

Islamic Populism in Palembang in the 1950s

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Abstract

This study discusses the emergence of Islamic populism in Palembang in the 1950s. In the official narratives of Indonesian history, the political turbulence in Palembang that occurred in the mid-1950s is often associated with a regional Army commander-led rebellion. This research instead finds that Islamic groups played a crucial role in developing the preliminary conditions before the military group took the initiative to pull the trigger. Islamic groups, through their network of ulama, tried to unite all groups opposed to Jakarta's leadership and communism to incorporate under one umbrella of political identity: Islam. We determine that the emergence of Islamic populism in Palembang was caused by multiple grievances: economic decline, redistribution of welfare to the region, the exclusion of Islamic groups, and the fear of communism. However, Islamic populism only succeeded in uniting factions in the Islamic community but failed to reach other groups because of the social cleavages from previous feuds.

Keywords: Islamic Populism, Palembang Local Politics, Political Turbulence.

Introduction

In the context of Indonesian political studies, the populist approach has recently been widely used to explain modern political phenomena, especially in response to the rise of Islamic politics in modern political contestation. We can clearly see this in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election as well as the 2014 and 2019 Indonesian presidential elections. The purpose of this article is to show that the concept of Islamic populism used to explain modern political phenomena can also be used to clarify events in the past. The concept of populism operated in this article seeks to dissect contestation within Palembang local politics in the 1950s while at the same time providing different arguments relating to the *Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia* (Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia, or PRRI) rebellion.

Compared to events related to the PRRI rebellion in West Sumatra and North

Sumatra, the explanation of the historical local political landscape of Palembang has not been revealed in detail. Through the work of Leirissa¹ and Kahin,² we now have access to more detailed information pertaining to PRRI in these two locations. Palembang experienced the same occurrences as the other two locations, but it was spared from the escalation of the rebellion and ultimately withdrew from the movement. Palembang's retreat asks the question of whether the rebel regional alliance's common objectives could not satisfy Palembang's wishes or whether other causes were at play.

Populism is still a debatable concept in the field of political science today, as the fact that this observation has now become commonplace shows. Mudde and Kaltwasser define populism as a “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’.”³ This thin ideology becomes one layer of the thicker ideologies of nationalism or socialism that offer a more extensive political position and worldview. Hatherell and Welsh chart the development of the earlier notion of populism based on criticism of the use of the term, which is employed by numerous academics to examine Indonesian politics.⁴ They characterize populism as a discourse employed by political elites to recruit supporters and battle rival parties, as well as a crisis narrative that draws an imaginary line between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In other words, elites must create a simple discourse to which ‘ordinary’ people can relate in order to gain followers and delegitimize their opponents.

Populism is also defined as political strategy. Weyland encourages this approach and emphasizes the need for leaders who can gather support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers.⁵ Therefore although populist politics requires the presence of vast community support, it still emphasizes the need for leadership. It connects how interests can be represented and articulated, ultimately arising due to disrupted formal representation. The role of leaders in populism politics is also advocated by Soare, who depicts how the personalities of leaders can

¹ R.Z. Leirissa. *PRRI Permesta: Strategi Membangun Indonesia Tanpa Komunis*. Jakarta: Pustaka Utama Grafitti (1991).

² Audrey Kahin. *Rebellion to Integration: West Sumatra and Indonesian Polity*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press (1999).

³ Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press (2017) : 5-6.

⁴ Michael Hatherell & Alistair Welsh. Populism and the Risks of Conceptual Overreach: A Case Study from Indonesia. *Representation* (2019) DOI:10.1080/00344893.2019.1663904

⁵ Kurt Weyland. Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics. *Comparative Politics*. 34-1, (1-22, 2001).

interpret and reshape this compulsory feature of the thin ideology of populism.⁶ Without the presence of leadership or a leadership figure, populist politics will reach its limitations.

