

How Indonesia Became a World Leader in Islamic Education: A Historical Sociology of a Great Transformation

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Abstract

Over the past twenty years, educators around the world have worked to devise curricula to educate students about how to live together as citizens in diverse societies. In Muslim educational circles, this task has been made additionally challenging by jurisprudential legacies from classical times that make strict and hierarchical distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims. This essay presents a historical sociology of educational reform in Islamic schools in Indonesia with regards to education about citizenship and nation. This study shows that the late-nineteenth century ascendance of madrasa-like institutions across the Indonesian archipelago meant that the widespread adoption of a more-or-less standardized fiqh-focused curriculum (like that long common in Middle Eastern and South Asian madrasas) coincided with two other developments: the rise of Indonesian nationalism, with an emphasis on multi-religious citizenship, and the spread of modernist-style “Islamic schools” (*sekolah Islam*) with a broad-based academic curriculum. The coincidence of these three currents ensured that here in Indonesia Islamic schooling adopted a general curriculum emphasizing the sciences of the world in addition to Islamic sciences more readily than in many other Muslim lands. In a manner that anticipated a shift recently seen in other Muslim-majority countries, Islamic educators did so while also prioritizing Islamic ideals of the public good (*maslahat*) and purpose-driven (*maqasid*) ethics over legal formalism, and rallying to the ideal of Indonesian traditions of multi-religious citizenship. In all these regards, Islamic higher education contributed greatly to contemporary Indonesia’s cultural and democratic reform.

Keywords: *Islamic education, Indonesia, curricular reform, civic education, Islamic ethics*

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Introduction

Over the past generation, the challenge of achieving civic harmony in the midst of societal diversity has become more pressing in nations around the world. In Western liberal democracies in the 2000s, the confluence of mass immigration, alt-right populisms, and racialized violence shook public confidence in once widely-shared assumptions as to democracy, diversity, and citizen belonging. This loss of confidence in received formulae for inclusive citizenship in Western nations was paralleled by an even greater sense of alarm in the Muslim-majority world, after the hopeful dreams of the 2011 Arab Spring gave way to a bleak Arab winter. In fact, all across the world, globalization, regional wars, and the increased circulation of people, capital and ideas have made the challenge of plurality and citizen co-existence all the more pressing.

Against the backdrop of the global challenge of diversity, I want in this essay to talk about Muslim educational and ethical traditions for living together as citizens in modern Indonesia. As is well known, Indonesia has had its share of ethno-religious conflicts in recent years, including those in eastern Indonesia during the first three years of the post-Soeharto transition (1998–2001). But of all of the world's Muslim-majority countries, Indonesia has been among the most successful at transitioning to a functioning and fair electoral democracy, and upholding a practice of multi-religious citizenship.

The fact that Indonesia has achieved these things in an age of global democratic challenge is, I would argue, not just a sociological accident. It is instead the result of distinctive synergies in Indonesian Muslim education and society, where the question of civic-pluralist coexistence has been debated since the dawn of Indonesian nationalism, and especially intensively among Indonesian Muslim educators since the 1980s. The quality and abundance of Islamic educators and scholars working on matters of civic education, democracy, and Pancasila pluralism today is largely a result of the visionary commitment of Muslim mass organizations and Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs to citizenship education and the *maslahat* public good. Muslim educators in Indonesia's state Islamic university system have, in particular, played the leading role in promoting an operating consensus on citizenship and nation, not through a European secularist privatization of religion, but by encouraging Muslim scholars and the public *to dig more deeply and contextually* into their religious heritage to develop Islamic resources for citizenship and the public good.

