

THE POLITICS OF MOSLEM CLOTHING IN INDONESIA

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Jilbab versus schools

This paper concerns the dynamics of jilbab as they conflict with social, political, and cultural issues in Indonesia. Around 1930, the jilbab polemic continued when a 17-year old school girl disagreed with the rule urging adult women to cover their heads to maintain their chastity. According to the girl, Java (Indonesia) was not Saudi Arabia and belief in Islam did not necessitate adoption of the Arab tradition. An Islamic media “Bergerak”¹ put a side to her argument. (Van Dijk, 1997: 65)

More than fifty years later, in 1983, Nugroho Notosusanto, Minister of Education, launched a press-release. Responding to the issue of female students wearing jilbab, he said, “The government would facilitate a move into private schools for those who opted to wear head covers.” (Kompas, August 6, 1983) Before this, the Minister held a private meeting with the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI)² and explained that “uniforms ought to be similar in style. Otherwise, they would not be uniforms.”

Following the press-release issued by the Chairman of MUI, K.H. E.Z. Muttaqien responded to the questions about the head covers (not jilbab) worn with the school uniforms. He said that there was a rule in the “Pedoman Pemakaian

¹ In English is “On the Move”.

² The Indonesian Council of Religious Scholars

Seragam³ that allowed the headmasters to regulate school uniforms according to the educational atmosphere in their regions. The whole nation, including teachers and mubalighs,⁴ would refer to the instruction of the President of MUI when it concerned religion. Gathering consisting of four points; the right to believe in religion, to master religious values, to live peacefully among different religions, and to solve religious matters with wisdom. MUI, along with other institutions, worked on the **operational pattern** (bolded by the writer) upon the instruction of the President. (Kompas, March 20, 1984) (Note: The issue here was head covers, not jilbab. Jilbab was a new vocabulary word at the time.)

In 1987, in the Rapat Kerja⁵ Komisi IX DPR⁶ RI, Munawir Sjadzali, the Minister of Religious Affairs, admitted that there had been no official judgment on Moslem women's public dress because he would be the one to have to deal with the Islamic leaders on the issue. (Kompas, July 17, 1986)

The issue of jilbab in schools eventually became crucial when four students of SMU⁷1 Bogor brought a legal action suit to court after the headmaster forbade them to wear head covers. (Kompas, October 6, 1988) The letters sent to the parents, informing them their children had been expelled from school, triggered the suit. The students claimed that this decision had made their status as students uncertain. Their exams, homework, and laboratory tasks went unexamined by the teachers, as if the

³ The Manual of School Uniform

⁴ Islamic preachers

⁵ Working Session of Commission

⁶ The Indonesian Legislative Assembly

⁷ Senior High School

students had never done any. In addition, even though the girls wore head covers, it had been clearly noted that they had obeyed the governmentally-released School Uniform Manual. In the end, Lembaga Bantuan Hukum (LBH)⁸ Jakarta reported that the case came to a peaceable agreement between the two sides.

A similar case occurred the following year. Ten female students of SMU 68 Jakarta went to LBH Jakarta because they could not attend their classes, due to disciplinary grounds relating to their school uniforms. Hence, they should be “returned to their parents”. (Kompas, January 5, 1989) At the beginning, they were informed that they would not be allowed to attend their classes or take exams, but the situation worsened when the school did not give in their reports and forbade them to enter the school.

The school suggested that they not wear head covers and take them off during the classes. However, this was rejected by the students and their parents because of religious beliefs. The school proposed to move them to other schools and declared that “they were to return to their parents”. The letter was also confirmed by the Head Department Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan (Depdikbud)⁹ Jakarta, Soegijo, who said, “I would like to convey my deep gratitude for your effort to maintain discipline and obedience. If you were ready to do it, they would be accepted in the school. Exams proceeded according to schedule.”

