

## THE IDENTITY OF SHI'A SYMPATHIZERS IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper sheds some light on Indonesian Shi'a sympathizers, their particular relations among themselves as well as with others. Following the Iranian Revolution by the late 1970, Indonesian Muslims witnessed a remarkable religious enthusiasm marked by the proliferation of Shi'a literature. This, in turn, is followed by the establishment of Shi'a- based institutions, Islamic schools, publishers and associations over the regions. However, in a Sunni-majority country like Indonesia, the identity of Shi'a sympathizers is contested by various religious inclinations among themselves as well as with Indonesian Sunnis. Due to strong suspicion from the Sunnis, the outward appearance of Indonesian Shi'i identity is not as visible as the Sunnis. It goes without saying that public discourse disappears. Some efforts to communicate with broader scope of Indonesian Muslims have been made by Shi'a sympathizers, especially among new generations, in order to strengthen their community as well as carry out a more open and productive dialog with the Sunnis.

**Keywords:** Shi'a, Muslim minority, and Indonesian Islam.

### Introduction

A study center called "The Iranian Corner" has just recently been set up in a number of Indonesian universities. Providing a bunch of

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literature and information pertaining to Iran, this “corner” has increasingly become a window for Indonesian students to have a look at contemporary Iranian culture, including its religious tradition and political system. The availability of Islamic literature written by Iranian scholars at the Iranian Corner is also believed to have contributed to the development of students’ knowledge on Shi’a tradition. Some works are written in Arabic, Persian, and English; but the rest are in translation (Bahasa Indonesia). All those literature are supplied by the embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Jakarta through Islamic Cultural Center (ICC). Dr. Behrooz Kamaluandi, the Ambassador of Islamic Republic of Iran in Jakarta also actively visits universities across the regions and gives lectures on domestic and international issues relating to Iran. A number of universities such as Indonesia University (UI), Islamic State University (UIN) in Jakarta and Yogyakarta, Gadjah Mada University, Hasanuddin University in South Celebes, as well as Muhammadiyah Universities in Jakarta, Malang, and Yogyakarta have great respect for setting up such a study center at their own universities as the Iranian Corner has also become a medium for those universities to carry out further cooperation with the Islamic Republic (I.R) of Iran in education and human resources development. Following this, Iranian government, for example, sent a number of students and lecturers from Indonesia to take a coursework in one of Iranian universities. The embassy of I.R. of Iran in Jakarta also brought some Iranian thinkers, academia, and public intellectuals to the listed universities above with the aim of facilitating ‘cultural exchange’ and making dialogue with local academia. It goes without saying that strong suspicion from particular Muslim leaders in the country disappears. As a matter of fact some consider that the Iranian Corner is nothing but simply concealing a hidden agenda, propagating the Shi’a tenets among university students.

The Iranian Corner is certainly not the only access to Shi’a literature. Since the early 1980s several works written by prominent Iranian Muslim scholars have been translated into Bahasa Indonesia and publicly available in many bookstores. The spread of Shi’a literature and the thought of Iranian modern Muslim scholars for the last three decades reveal that there was a renewed interest in the Shi’a tradition among Indonesian Muslims whose religious stance is Shafi’ia-Ash’aria in character. There is no precise survey that has been done as for the number of Shi’is in the region. One claims that their

population numbers in the country reach three million people. The increasing number of literatures, publishers, associations or foundations that very much deal with Shi'a tradition also indicates that Indonesian Muslims who either secretly or publicly adhere to Shi'a also increased. It is by no means certain that the Shi'i communities and sympathizers could visibly and freely express their identity in public life, as other Sunni>Muslims do, given that strong resistance to Shi'a tradition from certain groups of Sunni>Muslim mainstream remains. Keeping the above situation in mind, this article will explore the extent to which Shi'a sympathizers in Indonesia negotiate their identity with Sunni>majority tradition. In particular it shall deal with the nature of Indonesian Shi'a sympathizers in Indonesia and the rise of Shi'a-inspired institutions subsequent to the Iranian Revolution. This also will analyze the contested meanings of being Shi'i among the new 'converts' and how it generates reaction especially from the Sunni>purists.