Mietzner coined the term ‘the entrepreneur of grievance’ in the context of Islamic political mobilization in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, emphasizing the ability of Islamic movement leaders to mobilize the masses by converting a variety of issues into something easily digestible for their supporters. Economic grievances from various classes and ethnic sentiments were successfully turned into narratives by movement leaders as a form of discrediting the *ummah* and positioning the regime as the culprit for supporting conditions that are detrimental to the *ummah*.⁷ Meanwhile, Osuna mediates a variety of populist approaches to move the emphasis away from basic definitions and traditional categorizations toward a multidimensional perspective of populism. His approach is based on criticism of minimal conceptualisations of populism, which often fail to seize the empirical diversity of populist ideas, discourses, and practises.⁸

In Indonesia, Islamic populism has been extensively described by a wide array of scholars through their various works. Hadiz’s works on Indonesian Islamic populism discourses are the most well-known.⁹ Hadiz describes populism as asymmetrical inter-class alliances that are unequal in nature and bonded by a grand narrative of a common fate. As such, these populist alliances are full of internal contradictions and vulnerable. Hadiz notes that the distinction between conventional populism and Islamic populism is the use of Islamic narratives to show the *ummah* as objects who are oppressed by their opponents. This approach is also followed by scholars such as Savitri and Andriyanti, who emphasize the emergence of Islamic populism as a method of competing for resources with nationalist

⁶ Sorina Soare. Populism and Leadership: Is There Anything New Under The Sun? *Studia UBB Europaea*. LXII,3 (121-149, 2017) DOI :10.24193/subbeuropaea.2017.3.06.

⁷ Marcus Mietzner, Burhanudin Muhtadi, Rizka Halida. Entrepreneurs of Grievance: Drivers and Effects of Indonesia’s Islamist Mobilization. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia)* 174, (159–187, 2018). doi:10.1163/22134379-17402026

⁸ José Javier Olivas Osuna. ‘From chasing populists to deconstructing populism: a new multidimensional approach to understanding and comparing populism’. *European Journal of Political Research*. Vol 6-4, (2021) 829-853

⁹ Vedi R. Hadiz and Khoo Boo Teik. ‘Approaching Islam and Politics From Political Economy: A Comparative Study of Indonesia and Malaysia’. *The Pacific Review*, (24:4, 2011), 463-485, DOI:10.1080/09512748.2011.596561. Vedi R. Hadiz. ‘Imagine All the People? Mobilising Islamic Populism for Right-Wing Politics in Indonesia’. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* (2018), 3. DOI:10.1080/00472336.2018.1433225.

groups.¹⁰

The approach used by Hadiz and Robison depicts the factual dynamics of Islamic politics amid its development in the post-New Order period in Indonesia.¹¹ Historical tracing was carried out to explain the changes in Islamic political movement patterns during the post-colonialism political transition. In distressed condition due to changes in economic structures, the marginalized classes could join together under the banner of Islam. Through a structural approach, the main problems were dissected through four variables: the changes of the socio-political base of Islam, the influence of economic change and capitalism, state and Islamization, the rise of Islamic politics, and the political and economic crisis. For the purposes of this article, it is important to note that, in these works, Hadiz does not place specifically what happened in Palembang in the 1950s as a basis for explaining the trajectory of Indonesian Islamic politics.

The approach to Islamic populism in this article follows the approach of connectivity between social economic change and political contention from Hadiz to elaborate the political turmoil in 1950s Palembang. It emphasizes the process of the shaping of internal grievances influenced by structural factors as the main ingredient in the development populist politics. It also pays attention to the level of success that lied in the leadership of the movement. Leadership figures became important when looking at the patrimonialist characteristics of Indonesian society at that time. Therefore, the article puts forward the argument that political populism was limited in Palembang because although a populist movement was developed, it suffered from the absence of political figures at crucial times. The causes of leadership absenteeism will be explained in the last part of the second section.

Political-Economic Background of 1950s Palembang

The characteristics of the Islamic political rebellion in the 1950s in South Sumatra were constructed by internal factors, consisting of the economic base of its supporters, which was related to the economic structure of South Sumatra and the local political constellation.

During the Dutch colonial period, Palembang played an important role in the Dutch East Indies economy as a commercial area that traded agricultural export

¹⁰ Laksmi Adriani Savitri & Devi Adriyanti. 'The Demise of Emancipatory Peasant Politics? Indonesia Fascism and The Rise of Islamic Populism'. Conference Paper No. 69 International Institute of Social Studies (ISS). The Hague, Netherlands (2018).

