

INTELLECTUAL DISCOURSES ON CIVIL SOCIETY IN INDONESIA

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I. Background

One of the most salient features in Indonesian politics recently has been the recurring theme of empowerment of civil society (CS) as a viable approach in promoting transition to democracy. The popularity of the theme owes to both the democratic movements outside the country, especially in those post-totalitarian states in East and Central Europe, and the internal dynamics of Indonesian politics in the late eighties. The democratic movements in Czechoslovakia, Poland, East Germany, and, later, Russia have influenced many pro-democracy activists in Indonesia to seek for a new paradigm which is more relevant to their political endeavors. The struggles of pro-democratic activists in those former communist countries such as Havel and Michnik have caught the attention of Indonesian pro-democratic leaders, activists, and intellectuals. Their efforts to revitalize democratic impulses through the recovery of the idea of civil society have ultimately inspired some Indonesian pro-democracy activists and intellectuals to develop a similar approach for a similar purpose.

The Indonesians are, of course, quite aware of substantial differences between the two regions in regard to specific political, ideological, and socio-historical trajectories. Yet, they also see that certain similarities between the two are by no means non-existent, rendering the idea of civil society as attractive. For instance, in the East and Central European as well as Indonesian contexts, the phenomena of overwhelming state power on the one hand, and the weakness of the society on the other are existing and seen as one of the most essential constraints to democratization processes. Therefore, the idea of empowering a strong civil society, within which people's autonomy occupies a central position, could be easily shared by pro-democracy activists in those countries.

Meanwhile, the dynamics of Indonesian politics for the past three decades have shown the inadequacy of the existing conventional paradigm advocated by the regime in regard to democratization. It has failed to bring about substantial changes which could enlarge the notion of people's participation in the political realm. Thus, in contrast to the what has been going on in the economic realm, at least prior to the current fiscal crisis, Indonesian politics has so far remained underdeveloped, to say the least. This is primarily evident in the area of power relations between the state and society in which the former has remained in the dominant position in the past three decades while the latter has been under control and unable to exert its balancing power.

It is against the backdrop of asymmetrical power relations that the idea of engendering democracy through civil society has become an attractive topic of political discourses. Since the late eighties, the discourse on civil society has been blossoming as it evidenced by the number of publications on this particular topic and public forums devoted to it. Recently, the discourse on civil society has even reached the government circle and important institutions such as the *Lemhannas* (the Institute for National Defense) and the *Bappenas* (National Board for Planning and Development) have taken an interest in it and sponsored seminars and colloquia on civil society.

This paper will examine the ongoing discourses on civil society among the Indonesian intellectuals. It will attempt to explicate prevalent views on civil society from intellectuals in various schools of thought or social backgrounds. The underlying assumption of this study is that even though the idea of civil society and its role in strengthening democratization process has been shared by Indonesian intellectuals, there remain different opinions regarding its conceptualization and implementation. This is due in large part to the fact that the idea of civil society is a novel phenomenon for many of them and, therefore, requires sufficient time for them to develop coherent conceptual frameworks which are adequate for the Indonesian context.

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This paper will start with the background of the discourse on civil society by discussing the development of the New Order, stressing the emergence of a powerful state on the one hand, and the weakening of society on the other for the last three decades. It will be followed by examining the ongoing discourses on civil society among Indonesian intellectuals. For that purpose, the paper will examine the conceptualization of civil society in Indonesian context, the relevance of civil society in democratization, and the actors of civil society which may play pivotal roles in the process of democratization.

