parties as PPP clearly indicates that the new party complied with the limits set by the government. The merged party was not even allowed to take a name referring to Islam. Similarly, the creation of ICMI was also intended to "channel and control" the mobilisation of certain Islamist groups. These government supported groups also saw an opportunity to gain greater power in cooperating with the regimes. Many of the groups later accommodated with the government run programmes and participated in the political process including representation in the Parliament and obtain power within the government. Such accommodation resulted in the emergence of 'civil Islam' in Indonesia.[75] The outcome of Suharto's policies was thus, to subordinate the influence of political Islam.[76]

The authoritarian strategies of the government including repressive measures to control the Islamist groups worked well to contain their agenda for an Islamic state. One of such efforts to domesticate the Islamists was framing of a legislation in 1985 that required all organisations to adopt *Pancasila* as their basis of ideological posture.[77] Such measures of Suharto were labelled what Judith Nagata[78] calls "authoritarian democracy" to restrict the voices of the Islamists and the role of Islam in the polity.

6. Conclusion

The above discussion has dealt with the formation and the very character of Islam in the Indonesian context. We have seen that although the vast majority of the population are Muslims and there are some pressures from radical groups to Islamise, Indonesia remains committed to the secular values. The radical Islamists, although often expressed their existence in politics through various means including violence, constitute a minority within the minority population who seek to establish an Islamic state with *sharia* as the basis of the rule of law. However, as we have observed, these Islamists are "vastly outnumbered, out-educated, out-publicised..... and outinfluenced by the tolerant, forward-thinking moderates of Indonesian Islam."[79] The discussion has also highlighted the main reasons as to why Islamist politics has not assumed greater importance as compared to other Muslim countries including Malaysia and Pakistan

[74] The adoption of authoritarian measures including the use of force was common to both Sukarno and Suharto. The repression and ban on *Darul Islam* and *Masyumi* are examples of such measures.
[75] Jaques Bertrand, *op.cit*., p. 49.
[76] Berno, *op.cit*., p. 1.
[77] The law also provided the government to supervise, intervene and if necessary ban an organisation in order to ensure compliance. The legislation limited the practices of Islam only to individual level at family and mosque, restricting embracing Islam as a complete code of conduct including political activities. These restrictions invited reactions from the radical groups including the clerics who threatened political opposition including violence. However, the government in turn was not ready to tolerate such dissidence through stern actions including arrest, seizures, trial for subversion and long term prisons.
[78] Judith Nagata, 2010, *op.cit*., p. 36.
[79] Merle Ricklefs, *op.cit*., p. 12.

where Islam has assumed higher profile in response to local contexts.[80] Although syncretism is characteristic to Islam in South and Southeast Asian Muslim countries, Indonesian case presents differently considering the very pluralistic society in terms of ethnicity, language, region, religion and culture. The state since independence recognises the importance of such plurality and has firmly followed *Pancasila* as religious neutral state ideology and disapproved the greening of Islamist ideology. The majority people have not shown inclination towards the Islam-based political parties who, in their belief, can hardly address their socio-economic problems. The election results of 1999, 2004 and 2009 show that the Islam-based politics are on the decline and marginalised despite the fall of Suharto who was known as staunch supporter of secular values and for authoritarian suppression of the Islamist agenda. The key element of the analysis is that Indonesian Islam is hardly sensitive to the global resurgence of Islam caused by ideological conviction and its characterisation of universalism that challenges the status quo.

[80] In Malaysia, the ethnic conflict between 'not-so-majority' Malays and 'not-so-minority' non-Malay has elevated the public role of Islam. This has found expression in the state sponsorship of Islamist activism (e.g., the sharia courts have been made equal to that of the Supreme Court). Islam was also made the state religion of the country and equated with that of Malay identity. Before the independence, Malay states did not experience any religious issue since there were no competing groups for political eminence. However, this has become more pronounced in the post independence period as the Malays saw their communal interests being marginalised by the non-Malays. The Malay communities began to link their identity with Islam. Hence the rise of Islam is inherently connected with the communal political interests between two communities, the Malays and the non-Malays. See Maznah Mohamad, "The Authoritarian State and Political Islam in Muslim-Majority Malaysia", in Johan Saravanamuttu (ed.), *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia,* London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 65-70. Similarly, in Pakistan Islam has assumed higher profile in the polity largely because of the ethnic rivalries among different groups such as Mohajir vs. Sindhis, Panjabis vs. others. Due to heterogeneity in the social structure, Islam was instrumental as the unifying factor of the state. The ruling elites particularly the military also used the 'Islamic card' to legitimise their authority. This happened since its independence in 1947. Thus concept of jihad was developed in the 1971 war on Bangladesh by the military regime. The Pakistan army was given the impression that the Bengali liberation forces, Mukthi Bahini, were "kafir army" (infidels) and "to defend Pakistan" was equated with "to defend Islam". See Emajuddin Ahamed, "Current Trends of Islam in Bangladesh", *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 18, No. 25, 1983, p. 1117; Christine Fair, "Is Pakistan's Army as Islamist as We Think?," 2011, available at http://www.defence.pk/forums/pakistan-army/129844-pakistans-army-islamist-we-think.html, accessed on 20 Jun 2012; "Pakistan: The Mullahs and the Military", *ICG Asia Report No. 49,* pp. 7-8. The Islamisation made a "creeping progress" during General Zia's time (1978 – 88) covering legal, political and economic systems and the psyche of the nation so deeply that the subsequent governments found hard to back out "whether they wanted it or not". See William B. Milam, *Bangladesh and Pakistan: Flirting with Failure in South Asia,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 82.