

ROOTS AND ROUTES OF SECULAR & ISLAMIC FEMINISMS IN INDONESIA

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Abstract: With the words quoted below, Gadis Arivia recalled the start of her own and other women's feminist activism in Indonesia two decades ago, opening an interview on August 5, 2016 with Margot Badran on women's activism broadly and on secular and Islamic feminisms in Indonesia and the spirit of mutuality and inclusivity.

Keywords: islamic feminism, islamic feminist discourse, gender equality, gender justice, indonesian islamic feminism

“On February 23, 1998 at the Hotel Indonesia roundabout in Jakarta a group of women gathered chanting, carrying posters, and reading poems while clutching flowers in their hands. There were at least twenty women. They belonged to a group calling themselves Suara Ibu Peduli (SIP), the Voice of Concerned Mothers. They were surveilled by the police and surrounded by journalists. The atmosphere was tense. It was at the end of Suharto's New Order when demonstrations were strictly forbidden. The women activists who came out in the demonstration remained calm despite the announced shoot on-site order directed at those who dared to stage a demonstration. The demonstrators tried to attract the sympathy of motorists in the crowded streets to persuade them to respond to the needs of mothers, children, and the nation. I was one of the demonstrators. I was arrested that day along with Karlina Supelli and Wilasih”.

Margot Badran (MB) *Can you tell us more about the 1998 women's demonstration? Why did you identify as mothers? What role did the women's demonstration and other forms of activism play in igniting the Reformasi, the Reform Era, that began in 1998?*

Gadis Arivia (GA) We were demonstrating for the cause of democracy and bringing down a dictator who had been ruling Indonesia for thirty-two years. As scholars and activists, we

understood the consequences of protesting against the Suharto regime (the New Order 1966 - 1998). Suharto was ruthless and had jailed countless politicians and protesters who criticized him. We had to find a way to gain the sympathy of the public and break the silence. The group of us who had started the *Jurnal Perempuan* (The Women's Journal) in 1996 came up with the idea of exploiting the term "ibu" or mother which the New Order regime had made an icon of the nation's foundation (*Pillar Bangsa*). We used the word "ibu" strategically in the demonstration because we thought that by using that word our women's political activism could deflect suspicion. It worked. Calling ourselves the Voice of Concerned Mothers, the demonstration we led on the 23rd of February 1998 broke the silence against the authoritarian regime. Students later poured into the streets in protest against Suharto. The dictator was forced to resign in May of 1998.

MB *Can you give us a brief background of the history of the women's movement in Indonesia?*

GA The history of Indonesian feminism can be divided into four phases. The initial phase started in 1928 with the founding of the first Indonesian Women Congress in Yogyakarta. The word "feminism" as such was not used in the Congress but the discussions brought to the fore questions of women's rights, especially women's right to education. In the early 20th century, during the Dutch colonial period, several Indonesian women's organizations were founded promoting female education. A prominent figure in the struggle for women's rights was Kartini (1879-1904), the daughter of a Javanese nobleman who expressed her thoughts in letters sent to her Dutch friend, Stella Zeehandelaar. The letters were later published in her highly popular book entitled "Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang" or *After Darkness, Light is lay Born*.¹

Another figure was Siti Rohana Kudus (1884-1972), an ordinary woman from West Sumatra who published the first women's newspaper called *Sunting Melayu*.² In her newspaper she wrote about women's freedom and right to education, and spoke out against polygamy. The second phase of the women's movement occurred during the time of Sukarno in the 1950s and 60s following Indonesian independence. It was marked by the rise and spread of a women's grassroots organization called Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia) or the Indonesian Women's Movement.³ It had a close relationship with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Hundreds of thousands joined Gerwani which empowered women in the villages. Gerwani was later banned by Suharto regime and its members were arrested, imprisoned and some were murdered because of the avowed links of Gerwani with Indonesian Communist Party. During the third phase of the women's