¹¹ Vedi R. Hadiz & Richard Robison. Political Economy and Islamic Politics: Insights from the Indonesian Case. *New Political Economy*, 17:2, 137-155 (2012). DOI: 10.1080/13563467.2010.540322.

commodities such as coffee, pepper, and rubber. The leading agricultural commodity for the global market was rubber and its cultivation peaked in the 1920s when global rubber market demand began to increase.¹² In South Sumatra's hinterland, expansion of rubber cultivation was carried out by local indigenous communities, whose smallholder estates were ultimately even able to compete with rubber estates owned by foreign companies in terms of size and level of production.¹³ Before the fall of the world economy during the Great Depression, the colonial government tended to implement free market policies; this benefitted the regions producing agricultural commodities for export.¹⁴

South Sumatra continued to play an important economic role until after Indonesia declared independence in 1945, including during the Japanese occupation, when the world rubber price skyrocketing, giving temporary prosperity for South Sumatera. However, due to the absence of clear economic planning, the central Indonesian government could not keep its fortunes.¹⁵ As a rubber-producing area, South Sumatra considered the central government to have disrupted their trade routes through integrating regional economies for the national interest. The free trade they had previously enjoyed was disrupted by nationalistic economic programs.

The export value of rubber gradually decreased over time, including as a result of the Korean War. In 1951, the United Nations adopted a resolution to place an embargo on China and North Korea, releasing a list of goods prohibited for export to China. The Indonesian government's budget thus continues to experience a deficit. From mid-1952 to mid-1954, Indonesia lost foreign exchange reserves at a faster rate than any other country in the world. Its budget deficit generated high levels of inflation, primarily caused by the rising price of imported goods in the domestic market.¹⁶ The central government made several attempts to keep commodity exports flowing from Palembang to continue providing much-needed revenue, but ultimately these efforts failed due to corruption and poor management. Although the economic downturn was experienced by all layers of Indonesian society, fragmentation and political polarization determined the

¹² Bambang Purwanto. *From Dusun to Market: Native Rubber Cultivation in Southern Sumatra, 1890-1940*. PhD Thesis in School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (1992): 82.

¹³ James W. Gould. *Americans In Sumatra*. The Hague: Martin Nijhoff (1961).

¹⁴ Jeroen Touwen. "Moving towards a National Economy in Late Colonial Indonesia". *Itinerario*, (23, 1999), 145-161 doi:10.1017/S0165115300024633

¹⁵ Karl J Pelzer. "The Agricultural Foundation" in Bruce Glassburner (ed). *The Economy of Indonesia: Selected Writings* (reprinted edition). Singapore: Equinox Publishing, (2007)

¹⁶ Benjamin Higgins. 1956. Indonesia's Development Plans and Problem. *Pacific Affairs* (Vol. 29 No 2, 1956), 107-125. DOI: 10.2307/2752601

varying actions taken by different political groups across the country.

The local rubber trade route was politicized with the fragmentation political affiliation of actors in the rubber industry. The hinterland areas, where the vast rubber plantations were located, had long been pockets of Islamic strongholds since the pre-independence nationalist movements. Smallholders and middlemen considered Islamic parties as those best able to articulate their interests. Meanwhile, many rubber miller entrepreneurs and exporters Chinese, Arab, or local entrepreneurs who were also high profile members of nationalist parties in Palembang. These different affiliations caused tensions, with smallholders accusing businessmen-politicians in Palembang and Jakarta of playing with rubber prices. These economic grievances became increasingly political after the 1955 general election was held.

However, in the hinterlands, the Islamic groups were not without challengers. There were groups of local aristocrats who held significant political and economic influence, with traditional forms of power supporting them to accumulate both land and political power. During the economic crisis, the traditional aristocrats also suffered losses due to the declining sales of rubber from their land. As their patterns of political affiliation were not determined by ideology, this group was able to place its supporters in a variety of political parties to provide assurance for political change while still retaining access to government offices. This system, coordinating an entire political spectrum within one kindred group or clan, was found to encompass all active political active in the area, including both Islamic and secular parties.¹⁷

In 1955, the first national elections were held in Indonesia. In South Sumatra, Masjumi, an Islamic party, won a majority of votes, followed by *Partai Nasional Indonesia* (Indonesian National Party or PNI) in second place and *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (Indonesian Communist Party or PKI) in third. Two other Islamic parties, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and *Partai Sarekat Islam Indonesia* (Islamic Association Party of Indonesia or PSII), had be satisfied with coming fourth and fifth. Although divided across various political parties, it can be concluded that political parties with Islamic backgrounds dominated in South Sumatra, receiving 63.4% of the total vote.¹⁸

The 1955 election results became an opportunity for Islamic groups to dominate local politics in South Sumatra. Previously, since the revolution they had