⁸ Legal Aid Society

⁹ Department of Education and Culture

In the middle of the argument, a remarkable statement was taken from the discussion of the Jalaludin Rakhmat's book, "*Islam Alternatif*"¹⁰. The speaker, Dr. Ir. Fachrurozie Sjarkowi, in his article "*Beated in Achievement, Jilbab-Wearers Cornered,*" said that "All incidents faced by those of jilbab-wearers were caused by the fact that some female students of Islamic schools were inferior to public school female students in terms of knowledge and skill."

All of these disagreements culminated in an official amendment to the rule for certain school uniforms of SMP¹¹ and SMU¹² for 1992 and 1993. Surat Keputusan No. 100/C/Kep/D/1991 replaced Surat Keputusan No. 052/C/Kep/D/1982. This revision was made through a series of consultations with Islamic leaders, society, mass media, Kejaksaan Agung,¹³ Menteri Penerangan¹⁴ and Badan Koordinasi Intelijen Nasional (BAKIN).¹⁵ Also, a female student, who required a particular uniform based on private beliefs, was allowed to wear one as long as it conformed to the colour and design described in the enclosure. The parents or guardians would also have to be aware of the difference in uniforms.

The previous rule had stated that "due to religious considerations and local traditions, a school is allowed to have authority over the design of uniform, especially for the female students, but including all students of a school.

¹⁰ Alternative Islam

¹¹ Junior High School

¹² Senior High School

¹³ The Council of Attorney General

¹⁴ The Minister of Information Affairs

¹⁵ State Intelligence Coordinating Agency

The difference was the design of the head covers. According to the former regulation, head covers were tied up like a dastard or blangkon,¹⁶ the blouses had long sleeves and were worn outside of the skirt, and the skirts came down to the knees (SMP) or ankles (SMU). In the latter regulation, female students could wear white head covers, regular blouses tucked into skirts, and long sleeves down to the wrist with a buttoned pocket on the left. Skirts for both SMP and SMU students had to reach the ankles.

According to the regulation, any female student in a public school was free to wear jilbab to school, whereas those who went to Islamic schools or colleges were commonly obliged to wear jilbab. In fact, some female students only wore jilbab when they went to schools or colleges; they would take off their jilbab when they finished classes. It can be said that the new regulations have unveiled a new phase to the female Moslem believers in Indonesia.

After the fall of Orde Baru¹⁷, the regulation of school uniforms became so lax that schools often had several types of uniforms. In 2002, for instance, there was a new popular way of dressing for female SMU students in Jakarta. It was quite normal to find a female student in a pleated skirt that reached the ankles but the sleeves would be worn short and the hair loose. Others dressed in knee-length skirts and wore short sleeves. The rest wore jilbab in usual uniform but the skirts were longer – ankle-length. From interviews with some of the female students, I discovered that the

¹⁶ Javanese head cloth

¹⁷ The New Order regime

uniform was a part of a style, instead of just a precondition of jilbab. They even said that some teachers welcomed this trend, as the students looked well-mannered.

Regional Autonomy and the Side Effects

Regional autonomy has enabled the officials to enforce strict religious rules in some regions. The Regent of Cianjur, Warsidi Swastomo, called on his officials and officers of the Pemerintah Daerah (Pemda)¹⁸ to dress in “Islamic clothes” and demanded that members of society follow suit. Islamic clothes meant jilbab for women and long shirts (similar to a long tunic with a round neck) for men. (Kompas, February 1, 2002) This was intended to build the devout spirituality of the people. The Regent believed the policy would make the most of human resources in his region. The policy was designed for Islamic believers but had been discussed with and agreed upon by non-Islamic leaders.