II. The State and Society under the New Order

Until its collapse in May 21, 1998, the New Order period had witnessed a fundamental restructuring of Indonesia's politics. One of the most far reaching effects of the restructuring process has been the emergence of the state as a powerful and dominant political actor, within which the executive branch constitutes its center of power. Over the last three decades, the latter has developed into a powerful institution where political, economic, and social decisions are ultimately formulated, decided, and carried out. Similar to what happens in some peripheral capitalist states in Latin America and Asia, in New Order's Indonesia, the existence of a strong state is believed as a *sine qua non* to facilitate and maintain the process of economic development in the absence of other agencies in the society. This view is derived largely from the failure of both the liberal democracy (1949-1957) and the Guided Democracy (1959-1966) regimes to establish a united and strong authority at the central level. Thus, according to the architects of the New Order, the strengthening of the state and central government would lead, if only incrementally, to a greater sense of unity, legitimacy, and authority (Moertopo, 1973, Mas'oeud, 1983, Pabottingi, 1995, Budiman 1990).

In retrospect, the installation of a strong state had been highly compatible with the model of economic development adopted by the New Order, namely the state-led capitalist model. The strong state would provide a guarantee for sustainable political stability and security which are necessary for the implementation and maintenance of such a model. The strong state idea, therefore, has been deployed systematically by the New Order's ruling elite since the early seventies through discursive strategies and institutional building. Chief among the discursive strategies have been the notions of historical discontinuity and constitutionalism which function not only as the ideological ground upon which the regime's hegemony is established, but also as a legitimate justification to "physically constrain, delegitimize, and marginalize dissenters." (Rahardjo, 1984:13)

At the institutional level, the idea of strong state has been implemented through corporatist arrangements to social and political organizations and groups in society and the politics of depoliticization, targeting primarily the rural population. The corporatist strategy is intended to control those groups whose interests have great effects upon political arrangements such as labor unions, industrialist groups, political parties, social organizations, religious associations, youth organizations, etc. (Mas'oeud, 1983; Reeve, 1990; Hikam, 1995; Hadiz, 1997). By imposing the corporatist arrangement, both the inclusion and exclusion of major interest groups can be systematically carried out making them potential sources for state legitimacy and existence.

In the meantime, the politics of depoliticizing the masses, which had been vigorously pursued since the early seventies, is to detach or alienate the grass-roots population from genuine political processes. This has been done through the so-called "floating mass" policy whose underlying assumption has been that the rural peoples, who constitute the majority of Indonesian population, would be politically better-off if they were untouched by political parties. Prior to the New Order, so the argument goes, the rural areas had been highly politicized by both the presence and activities of competing political parties. As a consequence, the rural mass became one of the main arenas for conflicts and, hence, a source of political instability. Under the policy of "floating mass", it is now the task of the state apparatus to educate the rural people and ensure their political participation along with the state's framework.

In its developments, the policy has resulted in the disappearance of grass-roots politics in Indonesia which had once flourished, if rather imperfectly, during those periods between the late forties to the early sixties. Those decades had witnessed the rural people being directly involved into political affairs through their participation as members of certain political parties and affiliation to social organizations. Even if it is true that their political involvement were imbued with a strong

tendencies of primordialism and identity politics, it does not follow by de-politicizing the rural areas, such tendencies have been eradicated once for all.

Generally speaking, the New Order had been quite successful in implementing the above strategies as evidenced in the almost absence of opposition forces originating from society. The state had maintained an overwhelming power which prevented the development of a strong and autonomous civil society required as a basis for engendering democratization. Efforts to generate opposition groups have been relatively unsuccessful and the state's "*carrot and stick*" strategy mostly prevailing. Many leaders or influential figures in society (civilian and military) have been co-opted by the state and rewarded, for instance, with better political positions, lucrative business deals, political access to the ruling elite, etc. For those who resist such a co-optation, the state will punish them in which process the uses of violence are not infrequent. Those crackdown of student protests in the seventies, of the Islamic radical groups in the early eighties, and of the democracy movements in the so-called 27 July 1996 affair, are but a few examples.

