State-society relationship: assessing Islam in Indonesia's foreign policy Toward the Muslim world under Suharto

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“Muslims make up one-sixth the world’s population, and for this reason alone no major government can afford to ignore the world of Islam”.

“The rise of Islam as a political force can not be studied in isolation as a regional or localised phenomenon; rather, it has a positive correlation with the political events and changes taking places globally.”

Introduction.
This paper is about Indonesia’s New Order (1966-1996) foreign policy with special reference to Indonesia’s relations with the Muslim world in relations to the Organisation of Islamic Countries, and some international issues pertinent to the Muslim world such as the Moro conflict in Southern Philippine, the Palestinian issue, the Gulf War, and the Bosnia-Herzegovina conflict. It explores the position of Islam in Indonesia’s foreign policy and examines the level of Indonesia’s involvement with the Muslim world. Its main focus is the analysis of the position of Islam as a societal factor in Indonesia’s foreign policy and Indonesia’s attitudes toward the Muslim World.

In foreign policy analysis, the societal factor is crucial in foreign policy making and behaviour (Rosenau:1971,18). The basic assumption of this paper is that the input of society at the domestic level has motivated the ruling elites (the policy makers) to manage Indonesia’s foreign relations with the Muslim world. In this case, the domestic level provided the context for the role of Islam on Indonesia’s foreign policy. Even though, the input at the domestic level can be viewed as one of the independent variables in foreign policy making, the governmental factor is more crucial than the societal factor in closed states. On

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3 Societal factor in foreign policy analysis includes culture, history, and social structure. Other theorists of foreign policy, such as Patrick MacGowan and Howard Shapiro noted it also includes political culture and ideology.
4 The domestic level consists of the society, the political process, the goals, motives and priorities of state leaders and when and under what conditions the societal groups are most likely to exercise it. For further elaboration on this matter, see Skidmore, David, Hudson, Valerie M (1993).Establishing the limits of state autonomy: contending approaches to the study of state-society relations and foreign policy making. In Skidmore, David, Hudson, Valerie M. eds. The limits of state autonomy: societal groups and foreign policy formulation. Colorado: Westview Press. p.6.
5 The previous research of Brigid A Starkey (1992). Foreign policy in the Muslim World: A dialogue between State and Society. Political Communication. 9 has proven this assumption.
the other hand, the state’s conduct of foreign policy is also a function of its current internal political dynamics. At this stage, the complex interplay among individual, governmental, societal and systemic factors shapes foreign policy decisions and behaviours. Indeed, the question of society’s pressure level—a relatively neglected topic within the field of foreign policy analysis—on foreign policy is still a puzzle.

Discussion on case studies.
The discourse of the extent to which Islam played a substantial role in Indonesia’s foreign policy under Soeharto has been subject to debate among Indonesia’s foreign policy community. One senior diplomat argued that “the government had never included Islam as a determining factor in foreign policy making while national values was the prime factors of policy making and implementation toward the Muslim world”. While one leading scholar maintained that “Indonesia’s relations with Middle East countries, and also Indonesia’s attitude toward certain issues in the region, can not be separated from the influence of the Islamic factor”. A more neutral view of the role of Islam in Indonesia’s foreign policy has been acknowledge by a former foreign minister when he mentioned that “Indonesia’s foreign policy has been influenced by many factor including religious factor (Islam) and in certain issues, Islam has coloured the nuances of Indonesia’s foreign policy toward the Muslim world”.

In this context, similarly to the role of the state in handling domestic politics, the state will only involve the Islamic voices to justify its foreign policy behaviour. From six case studies that will be examined in this study: Indonesia’s role in OIC, the settlement of Moro conflict, the Palestinian issue, Indonesia’s relation with Israel, The Gulf War, and the conflict of Bosnia-Herzegovina, it can be seen that Islam has been manipulated as a justifier of Indonesia’s foreign policy.

Indonesia’s Involvement in OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conference).
In the case of OIC, even though Indonesia is an member of this religious based international organisation, Indonesia rejected to sign the OIC. The charter which stated that “every Muslim state is eligible to join the Islamic conference” has become a burden for New Order in significantly participating to the OIC’s programs. The single rationale of Indonesia’s participation in OIC was that Indonesia tried to fully implement the ‘Bebas-Aktif’ (Free and Active) foreign policy and was not based its participation on the Islamic sentiments. More importantly, Indonesia also perceived that OIC is not reliable enough in settling all issues related to Islam. This was mainly due to the internal weakness of OIC which did not have strong internal cohesion among its members.