Elsewhere (Hefner, 2009; 2011), I have referred to Indonesian educational initiatives like these as an example of the *intellectualization and maslahat-ization* of Islamic learning and ethics. Intellectualization and maslahatization have been trademarks of Indonesian Islamic education and welfare activism since the

establishment of the Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama in the early years of the twentieth century (Dhofier, 1999; Mulkhan, 2010; Nakamura, 2012). By intellectualization and maslahatization, I mean the deployment of Islamic ethical ideals, education, and jurisprudential methodologies to new challenges and purposes, so as to serve the public good (*maslahat*) in an inclusive and purpose-driven manner. Reforms in Islamic education and Indonesian traditions of Muslim associational life have together worked to encourage these processes. Education on Muslim public ethics, in particular, enables Muslim believers in Indonesia to understand their faith and religious ethics in ways that bear a striking resemblance to reformist ideas promoted by reform-minded figures like Tariq Ramadan (2009), Muhammad Khalid Masud (2005), and Ibrahim Moosa (2001; 2005). That is to say that Islamic education in Indonesia, particularly at its tertiary or university level, has made unprecedented progress toward creating institutions dedicated to integrating the Islamic sciences with the sciences of the world, and the *maslahat* public good with multi-religious citizenship. That, in any case, is my claim in this essay. Let's now perhaps dig a bit more deeply into the question of how Indonesian Muslims have achieved this educational and ethical feat.

Intellectualization and Maslahatization in Islamic Education

The first feature that distinguishes the history of Islamic education in *Nusantara* (the Indonesian archipelago) from that in the core areas of the Muslim Middle East has to do with the relatively late-arrival in the Indonesian archipelago—in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—of an institutional equivalent of the classical Middle Eastern *madrasa* with a comprehensive curriculum in the Islamic sciences. Certainly, from the first arrival of Islam in the archipelago, there were critical elements of jurisprudential (*fiqh*) learning, not least those having to do with Muslim practices of prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, almsgiving, and other aspects of social and devotional observance. However, madrasas (known locally as *pesantren* or *pondok pesantren*) with a full, in-depth curriculum, including both the Islamic sciences and sciences of the world like that commonplace in the Middle East and South Asia since the eleventh century, became a prominent feature on the Islamic social landscape in Indonesia, only four centuries after the first waves of conversion to Islam (Hefner, 2016). As a result of this historical sequencing, Islam in the Indonesian archipelago for most of its first centuries was deeply Islamic, but not in a way that prioritized a comprehensive study or implementation of jurisprudence. Certainly, the first centuries of Islamization in the archipelago saw the dissemination of authentically Islamic traditions of knowledge and practice, but most were organized in an Islamic register that again, while including *fiqh* elements, did not emphasize the law's comprehensive study. As M.B. Hooker has observed, most

traditions of Islamic learning during the first centuries of Islamization “pushed the rationalization of the mystic mode to its furthest conclusions,” and “its effect was non- or indeed anti-legalistic” (Hooker, 1983, p. 11; cf. Hefner, 2016; Lohlker, 2021, p. 193; Ricci, 2011). “Anti-legalistic” is certainly hyperbolic, since *fiqh* informed even elementary features of Islamic worship and social interaction. But the point is that the Islamic sciences celebrated in most Islamic study circles during this early period had not yet adopted a curriculum premised on *fiqh* as the queen of the Islamic sciences (cf. Berkey, 1992).

Much that is unique about the history of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago can be traced back to this distinctive cultural and educational legacy. To appreciate its importance, it’s helpful to put Islamic education in Indonesia during these early centuries in a comparative Muslim perspective. In its classical Middle Eastern form, the *madrassa* was a college for intermediate and advanced instruction in the Islamic sciences in general, and of *madhab*-based Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) in particular. In the Middle East, the first *madrassas* appeared in the tenth century, three centuries after the age of the Prophet Muhammad, but still early in the Middle East’s cultural Islamization. By the twelfth century the *madrassa* had become “perhaps the most characteristic religious institution of the medieval Near Eastern urban landscape” (Berkey, 2003, p. 187; see also Berkey, 1992; Makdisi, 1981). From the perspective of Islamic law and ethics, the rise of the *madrassa* in Middle Eastern Islam represented a critical juncture because it facilitated a “recentering and homogenization” of Islamic knowledge and authority (Berkey, 2003, p. 189; see also Chamberlain, 1994; Grandin & Gaborieau, 1997). In particular, the *fiqh*-focused *madrassa* canon came to occupy a privileged place in elite educated understandings of Islam. And *fiqh* came to be regarded as the queen of the Islamic sciences.