However, since the late eighties the wind of change has begun to blow albeit in a relatively slow pace. Several factors have contributed to it. Chief among them have been the dynamics of capitalist development and the decline of internal cohesiveness among the ruling elite factions which have, ultimately, pressured the state to relax some of its restrictive policies. For the first time, the notions of de-bureaucratization and opening were introduced in the public discourses, emulating the global trend of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Moreover, the changing structure of global market has also necessitated some changes in industrial policies, including the introduction of the regional minimum wage standard for workers. Furthermore, the apparent internal conflicts within the ruling elite factions, including within the military, has given rise to some political openings which pave the way for the increasing demand for democratic reform.

It is against the backdrop of political opening that during the late eighties and early nineties, Indonesia witnessed the growing democratic thrust in society in its various forms. Chief among them has been the emergence of pro-democratic activities led by intellectuals, NGO activists, prominent political leaders, students, religious leaders, etc. In addition, there was also a growing sense of hope that democratization will begin to flower as shown in the strength of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Islamic organization in the country under the leadership Abdurrahman Wahid after its withdrawal from the United Development Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, PPP) in 1983; the popularity of the PDI under Megawati after her 1993 election as its chairwoman; the revival of workers activism in the form of alternative unionization; and the return of students involvement in democratic struggles both within and outside their campuses.

It is also against this backdrop of changing political atmosphere that the discourses on civil society has begun to emerge among the Indonesian intellectuals. Originally, it was limited to only a small group of people consisting of scholars, NGO activists, and students. As mentioned previously, those people were inspired by the political events in the Soviet block where the wave of democratic movements had succeeded in bringing the totalitarian regimes down in a relatively peaceful manner. They also saw that the idea of civil society was central in the movements as exemplified in the works of Vaclav Havel, Vaclav Benda, Adam Michnik and other pro-democracy leaders in Eastern and Central Europe. Their struggles against a powerful state has inspired and motivated them to pursue similar approaches in democratic struggles.

As usual, it is through both the public forums and mass media that the discourse on civil society has caught the attention of a larger audience in Indonesia. Indeed, since 1990, publications and public discussions devoted to the idea of civil society have been increasing. Despite the lack of further development of the democratic movement in Indonesia after 1994, the discourses on civil society have not diminished, especially among those who remain convinced that the idea of empowering civil society is an appropriate strategy for democratization in the long term.

III. Intellectual Discourses on Civil Society

1. *On the Concept of Civil Society*

The concept of civil society has been understood from different perspectives among Indonesian intellectuals. There are those who use the Hegelian, Gramscian, and Tocquevillian understanding of the term (Budiman, 1990; Rasyid, 1997; Billah, 1995, Faqih, 1996; Hikam, 1996a, 1996b, 1998).

Those who use a Hegelian approach of civil society stress the importance of the middle class and its empowerment, particularly in the economic sector, for the development of a strong civil society. The Gramscian approach, meanwhile, has been applied mostly by NGO activists whose main objective it is to strengthen civil society as an instrument to counter the state's ideological hegemony. Civil society is an arena in which the organic intellectuals can be strengthened whose goal is to support the project of counter hegemony. Finally, those who apply the Tocquevillian understanding of civil society emphasize the strengthening of independent associations in the society and implantation of civic culture in order to develop a democratic spirit.

Regardless of the differences, there is a general agreement among them that the term as it is understood in the available literature should be put in the context of historical, social and political background in Indonesia. There are reasons for this perception. First of all, unlike those countries where the idea of civil society was invented and well developed, Indonesia has neither historical and epistemological legacies of distinguishing the realms of state and society. It was only after the introduction of the colonial state did a kind of state-society separation take place, whereby the colonial state apparatus had been working for the interests of the state which was located outside the society. During the kingdom and sultanate periods, the state and society was a single entity where the latter belonged to the former. Thus the idea of modern civil society is only relevant for modern political structure following the colonization process.