¹⁷ M.A. Jaspan. Tolerance and Rejection of Cultural Impediments to Economic Growth: The South Sumatran Case. *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* (3:7, 38-59, 1967) DOI: 10.1080/00074916712331331068

¹⁸ Herbert Feith. *The Indonesian Election of 1955*. Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Cornell University (1971), 81.

had to settle for being on fringes of local political power, which was dominated by figures from secular parties such as A.K. Gani, Mohammad Isa, and Nuntjik A.R. Not only dominating the political field, these secular politicians played important roles in the business sphere as economic-political entrepreneurs. The biggest contribution of votes for Masjumi came from the hinterland areas, where Masjumi activists from Muhammadiyah had campaigned more actively. Most Masjumi leaders in South Sumatra were affiliated with Muhammadiyah, although a few Islamic traditionalist scholars also joined the party. Most of the elected congressmen were old elite figures: politicians, former bureaucrats, and political activists from the Dutch colonial period. Despite having political roles, most also owned trading business that had been active since the colonial and revolutionary periods.

Unfortunately, national elections did not improve the overall political representation of South Sumatrans. National politics affected the local political situation in Palembang, and the conditions worsened when then-Vice President Mohammad Hatta officially resigned from his post on 1 December 1956. Hatta was considered as the person who could balance President Soekarno's views and actions, so his resignation led to widespread uneasiness and even protests, particularly in **Indonesia's** outer islands and in anti-Communist circles. The sympathy for Hatta strengthened anti-Jakarta and anti-Soekarno tendencies.¹⁹ This development coincided with the decline of Masjumi's influence in the central government, causing certain figures in Sumatra to conclude that the time had come to rise up against the central government, which they saw as only serving the interests of Java.

Internal friction within the military added fuel to the turmoil, dragging regionalist sentiments deeper in the vortex of conflict. The splits and disobedience of certain officer groups in the military corps due to reorganization and reassignment further enraged tensions **within the officers' circle**. Military reorganization became a problem not only because of the reassignment of officers but also because of the various economic activities carried out by several officers who were replaced. North and Central Sumatra were among the first to respond, delivering a series of demands for autonomy and economic improvement which led to civilian government takeover by local military commanders. The tension then began to spread to the south.²⁰

¹⁹ B.J. Boland. *The Struggle of Islam in Modern Indonesia*. Leiden: KITLV (1982), 87.

²⁰ Herbert Feith. *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia* (reprinted edition). Singapore: Equinox Publishing (2007), 535.

South Sumatran Reaction

On 27 December 1956, community leaders, students, laborers, peasants, and political party members gathered at City Hall in Sekanak Street, Palembang. In a meeting led by the then-Mayor of Palembang, Ali Amin, two main issues were discussed: the issue of regional development and a fair financial balance between the regions and the center. Among those who spoke at the meeting were M. Hasyim, a former officer, and Mattjik Rosyad, a revolutionary veteran. The meeting decided to form a Channeling Body for the Wishes of the Community of South Sumatra (*Badan Penyalur Kehendak Masyarakat Sumatera Selatan*, or BPKMSS) which consisted of Ali Amin as chairman alongside Demyi Husin, Rasyad Nawawi, and Pangeran Tjikmat.²¹

Unlike the Banteng Council and Gajah Council, two other PRRI groups, BPKMSS was trying to pursue a legal path to resolve the problems. The December 1956 meeting raised a resolution that contained at least two key points. First, the people's movement in Palembang was for economic demands for better development. Second, all movements must be aimed at constructive efforts in the procedures of the Republic of Indonesia constitution, which must be defended by South Sumatran people. Nevertheless, BPKMSS still forced Winarno Danuatmodjo, the Governor of South Sumatra at the time and a PNI member from Java, to resign.²²

In each BPKMSS meeting, there were invariably voices encouraging the group to follow same method used in Central Sumatra and North Sumatra. The path taken by BPKMSS was often considered soft and less revolutionary in urging the central government to meet the demands of the people of South Sumatra. BPKMSS sent a delegation of representatives from civilian groups to Jakarta to lobby the central government for the immediate realization of the development of South Sumatra and financial balance between the center and regions.²³ As a result, the central government provided financial compensation to Central and South Sumatra and promise to examine the regions' demands.²⁴

The traditional aristocrats held an indigenous congress in Palembang on 15-17 January 1957. The congress issued the South Sumatra People's Struggle Charter, which contained demands for the implementation of development, regional autonomy, and financial balance for the regions, alongside a request to form a new

²¹ Mochtar Effendy. *Perjuangan Mencari Ridha Tuhan*. Palembang: Penerbit Universitas Sriwijaya (2000), 174.