As Jajat Burhanudin (2006), Azyumardi Azra (1992), M.B. Hooker (1983), and other scholars have demonstrated, during its first centuries Islamic education in Southeast Asia had a *tasawwuf*-mystic more than a *madrassa*-based and comprehensively legal-minded cast. Transregional networks of scriptural Islamic learning *were* operative during this period, as Azyumardi Azra and others have shown. However, the books of theology, grammar, Prophetic biography, and moral edification that circulated across the archipelago looked to saints and the life of the Prophet more than they did to the full breadth of Islamic jurisprudence. In fact, early-modern Southeast Asia had little of the educational infrastructure associated with the Middle Eastern *madrassa*. As a result, prior to the late nineteenth century, *fiqh* had some scholarly enthusiasts, and Shafi’i handbooks circulated in scholarly circles, but jurisprudence as a systematic whole had a relatively limited place in popular ethical discourse and lived practice. This circumscribed engagement with comprehensive *fiqh* study was not just the consequence of the late ascendance of a

pondok with a more comprehensive curriculum in the Islamic sciences. It also reflected the fact that “legal administration often remained in the hands of the old elites, consisting of courtiers and other noblemen” rather than fiqh scholars; as a result, the social contract underlying early Muslim polities continued “to be conceived in terms of allegiance to the person of ruler” rather than an Islamic legal system (Kersten, 2017, p. 24).

It is important *not* to see this Islam Nusantara legacy as an example of some sort of Indonesian exceptionalism or, least of all, “syncretism” or deviation with regard to things Islamic. The Turkish historian of Islam, Ahmet Karamustafa (2007), and the late Shahab Ahmed (2016), among others, have shown that in premodern times there was a similarly heterogeneous rather than fiqh-focused disposition to Muslim education and ethical culture across broad swaths of Central Asia and the region Ahmed has referred to as “Balkans to Bengal”. Muhammad Khaled Masud (2002) has made a similar point with regard to the influence of *adab* on ethical traditions in South Asian Islam in premodern times.

Inevitably, however, as the modern era advanced, Indonesia’s Islamic educational infrastructure changed. As is well known, from the late eighteenth century onward (and especially after the middle of the nineteenth century) a growing interaction with centers of pilgrimage and learning in the Middle East brought about a heightened and more comprehensive educational engagement with fiqh-based normativity (Vredenburg, 1962). From the middle decades of the nineteenth century onward, the Indonesian and Malaysian equivalent of the Middle Eastern madrasa, that is, the *pondok* or *pesantren*, became a prominent feature on the social landscape across the Indonesian archipelago. Just as with classical madrasas in the Muslim Middle East, the study of Qur’an, the Sunnah of the Prophet, and a greatly expanded emphasis on fiqh jurisprudence and other classical Islamic sciences lay at the heart of the *pesantren* curriculum.

But this was not the end of Muslim Indonesia’s educational and public ethical story, because Islamic education in Indonesia was dynamic and about to undergo another far-reaching transformation. What do I mean? The changes to which I am referring had to do with the scholarly commentaries long at the heart of Southeast Asia’s *pesantren* boarding schools and known as the “yellow books” (*Kitab kuning*), because of the color of the paper on which they were printed in the late nineteenth century. Most *kitab*s are commentaries (Ind., *syarah*; Ar., *sharh*) in the local dialect and/or Arabic, discussing an older text which was itself a commentary or gloss on some earlier Arabic text. For many years, scholars of Islamic history, including the late Clifford Geertz, had assumed that the *kitab* curriculum in late twentieth century boarding schools in the archipelago had remained unchanged for centuries. However, two studies of the *Kitab kuning*, the first

published in 1886 by the Dutch colonial scholar, L.W.C. van den Berg, and the second, a pathbreaking work published in 1990 by Martin van Bruinessen today allow us to appreciate just how much the content of the curriculum in Indonesia's pondok-pesantren boarding schools had changed, in a manner that facilitated a remarkable broadening of educational and ethical horizons (Berg, 1886, pp. 519–55; Bruinessen, 1990, pp. 226–269).