Secondly, there are traditions in Indonesian society which are possibly supportive of the development of modern civil society and yet they are not sufficient in themselves (Hefner, 1998). They include the traditional educational system such as the *pesantrens* throughout Java, Sumatera, Kalimantan, and some of the Eastern Indonesian regions; the traditional cooperation systems such as *subak* (Bali) or *lumbung desa* (Java). Therefore, in the process of development of civil society in modern Indonesia attempts should be made to identify those traditions and cultural legacies which are compatible with it (Mahasin, 1994, Dhakidae, 1994, Wahid, 1997). The dialogues between tradition and modernity is of vital importance in determining the compatibility of civil society in Indonesian context.

Thus in terms of conceptualization, the intellectuals seem to agree that there are some difficulties in applying the term civil society to the Indonesian context without some qualifications. This is true when we consider the effort to Indonesianize the term. So far, civil society has been translated into "*masyarakat madani*," "*masyarakat warga/kewargaan*," and "*masyarakat sipil*," in public discourses. The term "*masyarakat madani*," which has arguably originated from Malaysia, used by the Deputy PM Mr. Anwar Ibrahim, has been popularized by some Indonesian Muslim intellectuals. The use of arabic term "madani" (from the word "madinah") to translate "civil" is regarded fit, because it implies the notion of civilized community as against uncivilized or uncultured one.

The term "*masyarakat warga/kewargaan*" connotes the idea of citizenship as an integral part of civil society. It was originally introduced by the Indonesian Association of Political Science (AIPI) and has increasingly gained popularity among Indonesian scholars. However, the term "*masyarakat sipil*," is, actually, by far the closest to the English term. Yet, under the New Order's political climate it has not been widely used in Indonesia due to its connotation to the civilian politics.

It is safe to say, therefore, that as far as the conceptualization of civil society is concerned, the discourse among Indonesian intellectuals seem to stress not so much its accurate definition, but more its practical uses. The idea of strengthening the position of society is seen as an essential dimension of civil society, and this is crucial for understanding this very idea in the context of the New Order.

2. Civil Society and Democracy

In the intellectual discourse of civil society, the existence of strong and independent associations is, generally, seen as an important point of departure for democratization in Indonesia. This is due to the fact that the most pressing problem in Indonesian politics is the overwhelming state power and the weakness of society. It is interesting to see that NGOs and mass organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah are expected by intellectuals to play the leading role in strengthening the position of society because they are among the few groups in society which are able to maintain their relative autonomy *vis-a-vis* the state and have a better position in addressing political, economic, and social problems.

According to an NGO activist, for example, the NGOs in Indonesia occupy a strategic position to promote social movements directed at transforming the existing imbalance in social and political relations (Fakih, 1996). This is possible because the NGOs as an integral part of Indonesian civil society have both the capacity and opportunity to mobilize grass-roots population. NGO activists, according to him, could educate the people about practical things and stimulate their awareness about their conditions. At the same time, the activists could also learn from the people about their real needs and problems so that there will be no distortion between what the activists think and the needs of the people.

However, some NGO activists are not so optimistic and, instead, concerned about the possibility of co-optation by the state. In fact, according to one of the NGOs' leading figures, many Indonesian NGOs have not been able to transcend themselves from the old developmentalist paradigm (Billah, 1995). In this case, instead of empowering civil society, the NGOs could serve as instruments to strengthen state power. Granted that the NGOs do have the potentiality to empower the Indonesian civil society, it is far from automatic. The first and foremost task of the NGOs is to be self-reflective in transforming their own vision.

With regard to the role of religious-based social organizations as well, the call for empowerment of civil society is strong. Among Moslem intellectuals and leaders in the country, Abdurrahman Wahid has become a well known proponent. He argues that basically an early or pristine form of civil society has already been established among Indonesian Moslems, namely in its community (*paguyuban*) together with its sense of solidarity as an essential value. This community was eventually transformed into organizational forms, such as NU (Nahdlatul 'Ulama), Muhammadiyah, PUSA (Persatuan Ulama Seluruh Aceh), PERSIS (Persatuan Islam), PUI (Persatuan Ummat Islam), etc. (Wahid, 1997). These organizations, in his view, can be considered as a part of the representation of Indonesian civil society as long as their activities are directed to strengthen the position of society and not that of the state.