²² Dedi Irwanto Muhammad Santun. *Venesia Dari Timur: Memaknai Produksi dan Reproduksi Simbolik Kota Palembang Dari Kolonial Sampai Pascakolonial*. Yogyakarta: Penerbit Ombak (2010), 150.

²³ Effendy. *Perjuangan Mencari Ridha Tuhan*, 175.

²⁴ Feith. *The Decline of Constitutional*, 535.

legislative body that included regional representatives. To ensure that the demand was heard by central government, congress participants was agreed to form a Garuda Council, led by Lieutenant Colonel Barlian, a local aristocrat who was also the local military commander. At the same time, the All-Sumatra Indigenous Congress was held in Bukit Tinggi, Central Sumatra, supported by Banteng Council. Both congresses in Palembang and Bukit Tinggi covered the same substance and increased the demand that regional autonomy policy should be adjusted to local traditional laws.²⁵

The Garuda Council was dominated by military officers and veterans who held respected positions in traditional indigenous communities. There was also some small-scale involvement of Islamic groups. Meanwhile, senior political figures, such as A.K. Gani and Mohammad Isa, came from PNI, but, despite being involved in lobbying the central government, decided not to openly support the Garuda Council when it was declared, **taking 'safe' positions for themselves.**²⁶

At the same time, grievances began to be articulated from members of the same social group who were not involved in the congresses. Most of the dissident officers in Sumatra were those who entered the military during the Japanese occupation as part of *Kyōdo Bōei Giyūgun* (*Pembela Tanah Air* or Defenders of the Homeland). One of the requirements for young men who could qualify as *Giyūgun* cadets was education; in Sumatra, the young men who received school education were mostly from upper middle-class backgrounds, including traditional aristocratic, land owning, and bureaucratic families. Some officers in South Sumatra thus held military positions while also being in honorable positions in the indigenous community.²⁷

In South, Central and North Sumatra, the local military commands took the initiative to mobilize forces against Jakarta. The commanders in each region tried hard to appear as the locomotives of dissidents, demonstrating that they could choose the path of struggle through their potential military power. However, Islam remained a decisive factor in gathering support and mobilizing the masses. The ability of religious leaders and Islamic politicians to play religious issues determined how grievances can be capitalized into political movements.

At national level politics, those making regional demands faced deadlocks due to blocked channels. Masjumi, who we should recall were the winning party in regions outside Java, was not able to achieve much at the national level. Gradually,

²⁵ Gusti Asnan. 'Nation, Region and the ambiguities of modernity in Indonesia in the 1950s', in Nordholt, H.S. (ed). *Indonesian Transitions*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar. (2006), 33.

²⁶ Effendy. *Perjuangan Mencari Ridha Tuhan*, 177.

²⁷ Mestika Zed. *Giyugun: Cikal Bakal Tentara Nasional di Sumatera*. Jakarta: LP3ES (2005), 80.

Masjumi's influence began to diminish within the national government, leading them to come under increasing pressure to shout louder the demands of their majority constituents from outer islands. The frustrations of the regions grew further when Soekarno declared his plan to bury parliamentary democracy and return to a presidential government under the 1945 Constitution. Through the strengthening of the centralized political system, the demands for development and regional autonomy, as championed by Masjumi, could thus no longer be fought for through formal tracks.²⁸

Pivotal Move

The decisive element was the return of Masjumi's reliance on religious leaders who openly provided support for local commanders to fight Jakarta and take over the local government in the regions. This move marked the formation of an alliance between Islamic groups and the military, and the beginning of the utilization of Islamic narratives for regional movements. The reaction of Islamic groups was also as response to the strengthening of communist influence at the national and regional levels attacked them. As highly-respected individuals in Muslim communities, religious leaders and their involvement in dissent towards Jakarta could no longer be considered as simply a political issue but also part of a larger struggle to defend Islam.