Van den Berg's research revealed that, although commentaries drawing on the Qur'an and *hadith* (traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammed) were already widely used in boarding schools in the late nineteenth century, full *hadith* collections were not yet widely studied. The absence is surprising because, as noted above, in the Middle East *hadith* study has long been part of the core curriculum of institutions of higher Islamic learning, because mastery of *hadith* collections is considered essential for intermediate and advanced study in Islamic jurisprudence. Equally surprising, in van den Berg's era there was only one *kitab* in the boarding school curriculum dedicated to Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*). A century later, based on exhaustive travel to schools across Indonesia and the collection of 900 textbooks, Martin van Bruinessen (1990, p. 229) discovered just how much the boarding school curriculum had altered its pedagogical priorities:

[A] significant change has taken place in the past century. There are no less than ten different Qur'anic commentaries (in Arabic, Malay, Javanese, and Indonesian) in the collection, besides straightforward translations (also called *tafsir*) into Javanese and Sundanese. The number of *hadith* compilations is even more striking. There is almost no *pesantren* now where *hadith* is not taught as a separate subject. The main emphasis in instruction remains, however, on *fiqh*, the Islamic science par excellence. There have been no remarkable changes in the *fiqh* texts studied, but the discipline of *usul al-fiqh* (the foundations or bases of *fiqh*) has been added to the curriculum of many *pesantren*, thereby allowing a more flexible and dynamic view of *fiqh*.

All this is to say, then, that in just one century the study of *kitab* in Indonesian *pesantren* boarding schools had been reconfigured so as to ground educational epistemologies in three subjects that together facilitate a significant broadening of intellectual horizons: Qur'anic interpretation; the study of the Traditions of the Prophet (*hadith*); and instruction in the general principles of jurisprudence (see also Lukens-Bull, 2005, pp. 57–58). These changes offer vivid proof that, contrary to critics' portrayals, traditionalist education in Indonesia has been anything but static or backward-looking over the past century.

These innovations in *pesantren* education were additionally important because they soon interacted with a second development in Indonesia's Islamic

educational sphere: the rise of modernist education and “Islamic schools” (*sekolah Islam*) as promoted by reformist groups like the Muhammadiyah. Contrary to what is sometimes said about traditionalist and modern Islam in Indonesia, the interaction of educators in these two communities was not a negative zero-sum process. Inevitably, there were occasional tensions; however, viewed across the broader historical expanse, interaction between educators in these two communities enriched Indonesian Islamic education as a whole, because the curriculum reforms introduced by modernists spread in two decades to pesantren boarding schools, and, conversely, modernists came to recognize the importance of the Islamic sciences mastered in pesantren schools.

What did this educational change involve and why did it occur? Faced with the threat of European colonialism, modernists in groups like the Muhammadiyah concluded—like their counterparts in Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey and Morocco—that the most effective educational instrument for the safeguarding of the Muslim community was, not just the pesantren with its fiqh-centered madrasa curriculum, but the “Islamic day school” (Ind., *sekolah Islam*; see Azyumardi, Afrianty & Hefner, 2007) with its mix of general education and Islamic sciences.

Why was this important? This educational history is so familiar to most Indonesian educators and scholars that its full ethical and educational importance is sometimes not fully appreciated. The new, modernist-promoted madrasa education was not just a matter of blackboards, class levels, girls’ education, and a curriculum that included science, mathematics and history, although modernist schooling featured all of these innovations. But modernist education also sought to do something larger and more ethically consequential: make Islamic schooling a force for not just personal and communal piety, but also for good works and far-reaching reforms in society. Indonesia’s modernists of course did not at all repudiate fiqh or the classical Islamic sciences. But they insisted that a proper understanding of the Islamic sciences requires believers to *intellectualize and contextualize Islamic education and ethics* through a return to the Qur’an and Sunna and a new commitment to the sciences of the world that had flourished in the Muslim Middle East and South Asia from the eighth to fifteenth centuries (Gutas, 1998). The modernists, and soon their Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) counterparts, also invoked the long-recognized legal concept of *maslahat* or “public interest” to emphasize that education should facilitate not just individual piety or ethical behavior, but good works for the well-being of all in society. In more recent decades some educators have gone further, insisting that *maslahat* interests were themselves derivative of the “higher aims of the shariah” (*maqasid al-shari’ah*; see Djamil, 1995, p. 60; Johnston, 2007).