### Defining Indonesian Shi'a Sympathizers

The generic term of Shi'a appeared after the death of Prophet Muhammad in 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D., which is in turn followed by the dispute among early Muslims over the rightful leader of Islamic community. The advocates of Ali bin Abi Thalib, which is latter on called the Shi'a 'Ali (the faction of Ali), maintained that Ali, with his spiritual virtues, deserved to be a rightful leader succeeding the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad. They denied recognizing the leadership of another faction led by Abu Bakr as-Siddiq that *de facto* became the first caliph in Islamic history. 'Umar Ibn al-Khaththab and 'Usman bin 'Affan, the successors of Abu Bakar, are also politically beyond Shi'a recognition. The advocates of Abu Bakr and his successors are associated with Sunni>Muslims or *Ahl al Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* ("the People of Tradition and the Community"), the largest faction in Islam. Most of Sunni>Muslims consider that Ali bin Abi Thalib is the forth caliph and included in the so-called "the Rightly Guided Caliphs" (*al-~~kh~~ulafa' al-rashidun*). The story continues when both factions develop their respective theological foundation and tradition, and these two opposing communities finally spread throughout the world. On the matter of leadership in Islamic community, the Sunni>scholars develop the concept of *khilafat*, while

the Shi'a ulama formulate that of *imama*.<sup>2</sup> Shi'is are heavily characterized by devotional love to the prophet Muhammad and his descendants from Fatima's blood line. Fatima is prophet's daughter who became the wife of Ali bin Abi Thalib.<sup>3</sup>

The Shi'a communities exist in many countries notably, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, India, and other parts of the world, including in Southeast Asia. In particular, the Indonesian Islam is overwhelmingly Sunni<sup>4</sup> and only few Indonesians adhere to Shi'a Islam.<sup>4</sup> There are at least two strains of the so-called Shi'a Muslims in the Indonesian context: those

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<sup>2</sup> Relevant accounts from Indonesian Muslim scholars to this issue, see for example, Nurcholish Madjid, "Skisme dalam Islam: Tinjauan Singkat secara Kristis-Historis terhadap Proses Dini Perpecahan Sosial-Keagamaan Islam," and Jalaluddin Rahmat, *Skisme dalam Islam: Sebuah Telaah Ulang*," in Budhy Munawwar Rahman (ed.), *Kotekstualisasi Doktrin Islam dalam Sejarah* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1995), pp. 668-688; 692-706.

<sup>3</sup> It is by no means that, in the Indonesian context, those propagating devotional love to the prophet Muhammad and *abl bayt* ("the Prophet's family") can by definition be labeled Shi'a since there are also some other groups among Muslims have high respect for Prophets' family and his progeny. Traditionalist Muslims' custom to some extent resembles Shi'a tradition in a way that they often carry out a sort of religious festival in which they adore honoring *abl bayt*. See for example Baroroh Baried, *L'Islam Dans l-Archipel*, *Archipel* (1978), issue 15, pp. 65-84; for a comparison see recent research conducted by Suharti, "Tabuik: Ritual Kepanatikan 'Kaum Syi'ah di Pantai Barat Sumatra Barat," (Unpublished research report, Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia, Padang Panjang, 2006); and Mazir Mozaffari-Falarti, "Critical Studies of Theories Surrounding the Historic Arrival of a Popular Shi'ite Festival in Contemporary Sunni Malaysia," (Paper presented to the Conference "Social Change in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," Center for Social Change Research, Queensland University of Technology, 29 October 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Some works have dealt with the coming of Shi'a to Malay-Indonesian Peninsula, asserting that Shi'a community arrived in the Archipelago by seventh and eight centuries. This community ruled Perlak Kingdom in the Aceh Area after defeating the Sunni<sup>8</sup>. See for example A. Hasjmy, *Syi'ah dan Ablusunnah Saling Berebut Pengaruh dan Kekuasaan Sejak Awal Sejarah Islam di Kepulauan Nusantara* (Surabaya: Bina Ilmu, 1984). However, there is, according to Azyumardi Azra, unfortunately no adequate evidence that supports this claim. Azyumardi Azra, "Islamic Thought: Theory, Concept, and Doctrines in the Context of Southeast Asian Islam," in K.S. Nathan 7 Muhammad Hashim Kamali (eds.), *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2005), pp. 8-9. Another account connects the emergence of Shi'a with the coming of Tarekat 'Alawiya to Indonesia-Malay Archipelago. It is suspected that some of the Tarekat 'Alawiya's members secretly adhere to Shi'a. For further discussion see Syed Farid Alatas, "The Tariqat al-'Alawiya and the Emergence of Shi'i School in Indonesian and Malaysia," *International Workshop on South-East Asian Studies*. No. 12, *The Arab in Southeast Asia (1879-1990)* (Leiden: Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology).