movement with the coming to power of Suharto feminism was frozen from on high as the state ushered in what has been called state ibuism (state maternalism). Women were seen solely as wives and mothers. However, prominent women's organizations such as Kalyanamitra (Friendship) were discreetly active behind the scene. Kalyanamitra, for example, organized discussions on feminism for a closed study group. The fourth phase of the women's movement came out into the open again in 1998 with the start of the Reformasi when unshackled feminism discourse skyrocketed. The *Jurnal Perempuan* founded two years before the start of the Reformasi, as I have noted, became a powerful locus of feminist discourse. During the Reformasi many women's organizations were created focusing on such issues as domestic violence and trafficking of women, and on matters related to religious pressures like controls on women's body and sexuality, the promotion of child marriage, and the defamation of LGBT. At the same time, the fourth phase was marked by expanding sexual freedom triggered by a growing number of women writers and novelists dealing with sexuality and the body such as Ayu Utami and Djenar Maesa Ayu.⁴ During the fourth phase a strong alliance developed between secular and religious women's organizations which worked together, especially in fighting religious narrow-mindedness.

MB *How and when did you become a feminist? Did you call yourself a feminist from the start of your active involvement on behalf of women or did you simply let your actions speak for themselves?*

GA I started my feminist journey in two ways: I published the first feminist journal in Indonesia in 1996, which I have just mentioned, and by teaching on feminism in a women's studies course. "Women's studies" was the only rubric allowed then at the University of Indonesia in the early 1990's. I wanted to raise awareness about feminism and spur a discourse on Indonesian feminism. I was not happy with the university environment where feminism was rarely discussed at the time and if it was raised it was dismissed as a Western ideology. Academics constituted the majority of the activists in the *Jurnal Perempuan*. Since our voices were suppressed by the university we thought that NGOs could offer safe space to engage in feminist debate. It was discontent with the situation at the University that pushed me to start the NGO called Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan, The Women's Journal Foundation in 1995 which brought out the *Jurnal Perempuan* the following year. Within the NGO, I was able to freely express my views. I called myself a feminist from the start of my work on women's rights and issues. I was constantly criticized for calling myself a feminist and sometimes attacked just for using the term feminism itself. My feminism is

what led me to plan a demonstration against Suharto. For me, being a feminist means believing in democracy and human rights.

MB *Tell us more about the Jurnal Perempuan that appeared two years before the start of Suharto's New Order. Did you have difficulty creating a feminist journal at that time? Did you and the others with you in the start-up see it then as a vehicle for a feminist movement in the making? When the Reformasi era began, the Jurnal Perempuan was already two years old and well-poised to be a mouthpiece for feminism in the new reform period. Can you tell us about this?*

GA It was difficult to publish *Jurnal Perempuan* under Suharto's New Order because his highly authoritarian regime made it hard to obtain a permit to publish a journal. I requested a permit to publish a journal for women. The government, assuming it would be about cooking, dress making, and such, granted me a permit. There was no model for a serious women's journal at the time. There were only glamour magazines for women. The general journals then usually focused on economics or politics and were heavily monitored by the state. It never occurred to the state that a women's journal would talk about economics and politics. So, on the one hand we were "safe" in the sense that the government never suspected a women's journal could be dangerous (how would cooking be dangerous?). On the other hand, we were ignored. We were fortunate that during the second year of the *Jurnal Perempuan* the Ford Foundation gave us support which enabled us to continue to engage in research and to publish articles. Because feminism was still a new subject in Indonesia there were very few scholars or women activists. So we had to translate articles from foreign journals and write many pieces ourselves. The first print-run of *Jurnal Perempuan* was less than fifty copies which we mainly distributed for free. I also used to give copies to my students to read. Now we have over seven hundred subscribers including professionals and homemakers. The journal is broadly distributed throughout government agencies, universities, and NGOs, and our articles, also circulate widely in the Internet.

MB *The fourth phase of the women's movement which began with the start of the Reformasi period you said saw the proliferation of feminist discourses. At that moment women intellectuals and activists, often one and the same, began to articulate an Islamic feminist discourse. Tell us about some of the pioneering voices of Islamic feminism in Indonesia. From where did they emerge and what were their concerns? In what way might their expression of Islamic feminism be seen to have an Indonesian stamp? How has Indonesian Islamic feminism intersected with global Islamic feminist discourse?*