At the same time, in the Province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, Islamic law was formally practiced from March 15 to the Islamic New Year of 1 Muharram 1423 Hijriah. The region became a requisite body-covered area. The names of stores, streets, and the destination boards for buses were in Arabic and Latin. Those who did not dress appropriately according to Islamic law (women’s clothing was to cover the body), would be punished. The media also reported that two days prior to the new practice store-owners were busy changing the names of their stores into Arabic and

¹⁸ Regional Government

Latin, while the regional officers were changing the names of streets, departments, and so forth. In the coming years, it would again change, but to English. Long-distance buses and inter-city trips changed their writing to both Arabic and Latin. (Kompas, March 14, 2002)

Beauty salon entrepreneurs were obliged to obey the rules of Islamic value as well. Women hair-dressers could not provide services to men. There had to be separate beauty salons for both sexes.

To support this practice, the Regional Government of NAD planned to recruit 2,500 Polisi Khusus Syariah (Polsus Syariah).¹⁹ The government consequently provided the budget. Polsus Syariah would be under the Islamic law and would be in charge of maintaining the laws, such as appropriate dress for women and men and the prohibition of adultery.

As shown, regional autonomy brings the opportunity to give meaning to Islam, considering that the new policies were impossible under the New Order. Those practicing Islam could pray freely without any worries of discrimination or stigmas.

Stylish Jilbab

In the middle of 1990, there were a number of Moslem fashion shows and competitions. Fashion designers, who focused in their designs on Moslem clothing, showed Moslem trends for the coming year, as many other designers did for autumn, winter, spring, and summer collections. Before this, Moslem fashion designs could be

¹⁹ Islamic Law Police

seen in women's magazines, especially on special occasions such as Idul Fitri but, in the following years, a number of magazines began to show the designs in the fashion pages as well.

Nowadays, many women do not dress in jilbab with loose-fitting clothes that hide the body lines. Instead, they wear tight t-shirts or long-sleeved shirts and tight-fitting jeans. The term "stylish jilbab," or "fashionable jilbab," stems from this phenomenon.

Jilbab and Moslem clothing had been very popular at the end of the 1990s. At wedding parties now, for example, many women dress in Moslem outfits but with more attention-grabbing colours and models. To an extent, wearing such an outfit is practical, for it frees the woman from having a heavy hair bun. The outfits also give flexibility and movement, more so than traditional ones (sarongs and kebayas). Here, we can see the non-religious reasons for wearing jilbab (Moslem clothes).

There is a great demand for wearing Moslem clothes during Ramadan. Television is full of worshipping programmes; various quiz shows change programming to coincide with the breaks in fasting; and, almost all news and infotainment show presenters wear Moslem clothes.

In particular, celebrities who wear jilbab contribute to the popularity of this clothing. Some younger examples are Inneke Koes Herawati, Yessi Gusman, and Desy Ratnasari, while some older ones are Sitoresmi, Ida Royani, and Ida Leman. These last three are also known as fashion designers. Public figures often have a

significant impact on the popularity of something. For example, people were once familiar with the head cover worn by Mbak Tutut, the nickname of former President Suharto's eldest child.

During the Bali bombing terror of 2002, there was a rumour circulating that Jamaah Islamiyah was responsible for a number of the bombs, including some in other parts of Indonesia and beyond. This affected opinions on some Moslem clothing, as it became a thing to be distrusted. However, jilbab and other Moslem clothing remained popular in Indonesia. An important consideration is the variety of, as well as the ideology behind, Moslem clothing worn by Islamic women in Indonesia.

Indeed, I find it personally difficult to understand the reasons why Moslem women wear jilbab. Nevertheless, I can bring it into view through a work of art by Angki Purbandono, a visual artist from Yogyakarta, entitled "*The Fashion of Indonesian Moslem Women*". Angki took pictures and interviewed five Moslem women in different clothes: Dian (a woman in veil), Riska (a woman in jilbab with fashionable style), Sitoresmi (a fashion designer who frequently dresses in glamorous Moslem clothes), Atik (a woman in long jilbab), and Endah (a woman who used to be in jilbab). I have cited some parts of the interviews between Angki and the women.