Sunnis who converted to Shi'a, and those who become admirers of the Shi'a following the Islamic Revolution. In this regards, Azra points out that it is hard to discover the Sunni Muslims who by definition converted to Shi'a. For him, the enthusiasm of limited groups of Indonesian Muslims to travel to Iran seeking knowledge of Shi'ite Islamic tradition does not indicate a sort of massive scale of "conversion". However, Azra and other observers seem to agree that the Iranian Revolution has had a great impact on the growth of interest in Shi'a tradition among Sunni Muslims.<sup>5</sup> It is also worth mentioning that for most Indonesian Muslim activists and students, admiration for Islamic Revolution in Iran does not necessarily lead them to self-conversion to Shi'a, except among few Arab descendants. Rather, they attempted to draw a more fundamental meaning of such a revolution, which is how to reframe revolutionary concept in Islamic tradition and reconstruct it in the Indonesian social and political environment.<sup>6</sup> Another account points out that by the end of century (2000 and afterwards), the numbers of Shi'a converts reach tens of thousands. Concerning the typical Indonesian Shi'is, Martin Van Bruinessen explains, "some of these are converts in the full sense of the word, many others sympathizers and admirers of the Shi'a."<sup>7</sup> Being Shi'is in "the full sense of the word" or simply being a Shi'a sympathizer has become a choice for limited groups of Indonesian Muslims. Based on the above accounts, the Shi'a Muslims this paper will much refer to are recent Shi'i converts or Shi'a sympathizers whose levels of devotional love to Muhammad, Ali bin Abi Thalib, Fatima and their progeny vary in quality.

There are different kinds of Shi'a sects: the largest group is called Twelvers Shi'a (*Ithna' Ashariya*). This group has strong followers primarily in Iran and Iraq. Next to it are Zaidiya and Isma'iliya. The former has strong supporters in Yaman, while the latter in some areas of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Most of the recent converts to Shi'a in Indonesia are "Twelver," and very limited numbers of Isma'iliya,

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<sup>5</sup> Azra, "Islamic Thought," pp. 8-9.

<sup>6</sup> Yudi Latif, *Intelegensia Muslim dan Kuasa* (Bandung: Mizan, 2005), p. 549.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen, "Genealogies of Islamic Radicalism in Post-Soeharto Indonesia, *Southeast Asia Research*, Vol. 10, no. 2 (2002), pp. 117-154.

such as Boria, exist in Surabaya-East Java.<sup>8</sup> The feature of Indonesian Shi'a quite differs in character from the ones existing in the Middle Eastern countries. Whereas Shi'a communities in Middle East have very long history of bitter experience of domination—and very much coped with strong oppression—of Sunni>Muslims, the Indonesian Shi'is are mostly recent converts whose sociological or political role is not as imperative as in the Middle East or South Asia. Likewise, in Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam where the majority of population is Sunni>the Shi'a groups have been treated rather differently. "Whereas the Shi'ites are relatively free in Indonesia, they face a great deal of difficulties in other countries in Southeast Asia. In both Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia, Shi'ism is regarded as a deviant teaching and, therefore, the governments in the two countries keep a watchful eye on Shi'a and its possible spread."<sup>9</sup> It is worth pointing out, however, that whereas the government allows Indonesian people to adhere to one of the 'recognized' religions, radicalization among limited groups of Indonesian Sunnis have contributed a great deal to the rise of communal tension in public realms between the majority (Sunnis) and Muslim minority groups (Shi'is and other small sects).

The spread of Shi'a teaching in contemporary Indonesia is not always associated with the Iranian Revolution or with Muslim activists and university students in urban areas. It, in some cases, also deals with local Muslim ulama, mostly Arab descents, who from the beginning might surreptitiously have adhered to Shi'a tradition. There are some key figures in the Shi'a communities that play pivotal roles in the spread of Shi'ite tradition in both rural and urban areas; among them Abdul Qadir Bafagih, Husein al-Habsyi, Jalaluddin Rahmat, Umar Shahab and others. Having been involved in Shi'a tradition, the above figures played their respective roles in the area where they live in. Bafagih, is very known to have introduced Shi'a tradition in Jepara-West-Java. Supported by his family members as well as his followers, he sets up pesantren where he and his family members can introduce

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<sup>8</sup> This is based on my private conversation with a sociologist Farish Ahmad Noor who just recently interviewed a leading figure of Boria community in Surabaya.