GA For Indonesian feminists, Islam is a feminist issue, because we are constantly attacked on how we dress, act, or choose to conduct our lives. Fundamentalist Islamic groups in different regions succeeded in imposing local regulations concerning *purda*, the covering of women's head and body, that are discriminatory against females. Purda regulations are issued by local governments but it is clear that radical religious elements play a strong role in supporting them. Secular and Islamic feminists in Indonesia work together in countering religious fundamentalism on many fronts. Secular feminists, for example, work closely with Musdah Mulia, a widely acclaimed Islamic religious scholar, who lectures on Islamic political thought at Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University in Jakarta, and was a former advisor to the Ministry of Religious Affairs, who also calls herself an Islamic feminist. Musdah Mulia is highly outspoken about LGBT. She confesses that her courage to defend the LGBT community in Indonesia derives from Islam's strong sense of *rahmatan lil alamin* or mercy in the world(s). LGBT became a contentious issue in 2016 when not only Islamic fundamentalist groups but also the government was menacing to NGOs. International funding organizations stood up for the LGBT community by supporting advocacy and research. Secular feminists also work closely with Kyai Hussein Muhammad, an Islamic religious scholar, pesantren (religious boarding school) educator, and an NGO activist, a former member of the National Commission for Women, 2007-2014, and long self-acclaimed Islamic feminist. Kyai Hussein sharply criticizes the notion that the jilbab (a body cloak) and hijab, pieces of clothing which came to Indonesia from parts of the Arab world, are ordained Islamic dress. KOMNAS Perempuan, the National Commission on Violence against Women, has remarked on the link between insisting on so-called Islamically prescribed dress for women and political authority. The Commission declared that in the year 2015 alone there were 389 local laws that discriminated against women. The jilbab and hijab have become flash-points in all the political parties. The sermonizing on the jilbab and the hijab has also sparked debate about Indonesian identity as distinct from Arab identity, and has strengthened the determination of Indonesians to hold fast to their own identity. Indonesian Islamic feminism is in line with global Islamic feminist discourse. This is evident at my university where the works of amina wadud and Ziba Mir-Hosseini on Qur'anic interpretation and Islamic jurisprudence on issues of women and gender are widely discussed as well as your historical and analytical work on the rise and spread of the phenomenon of Islamic feminism.

MB *It seems from the initial appearance of Islamic feminist discourse in Indonesia that secular feminism, often called simply feminism, and Islamic feminism have been on the same page seeking equality, social and gender justice, human dignity, and freedom of*

expression. These feminisms do not appear to have had an antagonistic relationship. Can you speak to this? Is there a special, or specific, Indonesian Islamic feminism?

GA Yes, in Indonesia secular and Islamic feminists work together closely. Being a feminist means striving for equality and social and gender justice. Whether we work on issues related to public policy, politics, economics, or issues relating to culture and religion we apply feminist arguments. These arguments which call for the implementation of gender equality and gender justice may be expressed in the abstract language of shared principles, they may use the language of state constitutions or international covenants, and they may reference Islamic ideals and religious sources. In Indonesia when fighting for justice and equality for women as part of fighting for justice and equality for all, we use multiple feminist languages, we claim ownership of our diverse but mutually supportive feminist discourses. This is integral to who we are and what we do in Indonesia.

MB *You are a feminist who may be seen as a secular feminist. From the rise of Islamic feminist discourse and activism in Indonesia you seem to have welcomed it and incorporated its ideals and aspirations into your own feminist projects and practice. Can you tell us about this?*

GA Yes, I consider myself a secular feminist. I also welcome Islamic arguments which I use in supporting gender equality. Therefore, I consider myself to be an Islamic feminist as well. Islam is open to everyone. People can have their own interpretations. I support a feminist interpretation of Islam and try to contribute as much as I can to advancing it. I cooperate closely with Musdah Mulia. We work together combining mutually supportive secular and Islamic feminist arguments in promoting the cause of gender equality and gender justice. In terms of Islam we uphold an Indonesian Islamic identity within the vast and diverse umma (community) or world of global Islam. Indonesian Islam has its own culture and language. Indonesian Muslim women are very proud of their culture, their ways of expressing it in their dress, hair and body. However, over the past two decades or so Indonesian practices of Islam are being challenged by cultural and political Islamic forces bearing an Arab stamp. Indonesian Muslim secular feminist and Islamic feminist women in Indonesia uphold their own local religious culture and practices while there are other Muslim women who capitulate to invasive Arab patriarchal structures and behaviors.