The communist threat in South Sumatra was relatively low compared to other parts of Indonesia. This was because areas of mass communist support were more numerous in urban areas where **the country's** oil companies were located.²⁹ However, there was a transformation of the narrative of demands around this time: the economic demands that were initially the root of the demands shifted, becoming balanced by an increase in Islamic narratives accompanying the regional protests. The anti-communist attitude of Islamic groups was used as a way to demarcate who were foes and who friends. Having a tolerable demeanor toward the communists (who largely aligned with Soekarno) and **Soekarno's** supporters was exploited as a fulcrum scheme to undermine Islam.

In West Sumatra, both the military and civil political elites were relatively homogeneous, with most people coming from the Minang ethnic group. These conditions facilitated collaboration between Islamic and military groups relatively effectively. As a step to unite the voices of Muslims, senior clerics and Islamic

²⁸ Remi Madinier. *Partai Masjumi: Antara Godaan Demokrasi dan Islam Integral*. Jakarta: Penerbit Mizan (2013), 215-222.

²⁹ Woongkyeun Yeo. *Palembang in the 1950s: The Making and Unmaking of a Region*. PhD Dissertation. University of Washington (2012).

political parties held the All-Sumatra Islamic Scholars' Congress which was held on 15-17 March 1957 in Bukit Tinggi.³⁰ The building of networks between Islamic scholars thereby extended to areas that in turmoil, with the *ulama* and the military preparing active campaigns.

Through this network, it was decided to hold a grand meeting of Islamic clerics to unite their voices against the central government. The event was planned to take place in Palembang. In general, large gatherings of *ulama* were often utilized as a strategy to show the strength and solidity of the *ummah*. Through these meetings, the *ulama* would seek to find joint solutions to national problems, pressing the central government harder to accommodate the interests of the people.

After careful preparation, the All-Indonesia Islamic Scholars' Congress was held in Palembang on 8-11 September 1957. Members of Masjumi and Muhammadiyah's local branch became the core members of the congress committee. The congress in Palembang witnessed the beginnings of cooperation between local modernist and traditionalist Islamic groups, who had previously never got along because of differences in schools of thought. The two groups came together over several issues at the congress, but the key issue was a feeling of injustice against Islam and the fear of the strengthening of communism. Masjumi utilized this conference to broaden their political campaign and gather Islamic forces to form a counter-offensive against Jakarta. However, as a result of the heated political constellation at the time, Nahdlatul Ulama as an Islamic organization did not send official representatives to Palembang due to differing views on several issues, such as centralization, regional autonomy, nationalization, and issues concerning the representation of Java and the outer islands.³¹

At the same time as the conference, a group of dissident officers – Lieutenant Colonel Barlian, Lieutenant Colonel Ahmad Husein, Colonel Zulkifli Lubis, and even Lieutenant Colonel Ventje Sumual, military commander in Sulawesi – gathered in Palembang. Dahlan Djambek, the former Bukit Barisan Military Commander, who had been transferred to Army Headquarters in Jakarta, was also present in Palembang. Djambek attended the Islamic scholars' congress, not only as a soldier but also as the son of the one Central Sumatra's great clerics, Sjech Muhammad Djamil Djambek. They met to formulate a text that contained regional demands to be submitted at the National Conference in Jakarta. The final text of the meeting was called the Palembang Charter, the contents of which were not very different from

³⁰ Asnan. 'Nation, Region and the ambiguities of modernity', 26.

³¹ Ulf Sundhaussen. *Politik Militer Indonesia, 1945-1967: Menuju Dwi Fungsi ABRI*. Jakarta: LP3ES (1986), 169.

previous demands regarding development, regional autonomy, and national and central military leadership, although it included added demands for banning communism.

The opening of the All-Indonesia Islamic Scholars' Congress was held on a Sunday night, on 8 September 8 1957 at Palembang Grand Mosque. Former vice president Mohammad Hatta initially planned to attend the opening of the conference but was ultimately unable to attend; instead, the committee planned to play a recording of a speech Hatta recorded especially for the opening. However, **due to technical trouble, Mohammad Hatta's speech** could not be played at the opening and was only played on the third day. As a Muslim who had known Marxism for a long time, Hatta gave a balanced speech about his views on communism.³² Ironically, Hatta's moderate attitude towards communism made the military commanders and some other participants displeased towards Hatta, although this reaction was not disclosed openly.³³