<sup>9</sup> Azra, "Islamic Thought," p. 8. See also his "Syiah di Indonesia: Antara Mitos dan Realitas," Introduction in A. Rahman Zainuddin (ed.), *Syiah dan Politik di Indonesia: Sebuah Penelitian* (Bandung: Mizan, 2000).

Islamic teachings in general and Shi'i tradition in particular to Indonesian Muslims. Recently, Bangsri-Jepara has increasingly known as place where many Shi'is resides.<sup>10</sup> Husein al-Habsyi is an influential Shi'a figure in East Java. Born in Surabaya in 1921, he converted to Shi'a and established, as we will discuss further in the next section of this article, Islamic educational institution in Bangil East-Java that become one of his prominent legacies. Like other Shi'i figures, both Bafagih and al-Habsyi have a great deal of difficulties living in Sunni majority population.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the above two ulama, Jalaluddin Rahmat is well known for his activities in "Dakwah Kampus". His position as a lecturer at Padjadjaran University-Bandung leads him to be more well-liked among students and younger Muslim activists. His popular writings and talks on Islam, leadership, and Sufism also make his position more acceptable in urban areas, especially among well-educated people. Rahmat is well-acquainted with western scholarship seeing as he graduated from western education system. Umar Shahab is another figure who was educated in Iran in the period of political transition of the Iranian Revolution. Umar Shahab and other Qum alumni have become well-known *ustadhs* in Jakarta.

### The Contested Meaning of the Iranian Revolution

We have discussed slightly about the Impact of the Iranian Revolution on Indonesian Muslim activists. The Iranian Revolution in fact generated a new development and innovation of religious revivalism among Sunnis, in general, and self-consciousness among Shi'is, in particular.<sup>12</sup> In the Indonesian context, we may highlight three phases of the development of Shi'a after the Iranian Revolution through Berger and Luckmann's "social construction theory." First of all, the phase of "externalization" or "taking in culture" signifies the process of intellectual transformation of Shi'a legacy and doctrines in the region. Next to it is the phase of "objectification," which is marked by institutionalization of Shi'a ideas individually and communally

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<sup>10</sup> See Ahmad Syafi'i, "Profil Ustadz Abdul Qadir Bafagih: Studi tentang Perkembangan Paham/Aliran Syi'ah di Desa Bangsri Kab. Jepara Provinsi Jawa Tengah," in *Agama dan Perubahan Sosial* (Jakarta: Litbang Departemen Agama, 1983).

<sup>11</sup> Zulkifli, "Being a Shi'ie among the Sunni-Majority in Indoensia: A Preliminary Study of Ustadz Husein al-Habsyi (1921-1944)," *Studia Islamika*, Vol. 11 (2004), Issue 2, pp. 275-308.

<sup>12</sup> See further Muhammad Hisyam, *Syiah dan Revolusi Iran* (Jakarta: LIPI, 1986).

through subjective and normative activities. Finally, the phase of “internalization” means “a process of socialization” and “producing culture”.

### *Intellectual transformation of Shi'a legacy*

It should be noted that before the Iranian Revolution there a few Indonesian students pursuing study in *Hawza 'Ilmiyya* at Qum-Iran, both in traditional and modern systems. Among the well-known Qum alumni who studied at Qum Iran several years prior to the revolution are Ali Ridha al-Habsyi, the son of Muhammad al-Habsyi of Habib Ali Kwitang of Jakarta. He studied at Qum in 1974. This is followed by Umar Shahab who is recently known as famous Shi'a figure in Indonesia. Shahab studied at Qum along with other Indonesian students in 1976. Soon after the revolution, especially in 1982, the Iranian government announced the initiation of sending more Indonesian students to Iran. Some representatives such as Ibrahim Ayatullah Amini, Ayatullah Masduqi, and Hujjat al-Islam Mahmudi came to Indonesia, visiting some places, including YAPI (Foundation of Islamic Education) of Bangil East-Jawa led by Husein al-Habsyi, the prominent Shi'a ulama in the country.<sup>13</sup>