Dian (25 years old):

At the beginning, my family did not agree with my wearing a veil. However, since I was fully conscious of my being a Moslem woman, I kept going with it. So

far, my family is okay with it. I have never faced any difficulty with it. Well, it has been suggested that we wear dark colours and black is preferred, in order not to tease men.

My decision to wear a veil came from my beliefs, books, and my reading-verses group. They were my biggest support, not my family. This does not mean that I was influenced by friends but that I believed this was the way of God. The way demanded that I dress like this. My group does not belong to a particular Islamic organization; it is merely a free-membership one. One may continue to belong or choose to leave it.

In my opinion, the appropriate Moslem cloth that covers the whole body is the veil that I wear now. It covers more than the head, unlike others many women wear, but it is difficult to tell this to everyone. I only tell my close friends.

I intermingle with anyone, whether they are wearing a veil or not. I teach in an Islamic kindergarten and it is rather exclusive. I take off my veil when I teach the children. Upon leaving school, I put it on again. The children get used to me with my veil. They are neither afraid of me nor surprised. I am neither harassed, nor placed under pressure by the children or my neighbourhood.

Endah (23 years old)

I used to wear jilbab but I no longer do . My family is not an extremely religious one - just so-so. We fast during Ramadan, celebrate Idul Fitri and, if we remember, keep ritual prayers. I learned more about myself after I joined my friends in a reading-verses group in SMP. I learned that the right way of life was the one written in the holy book. In 1995, when I was in the third grade of SMP, I started wearing jilbab. After wearing jilbab and hanging out with some Islamic friends, I felt as if I had found an oasis away from my life with my family and my neighbourhood, where they would speak rudely, gamble, drink alcohol, etc. I felt comfortable living in my little world: living peacefully without distractions, moving from one verse reading group to another, taking care of my community, lowering my gaze, and reading Islamic books.

Leaving SMU for college, I was separated from my closest friends. I began to read different kinds of books in the library, and I compared my way of life with that of others. I asked myself: Is my world this narrow?

Later, I began to change my appearance, moving from a very long jilbab to a shorter one. I met a lot of people, discussed everything, dared to question myself about the jilbab I wore. Why did I not have the courage to take it off? Was I afraid of being mocked by others? How did jilbab influence my spiritual life? I questioned myself on the fanaticism of people and their beliefs. In short, I thought any religion basically taught good deeds.

I want to live in peace and comfort. I want to live a life with conscious choices because I realize everything depends on me. With the strong will to be a new human being, I finally take off my jilbab.

Riska Andini (21 years old)

I wear jilbab because I got used to it. I was already used to it by the time I was in an Islamic schooling programme in SMU for a year. After that, I found that I lacked confidence when I did not wear it. I only felt comfortable with it.

My chin was pierced but it was not fashionable. I did it in response to the challenge of my friends: “Come on, we dare you to get pierced!”

I want to supervise all of my doing with jilbab but I smoke. My parents know it but I dare not smoke in front of them. Honestly, I keep thinking about these things. So far I have been in a tolerant community, so I am not burdened with these things.

I have a boyfriend. I do what people commonly do on dates. I wish my jilbab was not a barrier between me and someone I like. In my opinion, jilbab is just a piece of cloth. I think that way so that I do not feel naked when I do not wear it.

Apart from my college activity, I joined in the Brit/Indie Pop community called “Common People”. We often have discussions. Now, we have a project: to issue a music magazine. I am the only woman in jilbab among them.

Angki printed each as a life-size photo. Then, the photo was pasted onto a piece of thin board with a leg to prop it up. The head of each photo was omitted, allowing

visitors to 'put their own heads onto' each figure in the installation. The interviews were recorded and visitors could listen as they pleased. They were like footnotes. Through her art work, Angki seemed to ask, "If you were a Moslem woman living in Indonesia, what would you wear to show your ideology and identity?"

Moslem women in Indonesia can freely interpret the wearing of jilbab. It is elastic, flexible, and can be applicable to any circumstances the wearer might face.