The above qualification, in Wahid's opinion, is very important because in its development, a trend toward "elitization" has emanated from social organizations, including those religious ones. What he means is that many organizations in society maintain that they represent Indonesian civil society when dealing with the state, but in fact their primary goal is to obtain the latter's support. The outcome of this practice is co-optation by the state, and those organizations become nothing more than a mere extension of the state.

The problem faced by Islamic organizations in strengthening civil society, according to Wahid, is coming from the fact that they have not been involved in transformation processes, both internally and externally. Internally, the existing Islamic organizations, including the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), have not sufficiently undergone transformation in their visions of politics which can be used in anticipating rapid social changes in the modern era.² Traditionalism and modernism within the Islamic community mainly do not face the existing modern reality adequately and, instead, tend to support the *status quo* or become proponents of radicalism and particularism. As a consequence, many of their activities are actually directed to fulfill their own self-interests and not those of general public, particularly subordinated and exploited people (the *mustadz'afin*).

Externally, the Islamic community is still lagging behind in transforming itself as an agent of empowerment of Indonesian civil society, especially in term of articulating and defending the latter's interests vis-à-vis the state. In this particular aspect, one of the main tasks of Islamic leaders, groups and movements is to work hand in hand with others who have similar aspirations and interests in the context of civil society. Wahid is, therefore, quite critical to those Islamic organizations such as ICMI (the Association of Indonesian Moslem Intellectuals) which, in his view, is not orienting itself to strengthen civil society but, instead, attempting to dominate the power through the state (Wahid, 1997:6; Ramage, 1995).

² The post Soeharto era has opened up the possibility of the NU to enter into politics and therefore it has sponsored the establishment of the Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (the Nation's Awakening Party, PKB). It remains to be seen whether or not such a move will be beneficial to the organization's members. One is clear, however, that political conflicts within the Islamic community is inevitable because of the proliferation of political parties.

Another contribution from the Islamic community is in reinterpreting the term *ummah* in order to be an integral part of Indonesian civil society. According to Aswab Mahasin, there is a need to recover and reinterpret the concept of *ummah*, which until recently is only understood in a narrow and specific sense (Mahasin, 1994). The time has come, he argues, that the term *ummah* could be expanded not only being understood as a specifically Islamic community, but also with a universal idea of humanity and socio-historical context which in turn will result in the formation of consensus in a specific situation and condition. In this respect, he envisages that *ummah* can support the idea of civil society, which means becoming a part of social groups which is not directly related to the state and yet it has interactions with the latter in the realm of public (Mahasin, 1994:50).

By using the above concept of *ummah*, Mahasin sees that Islamic community as a part of civil society in Indonesia will be able to insert the idea of justice and the tradition of active involvement in matters related to public concerns. This is crucial because up until now, the idea of justice is not sufficiently explored within the existing political condition in which the *ulama* tend to be coopted by the state. This relates to the tradition of activism, which in the past had become one of the characteristics of charismatic *ulamas* in their involvement in society. They distance themselves from the power of the state in order to avoid the image of being corrupted which may blemish their reputation as the defenders of the *ummah*.

From the non Muslim intellectuals, the voices from Christian intellectuals are equally strong in urging the empowerment of civil society. One of the most prominent Catholic priests and intellectuals has been von Magnis Suseno, a Professor of philosophy at the Driyarkara School of Philosophy, Jakarta. He also maintains that a strong and independent civil society is an important foundation for democratization in Indonesia, where the state has overwhelmingly dominated the society (Suseno, 1996). He especially stresses the moral elements of civil society in which tolerance, openness, equality, and human rights become parts of its basis. Only within a civil society based on such values will people be able to develop a democratic polity in the future. The absence of such values, on the contrary, will produce a quasi civil society in which primordialism and particularism are prevalent.