It is worth mentioning that since Shi'a Islam came to public attention soon after the Revolution, we may observe the influence of two groups in the spread of Shi'a Islam in contemporary Indonesia: the first group is Qum alumni, and the second is student group at Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB). The two have a great deal of characterizing a new development of Shi'a tradition among Indonesian Muslims. Jalaluddin Rahmat, in this respect, has had a great influence on Muslim activists at such universities as ITB, Padjadjaran University of Bandung (Unpad), Indonesian University of Jakarta (UI) and others. One activist graduated from ITB told me that he knew Shi'a Islam during his involvement in the Campus-based *halaqah* (circle of knowledge), and Jalaluddin Rahmat was his mentor. Haidar Bagir, a scholar who also very knowledgeable about Shi'i intellectual treasure was also one of the foremost activists of this student group at that time. He graduated from ITB and then pursued his advance study at Harvard University for his Master degree, and Indonesia University (UI) for his Doctoral degree on philosophy. As we will discuss in the

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<sup>13</sup> See Zulkifly, “Seeking Knowledge onto Qum: The Education of Indonesian Shi'i Ustads,” *ILAS News Letter*, No. 38, September 2005, p. 30.



next section, ITB graduates and Qum alumni have played different parts, but complementary, in the spread of Shi'i literature in Indonesia.

The existence of the Shi'a before the Iranian Revolution was very "secretive." The sympathizers of Shi'a did not have enthusiasm for overtly propagating their teachings to others. In order to be able to integrate within the neighborhood, some dissimulate their beliefs (*taqiyyah*) as means of protecting themselves from any possible threat.<sup>14</sup> Yet, since then, some new converts are more assertive in demonstrating their religious orientation or at least to articulate their endeavor in bring revolutionary ideas to the country. In his observation in several Muslim countries Nikki Keddie concludes: "as a gross generalization one may say that the Iranian Revolution was, during its course and for many months after its victory, widely regarded as inspirational in the Muslim world, and more generally in the third world, but that the very positive view of that revolution has declined, except among the Shi'ism of several countries and some radical Islamists, especially students."<sup>15</sup> In line with this, Kuntowijoyo in his examination of Islamic intellectual history in contemporary Indonesia notes: "the impact of the success of Iranian Revolution on Muslim dignities in the world could not be forgotten...In Indonesia, a country which is politically and religiously less-affected by Iranian revolution, the echo of this revolution appears in different ways. The writings of Iranian Muslim scholars such as Murtadha Muthahhari, Ali Shari'ati, and Bani Sadr were warmly welcomed by younger activists. They seemingly have new 'intellectual weapons' against system and global ideologies."<sup>16</sup> To borrow Mehden's remark, this is a sort of "popular attitudes towards the Revolution."<sup>17</sup> Along with their admiration of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt and Neo Marxian

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<sup>14</sup> Jalaluddin Rahmat, "Dikotomi Sunni-Syi'ah Tidak Relevan Lagi," in A. Rahman Zainuddin & Hamdan Basyar (ed.), *Syi'ah dan Politik di Indonesia: Sebuah Penelitian* (Bandung: Mizan, 2000), p. 145; also *Catatan Kang Jalal, Visi Media, Politik dan Pendidikan*, edited by Miftah F. Rahmat (Bandung: Remaja Rosda Karya, 1998), pp. 433-460.

<sup>15</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, *Iran and the Muslim World: Resistance and Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 118. See also John L. Esposito, *The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact* (Miami: Florida International University, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> Kuntowijoyo, *Paradigma Islam: Interpretasi untuk Aksi* (Bandung: Mizan, 1993), p. 315.

<sup>17</sup> Mehden, *Two World of Islam: Interaction between Southeast Asia and the Middle East* (Florida, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), p. 72.

Schools, for example, many Muslim students were familiar with the Shi'a thinkers and Iranian ideologists. Therefore, as Jalaludin Rahmat illustrates, along with their discourse of "the Frankfurt School," the Indonesian Muslim students talk about "the Qum School" for their social critics.<sup>18</sup> Despite the fact that the wave of translation of numerous Shi'a works has enriched Islamic discourse among Indonesian Muslims, only few works have dealt straightforwardly with the political and religious ideology of Khomeini, the main figure of Iranian Revolution. As for the lower rate of publications about or written by Khomeini in 1980s, Van Mehden notes that it is probably because of the fear of governmental reprisal and because "Khomeini's writings and statements have been primarily Iranian in character."<sup>19</sup> Yet, after a little while the works of Khomeini and others Shi'a ideologist spread throughout bookstores in some regions.