MB *Jurnal Perempuan celebrated its twentieth anniversary with a conference in September 2016 in Jakarta. What were the highlights of the conference? Where are secular feminism and Islamic feminism in Indonesia today? Is it perhaps more pertinent now to*

speak of a confluence of secular feminism and Islamic feminism in Indonesia? Or of a new Indonesian feminism? Youth seem to have played an important part in celebrating the last two decades of feminism in Indonesia. Is their feminism different from the feminisms of their elders and predecessors? Are they expressing a “millennial feminism” of their own? What do you see as the most salient contributions of the Jurnal Perempuan over its past two decades of existence? What are the most pressing feminist concerns in Indonesia today?

GA Jurnal Perempuan, the first feminist journal to appear in the world’s largest Muslim majority country and a secular state, has reached a milestone with its twentieth anniversary. Where do we go from here? There is still a lot to be done. When we started Jurnal Perempuan, as I said, we were facing an authoritarian regime. We thought that taking down the regime would bring about democracy and gender justice. But democracy opens up space to all sorts of groups and projects including patriarchal political Islam. In Indonesia we are now facing fundamentalist groups who are hostile to gender equality. They are even against the word equality. Interestingly today these fundamentalist groups are using women preachers and academics to criticize gender equality such as the group AILA (The Family Love Alliance) [*aila* in Arabic means family]. This group aspires to make the country more “civilized” and to “protect” Indonesian families by strengthening family values, that is, their interpretation of Islamic family values. The group has requested that the Constitutional Court change the definitions of adultery, rape and sodomy in the Criminal Code. The purpose is to outlaw consensual sexual relationship outside of marriage and to discriminate against LGBT. Twenty years ago the common enemy was the state. Today, it is more challenging because if you criticize these religious extremists you are labelled anti-religious or anti-Islam. Many Islamic feminists are accused of being against Islam because they speak their minds about gender equality and justice in the language of Islam. Islamic feminists and secular feminists share the same experience of rejection by the central state as well as by local governments who are often in bed with right-wing religious forces. The twentieth anniversary of *Jurnal Perempuan* revealed to its readers the existence of an even more robust feminism, or feminisms, in Indonesia because we are faced here with an enormous challenge not only against patriarchy embedded in the secular state and society but also the patriarchy of Islamism. It is especially encouraging, after twenty years of feminism in Indonesia to see millennials joining our cause. The age of social media is the age of promoting feminist empowerment by and among the millennials. We are proud that the *Jurnal Perempuan* continues to empower feminist voices on behalf of all whatever their ages, ethnicities, gender, sexualities, and religious affiliations. We are also aware of the

hard work ahead and that the forces of inclusivity must triumph over the forces of division and exclusion.

NOTES

¹ *Habis Gelap, Terbitlah Terang* (After Dark, Comes Light), was written by Armijn Pane based on the compilation of Kartini's letters (Balai Pustaka: Jakarta, 1911).

² "Sunting Melayu" is a term for Malay woman's hair pin, a symbol of Malay women.

³ See Saskia Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

⁴ See Ayu Utami's famous novel *Saman* (Gramedia Pustaka Utama: Jakarta, 1998) and Ayu's collection of short stories, *Djenar Maesa* [They Say I'm a Monkey] (Metaphor: Jakarta, 2008) Both considered prominent Indonesian feminist writers. They write about controversial issues such as politics, religion and sexuality.

Contributor:

GADIS ARIVIA. Is a recently retired lecturer in philosophy and gender studies at the University of Indonesia at the Faculty of Humanities in the Philosophy Department where she has taught for more than 20 years. Her courses include feminist theory, ecofeminism, and ethics. She founded the first feminist journal in Indonesia, *Jurnal Perempuan*, in 1996. Her books include *Filsafat Berperspektif Feminis* (Philosophy with a Feminist Perspective) 2003 and *Feminisme Sebuah Kata Hati* (Feminism from the Heart) 2006. She published poetry in *Antologi Puisi, Yang Sakral dan Sekuler* which also appeared in English: *Poetry Anthology, The Sacred and The Secular*, 2011. She lives in Bethesda, Maryland with her family.