Over the long run, what was important in this shift toward a new intellectualization and *maslahatization* of *Muslim education* was not just the specific ethical or *fiqh* arguments it facilitated. What was especially significant was that these reforms legitimated an opening of Islamic education and ethics in Indonesia to the empirical sciences of the modern world and, with that, an understanding of Islamic *shariah* as involving not just specific rules or regulations, but also the public good (*maslahat*). The latter more purposive and empirical understanding of *shariah* ethics is one that has become widespread in modern Muslim educational circles (see Moosa, 2005; Nassery, Ahmed & Tatari, 2018; Ramadan 2009). What is less commonly recognized is that Indonesian Muslim educators were themselves trending toward this understanding of Islamic *shariah* as ethics from the first decades of the twentieth century—well ahead of their Muslim educational peers in other parts of the world. The change was important, then, because it socialized the conviction that Islamic education should facilitate both individual piety and good works in society—good works defined in terms of not merely conformity to the formal letter of the law, but also to the holistic spirit of the law as expressed in real-world improvements in education, health, family economy and social justice.

On this point the example of Islamic educators in Indonesia speaks to a much-discussed challenge in modern Islamic education, *fiqh* and ethics. In an important article on Islamic ethics, the South African-born University of Notre Dame Muslim scholar, Ebrahim Moosa, has argued that there has been a tendency in some conservative Muslim legal circles in modern times to adopt what Moosa calls a “doctrinaire traditionalism”. He argues that many modern Muslim legal scholars subscribe to a “static and idealistic notion of history,” with the result that “Contemporary experiences do not qualify to influence adaptation and change to the law or ethics” (Moosa, 2005, p. 241). He then points out, however, that in recent years a small movement for “critical traditionalism” has emerged. Its central characteristic is to “affect a new knowledge synthesis,” one based on putting “traditional Muslim religious sciences in dialogical engagement with the modern social sciences and humanities”. Surprisingly, Moosa concludes his insightful article with the rather gloomy observation that, “Contemporary Muslim thinkers have yet to devise a satisfactory ethical theory in which the dialogic of transcendent norms and history are effectively demonstrated” (p. 242).

Whatever the applicability of this latter generalization to education and ethical thought in some Muslim-majority lands, it does not apply to Indonesia. Since the rise of both modernist and a reformed traditionalist education in the early decades of the twentieth century, Muslim educators, beginning with Muhammadiyah but quickly including those in NU, have worked diligently “to affect a new knowledge synthesis, starting with traditional Muslim religious sciences in

dialogical engagement with the modern social sciences and Humanities” (Moosa, 2005, p. 241). The far-reaching curricular reforms implemented over the past twenty years in the UIN/IAIN State Islamic universities have taken these impressive educational reforms only further. They have established Islamic higher education in Indonesia as among the finest in the world. I would even be so bold as to declare that these educational reforms have laid the foundation for an open and innovative educational curriculum like that which flourished in early Abbasid Society in Baghdad from the eighth to tenth centuries. Emerging in the aftermath of the so-called translation movement, the latter provided the foundation for the cultural and scientific renaissance of the tenth to the fifteenth century, when Islamic learning and science were arguably the most advanced in the world (Gutas, 1998; Saliba, 2007).

Here in Indonesia, the changes in Muslim educational practices and ethical thinking also opened Islam Nusantara to the last of the remarkable Indonesian innovations about which I wish to speak in this essay: the proliferation of modern social welfare associations. In this sphere, too, Muslim educators and intellectuals wrought important changes both in Islamic learning and applied social ethics.

Muslim Mass Organizations as Sites of Maslahat Education

The impact of Indonesian Islam’s broadened educational and ethical horizons has never been limited to formal learning and pedagogies. The reforms also encouraged new forms of associational life and what we might call a purposive or *maqasid*-oriented shariah ethics. Indonesia’s mass-based Muslim social welfare organizations are institutions that, in good Bourdieu-ian manner, we should recognize as part of the informal education so central to Muslim social life. Education, especially of an ethical sort, is not limited to the learning processes that take place in formal school buildings; it occurs across the broad expanse of social life (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). And here in Indonesia some of the most important and transformative education on the public good occurs in Muslim mass organizations like NU and Muhammadiyah.