Attention should also be paid to the way sympathizers of the Shi'a put forward their identity through discourse. It was the Mizan Press that initiated the publication of the so called "Shi'a books" in the early 1980s. The Arabic book *al-Muraja'at* constituting a dialogue between A. Sharafuddin Al-Musawi and Shaikh Salim al-Bisri al-Maliki was selected to be the foremost book published by the Mizan Press in 1983. It has been entitled *Dialog Sunni-Syi'ah* (A Dialogue between a Sunni and a Shi'i).<sup>20</sup> According to the Director of Mizan Press, Haidar Bagir, the publication of this book was inspired by the fact that "there was no appropriate and adequate discussion of Shi'a in Indonesia at that time."<sup>21</sup> Because of this, Haidar was suspected of disseminating Shi'a doctrines. At that juncture, most of Shi'a books being published were not necessarily reflecting specific Shi'a teachings.<sup>22</sup> Rather, they

<sup>18</sup> Rahmat, "Dikotomi Sunni-Syi'ah," p. 150.

<sup>19</sup> Mehden, *Two World of Islam*, p. 73.

<sup>20</sup> As-Sayyid Syarafuddin al Musawi, *Dialog Sunnah Syi'ah: Surat menyurat antara asy-Syaikh al-Misyri al-Maliki Rektor al-Azhar di Kairo Mesir dan as-Sayyid Syarafuddin al Musawi al-Amili seorang ulama besar Syi'ah* (Bandung: Mizan, 1983). In order to counter this book, one publisher in 1989 translated and published the work of Mahmud az-Zabi, *Al-Bayyinah, fi ar Radd ala Abatil al-Muraja'at*. See Mahmud az-Zabi, *Sunni yang Sunni: Tinjauan Dialog Sunni-Syiahnya al-Musawi* translated by Ahmadi Thaha and Ilyas Ismail (Bandung: Pustaka, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.mizan.com/portal/template/BacaBerita/kodenews/591>.

<sup>22</sup> Some Shi'a literature are published by, among other things, by the following publishers: the Mizan Press, the Lentera, the YAPI Press (Jakarta), the YAPI Press

focus with general Islamic themes, such as the concept of family in Islam, justice in Islam, women in Islam, moral and ethics in Islam, al-Quran, the History of Muhammad, and the issues with reference to the dialogue between Sunnis and Shi'is. Through this way, Shi'a sympathizers attempt to share the resemblances between Shi'a and Sunnis. However, other Shi'a groups presently became more audacious in disseminating their religious principles. They have offered more specific themes, constituting the core concepts of Shi'a legacies that 'distinguish' them from Sunnis, such as the concept of *imamah*, the superiority of the *ahl al-bayt*, Imam al-Mahdi, Mut'ah marriage, etc. Currently, hundreds of Shi'a books on Islamic Theology, Ethics/-Moral, Islamic Jurisprudence, Philosophy, History, Biography, Society, Al-Quran, and Hadith, have already been translated into Indonesian language and published by several publishers.

The new generation of Qum alumni and Shi'a organizations then became important agents in the perpetuation of the spread of Shi'a doctrines. If historians mention that the early Shi'a ideas were probably brought from India some centuries ago by Arab-Persian traders or some Sufi orders, the contemporary phenomena of "Qum students", starting from 1980s up to now, can be regarded as a new stripe of the direct linkage between Indonesian Muslims and Shi'a ideas intellectually, religiously and, perhaps, politically. Numerous Indonesian students studied there (Qum) and brought the teachings of Shi'a to this country. As far as this, most Indonesian students in Qum were coming from the families of Shi'a sympathizers or those having relationship with them. But the situation has changes in recent days. Some Sunni Muslims, who knew Shi'a when they studied in one of the listed universities above, told me that he converted to Shi'a because he admired Shi'a prominent figures. "I was raised in a modernist Muslim family; my father is even a local Muslim figure who administers modernist Muslim school in my hometown. After having graduated from the faculty of engineering at one state university in Jakarta where I was acquainted with Shi'a teachings, I decided to pursue my advanced study at Qum Iran," one Shi'i convert explains his

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(Bangil), the Rosdakarya Press, the Al-Hadi Press, the CV Firdaus Press, the Pustaka Firdaus Press, the Risalah Masa Press, the Qonaah Press, the Bina Tauhid Press, the Mahdi Press, the Al-Kautsar Press, the Al-Baqir Press, the Al-Bayan Press, the As-Sajjad Press, the Basrie Press, the Pintu Ilmu Press, the Al-Muntazhar Press, etc.