In doing so, Indonesia has never put its involvement in OIC as a main priority in its foreign policy. In compare to Indonesia’s participation in NAM, Indonesia’s involvement in OIC was quite marginal. This was clearly indicated by Suharto’s reluctant to attend most of the OIC summit or to apply for being a host of OIC summit. This was mainly due to the consideration of Suharto to containing the increase position of Indonesia’s Islamic society in domestic politics. Surprisingly, Islamic society did not give any significant responds

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7 Interview, 5 August 1999.
8 Interview, 5 August 1999.
9 Interview, 26 August 1999.
10 Interview, 29 November 1999.
regarding Indonesia’s passive involvement in OIC, even the Islamic society has never given its complaint to the absence of Suharto’s attendance in almost all OIC summit.

Nevertheless, one of Islamic scholars argued that Indonesia’s participation in OIC was also aimed to promote Islamic solidarity between Indonesia and other Muslim states for the sake of Suharto’s domestic political interest. In order to mobilise Islamic voices to retain his political power, Suharto for the first time attended the OIC Summit in Senegal in 1991. This first attendance in OIC summit was believed by many analysts as a political effort of Suharto to attract Indonesia’s Muslim society for his interest in gaining Islamic voices in 1992 general election. Furthermore, ICMI was also established in December 1990. In this context, Suharto has played its “Islamic card’ in order to both build policy coalition and to retain his political power.

**Indonesia and Bosnia.**

In the case of Conflict Bosnia, there have been significant competing attitude among policy makers particularly between Deplu, military and among top military brass itself. On the other hand, Islamic society have also showed its own perceptions regarding Indonesia’s policies in helping the independence struggle of the Bosnian people. Deplu, for instance, has always emphasised that “the support of Indonesia to the struggle of Bosnian people is based on essential values of the right of freedom as stated in the preamble of 1945 constitution”.

Moreover, it was also reflected Indonesia’s main task as the chairman of (Non-Aligned Movement) NAM and as a member of UN. Indonesia would only support the efforts to find peaceful settlement under the auspices of UN. This attitude, according to many analysts, was believed as “an effort that appeared to downplay the Islamic factor” of the conflict of Bosnia.

As a result, some Islamic groups led by Komite Indonesia Untuk Solidaritas Dunia Islam (KISDI) or Indonesia’s Committee for the Solidarity to Islamic World has protested the government’s attitude to the conflict Bosnia. They argued that the conflict of Bosnia was a conflict of religious between Islam and non-Islam so that Indonesia as the biggest Muslim country in the world should have taken more concrete actions to end the conflict and concluded that, Indonesia’s policy was so cautious and inconsistent. KISDI, then, organised some demonstrations over the government’s policy to Bosnia and planned to send volunteers as Jihad forces to fight on the Muslim side of the Bosnian people. In fact, this plan had the effect of raising different perceptions among Deplu and Military. Deplu has always argued that the conflict in Bosnia was not a religious conflict but a internal conflict of a sovereign state so we do not need to send troops.

While in the military, there was a sharp different perception between Gen. Faisal Tanjung (the commander of Arm Forces) and Gen. Edi Sudrajat (Minister of Defence). Gen. Faisal Tanjung publicly commented that “ABRI is ready to send its weapons and troops to Bosnia in order to help the struggle of Bosnians”. This statement, then, invited a friction between

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11 Interview, 3 Nov 1999
12 Based on several interviews from September to November 1999.
13 Interview, 31 August 1999.
14 Interview, 28 September 1999.
15 Interview, 5 and 9 August 1999. See also Rizal Sukma (1999). p.39
16 Gen. Faisal Tanjung was believed as a representation of ABRI Islam (a faction in ABRI who concern with the Islamic dimensions of national and international issues). While Gen. Edi Sudrajat was a representation of a nationalist- secular faction of ABRI or Military). Interviewed, 31 August 1999.
The idea to visit Bosnia did not come from Deplu but was the idea of Probustedjo (Suharto’s step brother). He believed that with this visit, Suharto will get more support from the Islamic community. Based on interview, 30 September 1999.

17 Interview, 31 August 1999.
18 The idea to visit Bosnia did not come from Deplu but was the idea of Probustedjo (Suharto’s step brother).
19 Interview, 9 August 1999.
20 Republika, 31 October 1994.
government’s perception of Islamic phobia. He further argued that “the government did not want to be perceived by Western countries as giving a room for Islamic radicalism, and terrorism”.\(^{21}\) Another indicator of the government’s prudence policy was Indonesia’s permission for PLO to open its diplomatic mission in Jakarta. The idea to open diplomatic mission has been issued since 1974 but it took 15 years for PLO to open its office in Jakarta.\(^{22}\)

In regard to the Gulf War (Iraq-Kuwait), Indonesia’s attitude was also seem to be more cautious. Even though, many elements of Islamic society such Muhamadiyah, Ansor Youth Movement, and pergerakan Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia (PMII) or the Indonesian Association of Muslim Students has urged the government to play an active role in peaceful settlement of conflict\(^{23}\), the government maintained that Indonesia has responded ‘proportionally and rationally’ to invite the parties to stop the war. In order to calm the emotional responds of Islamic society including anti-American demonstrations, the government even warned the Indonesian Muslims not to be tempted by the story that the Gulf war was at war between religious communities\(^{24}\). In this context, the government has always tried to avoid any deep involvement in the war that might produced the impression that Indonesia’s foreign policy was determined by religious factor.