Why is it important to emphasize this? Viewed from a comparative Islamic perspective, Indonesia has the most “associationalized” variety of Muslim social organization in the world. As Danielle Lussier and Steven Fish observed in a 2012 article, Indonesia is unusual among lower-middle income countries in that it has “extraordinary levels of civic engagement”—as measured by average number of memberships householders have in civic and social welfare organizations (political parties, community associations, religious groups, etc.; see Lussier & Fish, 2012, p. 74). Indonesians’ levels of civic membership are the highest among Southeast Asian countries, and also significantly higher than those of their counterparts in Middle

Eastern countries. No less significant, and entirely unlike their female counterparts in countries like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco and Turkey, Indonesian women's rates of participation in religious associations and meetings is "virtually identical" to the high rates of participation found among their male counterparts. Together these circumstances allow Muslim society in Indonesia to sustain an "unusually vibrant associational life" (Lussier & Fish, 2012, p. 70)—and one in which women as well as men are encouraged to link their education and ethical values as Muslims to virtuous deeds in the world.

What does associationalism have to do with Islamic education and *maslahat* public ethics? The answer to this question is that the mass associations organized by groups like Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama are not just formal structures—on the contrary, they have played a major role in educating believers in a profound way as to how to realize Muslim values in society. To take but one example of this far-reaching *Islam transformatif*, today the reformist Muhammadiyah has some twenty-five million members. It manages 12,000 schools, 167 institutions of higher learning, 421 orphanages, 345 polyclinics and hospitals, and a nationwide bank (Bank Pengkreditan Rakyat; see Njoto-Feillard 2012). Here in practice is demonstrable evidence of a distinctive and *maslahatized* understanding of Islamic ethics and education. Although this process of public-good activism was pioneered by the Muhammadiyah more than a century ago, it was soon replicated in other Islamic welfare associations like the Nahdlatul Ulama and, at the provincial level, groups like the *Pesantren As'adiyah* network in South Sulawesi.

In Indonesia, associational life is educational in the deepest sense then, in that it teaches Muslims how to realize basic Islamic values in concrete forms defined not just by abstract conformity to the letter of the law (although this too can be and is typically respected), but by some applied and empirically measured notion of *maslahat* public good. The good deeds include educating young people, caring for orphans, healing the sick in hospitals and clinics, counseling women in times of family trauma, and struggling for social justice. This real-world realization of Muslim ethical values teaches people in a very practical and empirical way just what Islam's ethical priorities are. As recent studies of Islamic social work have similarly emphasized (Schmid & Sheikhzadegan, 2022), these welfare-oriented activities also bring into existence whole groups of Muslim specialists—doctors, nurses, educators, social workers, administrators—whose expert knowledge is seen not as secular or un-Islamic, but as thoroughly consistent with the higher aims (*maqasid*) of the shariah (cf. Hallaq, 2011; Opwis, 2007). It is no coincidence that one of the more unique features of Muslim society in Indonesia is that the term *ulama* can be applied to not just scholars of the Islamic sciences, but also to pious Muslims who also command expertise in some scientific or technical field. Here too we see

evidence of the way in which Muslim education and ethics in Indonesia have been linked to a *maslahat* notion of the public good.

Associationalism and National Citizenship

This brings me to the third and last of the legacies I wish to highlight as constituents of modern Muslim education's contribution to citizenship and the public good in Indonesia. It was the conviction among most, if not all, Indonesian Muslims that Islamic values and ideals are consistent with the multi-ethnic and multi-religious ideals of Indonesian nationhood. We all know that this commitment was not uncontested. Muslim leaders like Kartosuwirjdo rejected nationalism outright as an un-Islamic principle of political organization (Dijk, 1981; Formichi, 2012). Indeed, in the 1950s and early 1960s, struggles over nationhood, citizenship, and the place of Islamic law in the Indonesian legal system were at times so fierce that Indonesia looked as if it might descend into a downward spiral of violence over the question of the place of Islamic legal traditions in the new nation (see Feener, 2007; Lindsey, 2012).