involvement in the Shi'a community. This Shi'i convert along with other students studied *'ulum al-Qur'an* (the science of the Quran), *'ulum al-hadith* (the science of Islamic tradition), *fiqh* and *ushul al-fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence), *'aqidah* (Theology), and *falsafah*, *hikmah* or *'irfan* (Philosophy). The *Markaz Jabari>Ulum al Islami* under the control of *Rabbar* (Ayatullah al-Uzma Sayyid Ali Khamanei), has so far been organizing all international students from across the world, including Indonesian students, who are studying religion in Qum.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Institutionalization of Shi'a Islam***

Witnessing Shi'a-based Islamic education institution, Qum alumni have increasingly become an important agent for the growth of the Indonesian Shi'a associations. According to the observation carried out in 1997, there were about 25 organizations dealing with Shi'a in Jakarta. Ahmad Barakbah, a Qum alumnus, has mentioned that there were no less than 40 Shi'a organizations that have been established in Indonesia, including the Mulla Sadra Foundation (Bogor), the *Pesantren al-Hadi* (in Pakalongan), the Al-Jawad Foundation (in Jakarta), the al-Muntazhar Foundation (Jakarta), the Yayasan Pesantren Islam/YAPI (in Bangil), the Muthahhari Foundation (Bandung), the Fatimah Foundation (Jakarta), the Al-Muhibbin Foundation (Probolinggo) and others that can be found in Malang, Yogyakarta, Pontianak, Ujung Pandang, Samarinda, and Banjarmasin.<sup>24</sup> Their core programs and activities include education, Islamic gathering, and publication. Among the regular publications in the form of bulletin, magazines and semi-journals issued by the Shi'is are: *Yaum al Quds* (Magazine, published by the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Jakarta); *al Mawaddah* (Indonesian Ahl al-Bayt Communication Forum); *Al Hikmah* (Muthahhari Foundation), *Bulletin Al Jawad* and *Al Ghadir* (Al Jawad Foundation), *Al Tanwir* (Muthahhari Foundation), and *An Naba* (Fatimah Foundation).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> This is based on my correspondence with the Indonesian Student Association in Qum, Iran on 25 July 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Dewi Nurjianti & Arief Subhan, "Lembaga-lembaga Shi'isme di Indonesia," *Ulumul Quran*, No. 4, Vol. VI, (1995), pp. 20-25.

<sup>25</sup> Thohir Abdullah Al-Kaff, "Perkembangan Syi'ah di Indonesia," in *Mengapa Kita Menolak Syi'ah: Kumpulan Makalah dan Kesimpulan Seminar Nasional Sebari tentang Shi'ism* (Jakarta: LPPI, 1998), p. 67.

While in the 1980s the teachings of Shi'a were disseminated because of, perhaps, the political and intellectual euphoria of the Iranian Revolution that, in fact, attracted Indonesian younger Muslims and student activists, in the 1990s and afterwards their interest in Shi'a is institutionalized in the form of association or foundation. They, to some extent, prefer not to use the word Shi'a in their outward appearance. Instead, they employ the term *abl al-bayt* for marking their group. Indeed, the term of *abl al-bayt* is more neutral in nature compare to the term Shi'a. The aim of the listed foundations above is to propagate Shi'a Islam to Indonesian Muslims. The Al-Jawad Foundation, for instance, openly declares its mission: "to practice the teachings of the *ablul bayt* in daily life, individually and communally, and to propagate them extensively within society." The same idea is voiced by the Fatimah Foundation (established in 1997) whose objective is "to disseminate the teachings of the *ablul bayt*," and "to make the *ummah* to be the devotees of Muhammad and the *ablul bayt*." In short, intellectual transformation in the form of "*hikmah*" of Shi'a in the 1980s has been transformed into that of institutionalized movement.

A non-'confrontational' way has been taken by some Shi'a communities. Jalaluddin Rahmat, the founder of the Muthahhari Foundation, explains that this foundation does not intend to propagate Shi'a. He suggests that for the time being it is necessary for new Muslim generations to reduce the dichotomy between Shi'a and Sunni in order to discourage schism within Muslim society. He employs the "*ukhummah* approach" for his strategy to communicate with other Muslim fellows (Sunnis).<sup>26</sup> The Muthahhari Foundation whose main activity consists of education and publication has taught its students all main *madhhab* (Islamic schools of law), especially the Maliki, Hambali, Hanafi, Syafi'i and Ja'fari. There is a marked contrast between the feature of Muthahhari Foundation and that of other Shi'a organizations such as the Al-Jawad Foundation of Bandung, YAPI of Bangil, Pesantren al-Hadi of Pekalongan, and the Fatimah Foundation of Jakarta. The mission of the Muthahhari Foundation has increasingly become more moderate in articulating the Shi'a religious principles.