In the documentation book published by the committee of the All-Indonesia Islamic Scholars Congress, 325 envoys from all regions in Indonesia were recorded as participants across the four days of the congress. The participants consisted of invited scholars, delegates from all districts in Indonesia, members of the Sumatran *Ulama* Council, advisors of the congress' central committee, and provincial committee representatives. Another almost 300 people attended as observers, most of whom were delegates from local Department of Religious Affairs offices in Sumatra and Java. The congress in Palembang was actually more political than the congress in Bukit Tinggi because half of the congress discussion focused on political issues. There were seven priority discussions at the conference: Islamic law, the state, economy, education, history and culture of Islam in Indonesia, religion, and Islamic defense. Almost panel session either open and closed from each section was held in the Masjumi building and Muhammadiyah office.³⁴

It was not surprising that the most heated decision was about communism. All scholars who participated in the congress agreed to issue a *fatwa haram* against communism and urged President Soekarno to issue a decree prohibiting PKI. The congress also issued *fatwa* stating that Muslims who adhere to communism are to be considered infidels and that communist sympathizers would not receive Islamic funeral services after their death.³⁵ Building the Islamic political identity became a

³² Panitia Kongres Alim Ulama. *Buku Dokumentasi Kongres*.

³³ Audrey R. Kahin (ed). *Dari Pemberontakan Ke Integrasi: Sumatera Barat dan Politik Indonesia. 1928-1998*. Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia (2005), 309.

³⁴ Panitia Kongres Alim Ulama. *Buku Dokumentasi Kongres*.

³⁵ The prohibition on dealing with someone's death in an Islamic manner also occurred during the 2017

method for the group to differentiate itself from its competitors at the local level. Such religious rhetoric helped counter the nationalist narrative of Jakarta, even though the group did not explicitly support the establishment of an Islamic state.³⁶

The decisions produced by the All-Indonesia Islamic Scholars Congress and the Palembang Charter were made in the same style. However, this remains a question of interest: how did two different entities issue statements that were almost the same? Although there was cooperation between Islamic organizations and the military, it nevertheless appears that dissidents with more secular backgrounds did not share the same political identity.

Neither the All-Indonesia Islamic Scholars Congress nor the Palembang Charter were apparently able to withstand the continued strengthening of the communist influence in South Sumatra. On 1 December 1957, local elections for the South Sumatra Council was held. When the results were announced in March 1958, Islamic groups and the military were shocked. Although Masjumi still won the majority vote in South Sumatra, PKI was unexpectedly able to increase its votes, finishing in second place and capturing more seats in at the local council level.³⁷ This was despite the fact that all parties in South Sumatra had agreed not to attack each other during the campaign, instead focusing their efforts on submerging PKI.³⁸ The increase in PKI's votes in South Sumatra was a severe blow to its political opponents.³⁹

Under pressure, Palembang gradually began to distance itself from the wishes of their colleagues in Padang. The reversal of Palembang's direction, as the richest region, determined the path of revolt in other regions. Palembang's **withdrawal** from the circle of dissidents has led to many debates for scholars analyzing the movement. Kahin and Leirezza, for example, portray Barlian, the South Sumatra military commander, as the person who most contributed to preventing full-scale civil war in South Sumatra, either through his own initiative or, according to Hatta's version, because Barlian wanted to obey Hatta's advice, who had come to Palembang to advise Barlian not to rebel if he did not want bloodshed.⁴⁰

Jakarta gubernatorial elections. A major Islamic group prohibited Muslims who support Basuki Tjahaya Purnama, who had been accused of blasphemy, from being treated in the Islamic way if they die.

³⁶ Panitia Kongres Alim Ulama. *Buku Dokumentasi Kongres*, 30-35.

³⁷ J. Van der Kroef. 'Disunited Indonesia III'. *Far Eastern Survey* 27-5 (1958), 73. DOI: 10.2307/3024286

³⁸ "South Sumatra Gang-up Against Communist". *Singapore Standard* (23 November 1957)

³⁹ Donald Hindley 'Communist Party strategy in Indonesia 1948-1959'. *Australian Outlook* (13:4, 1959), 253-271. DOI: 10.1080/10357715908444061

⁴⁰ Mavin Rose. *Indonesian Free: A Political Biography of Mohammad Hatta*. Cornell Southeast Asia

Barlian's rational attitude can be explained in several ways. First, the background of the officers' group in South Sumatra was too heterogeneous. In fact, Barlian himself was once almost removed as commander by his subordinate, which resulted in the loss of control of the main airfield in Palembang to Jakarta loyalists. Second, as an economic center in South Sumatra, Palembang had suffered significant losses, so the situation there would worsen if conditions escalate. Third, Barlian had minimal support from outside the military itself. Officers were dominated by individuals from traditional aristocratic backgrounds who, incidentally, were political competitors for Islamic groups in the hinterland.