But the Muslim proponents of multi-religious nationalism and citizenship in Indonesia persisted and by the 1980s and 1990s they were again the dominant current in Muslim society. And it was the great commitment of Muslim educators to Pancasila democracy and multi-religious citizenship from this period on that made possible Indonesia's return to democracy in 1998–1999. *Muslim Indonesians' commitment to multi-religious nationalism and plural democracy was not the result of coercive state engineering or non-Islamic heritages, as some Western analysts have claimed.* Indonesia's return to democracy in 1998–1999 built on the ethical and epistemological revolution wrought in Islamic education in Indonesia over the course of more than a century, culminating in the reforms to the State Islamic System of Higher Education in the 1990s and 2000s (Jabali & Jamhari, 2002), along with its private Muhammadiyah and NU counterparts. In its effort to link scriptural knowledge to education and welfarist good deeds, Islamic higher education in Indonesia realizes the reformed Muslim ethics about which Tariq Ramadan (2009) spoke when he appealed for the integration of *ulama an-nusus* ("text scholars") with *ulama al-waqi'* ("context scholars", i.e., scholars of the sciences of the world).

This history also helps us to understand why Indonesian Muslim educators have not merely followed, but taken the lead in, what I have called "the normative work" of creating and publicly transmitting an Indonesian and Islamic tradition of pluralist citizenship. As Masykuri Abdillah (1997) showed in his work on Indonesian Muslim intellectuals and activists in the late 1990s, Indonesian Muslims did not just embrace the ideals of democracy, human rights and constitutionalism in the 1990s,

but ensured their broad popular acceptance by adapting them to an Indonesian and Islamic context. As Achmad Ubaedillah (2018) and his colleagues have demonstrated in the textbooks on civic education they have crafted for the Ministry of Religion, and as Azhar Ibrahim highlighted in his 2012 article in *Studia Islamika* (Ibrahim, 2012), since the early years of the *Reformasi* period in post-Soeharto Indonesia, Indonesian Muslim intellectuals have grappled with the thorny question of how to live together in a plural world. None of these achievements were easy—they are not easy in any nation of the world. These same achievements are also not free of contention. However, as the British Muslim sociologist Tariq Modood has argued, the modern ideal of pluralist or multicultural citizenship builds on a practice of citizenship that is lived “in a plural, dispersed and dialogical way and not reduced to legal rights, passports, and franchise” (Modood, 2007, p. 146).

In the case of Indonesia, a sustainable commitment to Pancasila democracy and inclusive citizenship was only possible as a result of the great *ethical and epistemological labors* carried out by a full generation of Indonesian Muslim educators in support of the conviction that democracy and Pancasila pluralism are entirely compatible with Islam. Certainly, the efforts of Indonesia’s Muslim educators are a work in progress, and one subject to challenge by more exclusive-minded activists and politicians. But the achievements of Indonesia’s Muslim educators are real and, in every respect, deserving of international recognition.

Conclusion

By linking good deeds and the public good to the ideals and practices of multi-religious citizenship, Muslim educators in Indonesia have laid the foundation for a *maslahat*-based understanding and practice of Islamic ethics. That remarkable synergy has been demonstrated in three achievements that underlie Indonesian democracy today: a commitment to multi-religious nationalism; an epistemological and educational revolution comparable in multidisciplinary scope to that which marked the golden age of Muslim science six hundred years ago; and far-ranging social welfare programs carried out by NU, Muhammadiyah and other Muslim mass organizations.

In all these regards, it is clear that the richest resources for pluralist citizenship and multicultural flourishing in Indonesia don’t lie in Indonesia’s pre-Islamic past, as some Western analysts of Indonesian traditions of tolerance have suggested. The most important resources are thoroughly modern—and linked in particular to Islamic higher education and Muslim social welfare associations. The legacy of the Muslim community’s intellectualization and *maslahatization* of education, public ethics, and governance remains a powerful force in Indonesian public life. It is one of the most remarkable achievements of Islam Nusantara.

This Indonesian legacy also offers lessons to all humanity on living together harmoniously in an age of deep religious plurality. The essence of this message is that, if humanity is to live together in deeply plural societies, people of faith must do as Indonesian Muslim educators have done: draw on the deepest values of one's own religious tradition to affirm a common good premised on citizen inclusivity and universal human dignity. That is an important and transformative message indeed.

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