In the case of Israel’s initiatives to open diplomatic relations, the voices of Muslim communities was even more significantly articulated to the government\(^{25}\). Even though, President Suharto received a controversial visit of the Israeli’s Prime Minister in 1983, Deplu maintained it as ‘a courtesy visit’ to Indonesia in its capacity as chairman of NAM\(^{26}\). This visit, of course, invited an enormous protest from Islamic society. They even rejected the intention of Israel to establish diplomatic relations with Indonesia. as long as Israel did not withdraw its troops from Jerusalem. The Islamic society’s demand to refuse diplomatic relation with Israel were not only based on political problems of Palestine but more importantly, based on the religious consideration\(^{27}\). Meanwhile, Deplu argued that “we would not open diplomatic relations with Israel unless there was a comprehensive political solutions over the Palestinian problem.

It clearly indicated that Indonesia has always demonstrated the non-religious consideration of its foreign policy. Interestingly, as one well-known foreign policy analyst argued, in the case of Indonesia’s decision to refuse the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel, Suharto was not responsive to the domestic demands but he was rather anticipative to the possible impacts from the reactions of Muslim society\(^{28}\). With this decision, Suharto could gain more political popularity from the Muslim society by manipulating Islam as a determinant factor in Indonesia’s foreign policy to serve domestic political goals. Indeed, it also suggested that the Islamic factor in Indonesia’s foreign policy could serve the function of political legitimisation in the domestic political context.\(^{29}\)

\(^{21}\) Interview, 30 August 1999.
\(^{22}\) According to one of senior diplomat at Deplu, Indonesia asked the permission of the US government whether the US can accept the opening of diplomatic relations between Indonesia and PLO. Indonesia then give permission to PLO to open its office in Jakarta in 1989 when the US signalled its green light. Interview, 30 August 1999.
\(^{23}\) Suara Pembaruan, 30 January 1999.
\(^{24}\) See among others, the Jakarta Post, 2, 13 February 1991.
\(^{25}\) This is the only foreign policy issue in which president Suharto considered Islam as an influencing factor in Indonesia’s foreign policy. Based on several interviews, October-November 1999.
\(^{26}\) Interview, 30 November 1999.
\(^{27}\) Interview, 9 August 1999.
\(^{28}\) Interview, 24 November 1999.
Indonesia and The Moro Problem.
In the issue of facilitating the peaceful settlement of Moro conflict between the government of the Republic of Philippine and the Moro National liberation Front (MNLF), Soeharto has put regional cohesiveness of Southeast Asian countries as his main priority instead of religious awareness of Islam in Moro Islands. The regional security and stability in Southeast Asia was considered as the primary factors of Soeharto’s policy in facilitating the peaceful settlement of the Moro conflict. For Suharto, regional stability in Southeast Asia was much more crucial than religious solidarity with the Moro people so that Indonesia as well as other ASEAN members would not support any separatist movement in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion:
The above discussions show that Islam as a political force had always been put within the context of domestic political stage so that Soeharto substantially could deny the penetration of Islam in foreign policy making. This paper has shown that the role of Islam in Indonesia’s foreign policy was inconsistent. This inconsistency was mainly due to the fact that the New order regime has conducted a “double-standard” policy in managing Islam in Indonesia’s politics. The role of Islam has been marginalised and in most cases, Islam has even been manipulated as political machinery of the New Order regime.

In other words, similarly to the role of the state in handling domestic politics, the state is much more stronger that the society so that the state can relatively neglect the role and the influence of societal factor (religious) in foreign policy making and implementation. The state will only involve the Islamic voices to justify its foreign policy behaviour. In this regard, the need to achieve national development and stability with a more pragmatic instrument was seen as a more crucial factor for Indonesia’s foreign policy. To sum up, it can be argued that during the Suharto era, Indonesia’s foreign policy had been determined by pragmatic and realistic considerations which resulted from the developments of domestic and international environment.

This paper shows that Islam had never been a major factor in most Indonesia’s foreign policy making and implementation. In doing so, the position of Islam in the field of foreign policy had been marginalised. In fact, Islam has been manipulated as a foreign policy tool to build policy coalitions and retaining political power in the domestic context. In other words, even though Indonesia is the world’s largest Muslim country, the nature of Indonesia’s foreign policy was very secular.

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