Ulama networks could be built to unite groups of *ulama* from various regions in Sumatra, but they could not overcome the chronic fragmentation of local politics in South Sumatra. In addition, socio-political cleavages among South Sumatrans proved to be huge barriers to bring people together under one political identity. In addition, Islamic rhetoric could only eliminate barriers between modernist and traditionalist groups, but could not attract other groups such as traditional aristocrats, particularly in the hinterlands, to build cooperation. Local military command also could not mobilize the masses due to the lack of support from civilians and the lack of leadership capable of uniting different groups.

The main challenge in Palembang was the absence of civilian figures who had the capability to lead the movement or become involve in the movement's elite circle. Prominent figures who were respected by the communities and were able to mobilize civilians, as well as political entrepreneurs who could connect dissatisfied groups into alliances, were numerous across the border in Central Sumatra. Mohammad Natsir, Syafruddin Prawiranegara, and Burhanudin Harahap were all national level politicians whose popularity and association with Minang ethnicity could rally strong support in West Sumatra. Likewise for the most respected religious leaders of the community, both traditionalist and modernist, who were determined to provided support for Banteng Council to fight Jakarta. The figures who can perform these roles were not found in South Sumatra. In South Sumatra, the cleavage was between civilian leaders, especially with regard to Islamic groups and the Garuda Council. The groups could only loosely unite because of their shared dislike of the central government, even though their reasons were diverse.

Another key failing was that Islamic groups in Palembang did not make any **moves when local military command could not take action**. Masjumi's local leaders were not typical solidarity makers; they were businessmen, bureaucrats, and religious activists. The clerics, especially those who were members of the Anti-

Program Publications (1991), 320.

Communist Front, sympathized with the rebellion but did not push for meaningful action. The loud calls of the clerics who appeared at the All-Indonesia Islamic Scholars Congress in Palembang also failed to bring about mass mobilization. In fact, after being asked by the Indonesian military, clerics used radio broadcasts to call on the people not to become further involved in the rebellion, as it endangered national unity.⁴¹

In the end, during the period of 1958-1960, the security situation in Palembang gradually normalized despite worsening economic conditions. Throughout the 1950s, the living cost in Palembang was even greater than in Jakarta and in Sumatra's other major city, Medan.⁴² Nationalist hysteria blared in Palembang and ultimately out-shouted the groups' grievances in the shadow of modernity. National identity in Palembang became intertwined to the city's lighthouse projects, which had long been promised yet were always hampered by a lack of financing; now, they were finally being realized.⁴³

Conclusion

This article underlines how crucial it is to consider Islamic politics in their local context when studying Indonesian politics, especially Indonesian Islamic politics. The 1950s saw significant political turbulence, as it was a period when regions which relied on commodities export trade found their economic success disrupted due to a series of government policies that sought to integrate regional economies in the national interest. The economic losses suffered by the ordinary people, who founded the base of Islamic groups, meant that when religious sentiment was raised, groups who were considered the cause of the downturn could also be accused as the ones who threatened Islam's very existence. The rallying of Islamic groups did not signify the triumph of Islamic populism; rather, they were a necessary step in the development of movements and the balancing of discourse between associated groups. Islamic rhetoric did not take off when grievances first emerged but rather when Islamic groups succeeded in the general elections, although this procedure did not provide the desired results in Palembang.

In Palembang in the 1950s, Islamic populism was constrained by the unresolved political fragmentation of local factions, despite the fact that these parties had similar grievances with the central governance. It cannot be denied that the contestation that occurred in Palembang in the 1950s was still influenced by the social groups and economic differentiation that had emerged during the colonial

⁴¹ Effendy. *Perjuangan Mencari Ridha Tuhan*, 470.

⁴² Jaspian. 'Tolerance and Rejection', 41.

⁴³ Santun. *Venesia Dari Timur*, 160-180.

period. The amalgamation of grievances and religious sentiments could be overcome within Islamic groups themselves but failed to reach other groups competing for resources at the local level. Additionally, local Islamic groups lacked leaders with the ability and reputation to support mass mobilization. Inter-regional movement alliances were not helpful in overcoming this restriction. This article shows that we must also recognize the importance of leadership in populist movements in the context of a patrimonialist society.

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