Other intellectuals from non-religious circles see the relationship between civil society and democracy in Indonesia in the form of the ability of the former in defending the people's basic rights. In so far as Indonesian civil society cannot perform such a task, a substantive democracy is not conceivable. What we have, rather, is a pseudo-democracy or what is labeled as "illiberal democracy" where the form is more apparent than the substance. What Havel and his colleagues call "as-if democracy" is its ultimate outcome and that is what has happened in Indonesia for the last three decades.

3. The Actors within Indonesian Civil Society

There have been debates about this issue, particularly concerning the role of middle class in empowering civil society. Some intellectuals maintain that the Indonesian middle class, however weak it may look, is still an important source for empowerment of civil society. It consists of those professionals, NGO activists, intellectuals, and business peoples who are not totally under the state's domination. They can perform the process of empowerment through strengthening their autonomy and solidarity among their peers and members. The NGOs are especially noted because they can directly contribute to the people through their advocacy works, training, and community development programs. Of course, there should be some qualifications because many NGOs are also serving the government's interests or at least having no ideological perspectives which are relevant to the idea of empowerment of civil society (Billah, 1995, Karcono, 1995).

Other intellectuals are less sanguine to the primacy of the Indonesian middle class in empowering civil society. They rather expect mass organization and associations, including those religious associations, to perform the task. The notion that the Indonesian middle class will be able to do pioneering works is highly doubted based on the fact that this class is overwhelmingly weak and tend to be conservative. Arief Budiman, a prominent intellectuals who is now at the Melbourne University, has argued that the Indonesian middle class cannot be expected to spearhead political changes due to its dependence on the state. This is especially true in the case of the national bourgeois class whose development is nowhere near the experience of the western bourgeoisie.

Therefore, Indonesian civil society may develop in a different way, coming from social groups which is traditionally independent from the state or new social classes who are marginalized by the state. One has to pay a serious attention to the religious groups, students, workers, etc. which remain in the periphery and yet become forces which challenge the state (Hikam, 1996b, 1998). The middle class should be persuaded by those groups to join their struggles against the dominant power of the state. Indonesian civil society can only grow strongly if the elements inside is having a high degree of self-confidence. The Indonesian middle class, on the other hand, has yet to develop its self-confidence in order to become a backbone of Indonesian civil society.

It seems that the debate will not end pretty soon and this perhaps a signal that the idea of civil society will remain one of the most contested terrain in the future. Both camps inside the Indonesian intellectuals could construct and reconstruct the idea of civil society and the main actors in it and in turn contribute to the existing public discourses in the country.

IV. By the way of Conclusion

The above discussion is a tentative outline of the intellectual discourses on civil society in Indonesia. It maintains that the Indonesian intellectuals have attempted to appropriate the notion of empowerment of civil society as a basis for democratization processes following the downfall of totalitarian regimes in the Central and eastern Europe and the recent global trend of democratization.

The current intellectual discourses have focused on the conceptualization of the term in the Indonesian context, the relationship of civil society and democratization and the main actors of Indonesian civil society. In term of conceptualization, despite the existing differences in it the intellectuals are in agreement that the concept of civil society should be put in the context of Indonesian historical and socio-political background in order to be adequately understood. In term of relationship between civil society and democracy, they agree that there has been traditions and values which can be recovered from Indonesia which may be strengthening the struggles for democracy through the empowerment of civil society. In term of its actors, there have been ongoing debates on the position of Indonesian middle class and mass organizations as the main sources for developing Indonesian civil society.

The intellectual discourses on civil society is still a novel development in Indonesia and it has remained to be seen whether it will gear toward sophistication in its conceptualization and its practices. Regardless of its novelty, it seems that the idea of civil society has gained a strong ground in Indonesia due to the involvement of its intellectuals.

V. References

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