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<sup>26</sup> See Dedy Djameluddin Malik dan Idi Subandy Ibrahim, *Zaman Baru Islam Indonesia: Pemikiran dan Aksi Politik Abdurrahman Wabid, M. Amien Rais, Nurcholish Madjid dan Jalaluddin Rakhmat* (Bandung: Zaman Wacan Mulia, 1998)

The Fatimah Foundation, for instance, has taken the opposite way by publishing some articles in response to the Sunni>criticism, such as “the Deviations of the Doctrines of *Ahlu Sunnah wa al Jama'ah*,” “The Blemished Wahhabis’ Characteristics,” “the Mistakes of Muhammad Companions,” and the like.<sup>27</sup> In conjunction with this, *Pesantren* al-Hadi of Pakalongan, having operated since 1989, has sent a number of its alumni to Qum-Iran. Along with the YAPI in Bangil, this Pekalongan based *pesantren* is perhaps the only Islamic educational institution in the country adopting the *hawza* system of Qum in its curriculum.<sup>28</sup> Some factors may have generated the institutionalization of Shi'a Islam. First of all, the increasing Shi'a sympathizers in number in several regions require more organized activities. They realize that a new step should be taken into consideration, unifying a sporadic movement of Indonesian Shi'is. As a minority, Shi'a sympathizers need more social and political recognitions from a wider scope of audiences, especially the outsiders. Another factor is relied on insiders' need. For them, institutionalizing Shi'a Islam would give lots of benefits to the community. It provides a more comprehensive reading facility (library), offers more reliable curricula for new converts, and strengthens social cohesion among the existing communities. Therefore, it is expected that Shi'a sympathizers will be able to deal with both political and religious/spiritual principles of the Shi'a.

The decline of the New Order regime in 1998 has had a profound impact on Indonesian Muslims. Along with the emergence of new revivalism among the Sunni>mainstream, the Shi'a Islam witnessed a remarkable situation where religious freedom was strongly supported by the government, especially under Abdurrahman Wahid's administration. At that juncture, the public sphere was engulfed by the rise new religious movements, ranging from the most radical groups to the liberal ones. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) is a prominent inclusive Muslim scholar and the former President of the Republic of Indonesia whose commitment to shoring up religious freedom and pluralism is unquestionable. Prompted by this situation, a number of Indonesian Shi'is declared a new association, namely IJABI

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<sup>27</sup> See <http://www.fatimah.org/indexartikel.htm>

<sup>28</sup> Nurjulianti & Subhan, “Lembaga-lembaga Shi'ismh di Indonesia,” p. 24; Tatik S. Hafidz “Dari Qum, ke Bangil dan Pekalongan,” *Tirias*, No 3/Thn II/15 February 1996.

(Association of Indonesian Ahlul Bayt Society) on 1 July 2000,<sup>29</sup> and publicly announced their first national congress on 4 July at the same year in Bandung-West Java.<sup>30</sup> About two thousand people from twenty provinces attended this congress. Pertaining to the identity of this organization, the IJABI, in the Introduction (*Muqaddimah*) of its Guiding Principles (*Anggaran Dasar*), asserts:

“For centuries, Indonesian Muslims have preserved their love for the *ahl al-bayt*. In order to continue the struggles of the previous *ulama*s, the lovers of the *ahl al-bayt* in Indonesia intend to unify and strengthen communities by establishing social organization based on the *tawhid* (unity of God), *nubuwah* (prophethood), *imamah* (leadership), justice, and the return of the servants to God, the *Rahman* (the most compassionate) and the *Rahim* (the most merciful)...By taking the blessing of the prophet’s (Muhammad) sayings: “The *ahl al-bayt* is like Noah’s ark (during the flood and typhoon). Those who travel and join with this ark would be safe; otherwise, they would be sunk and thrown.” We have established the *Ikatan Jamaah Ahlul Bait Indonesia* (IJABI) as the ark of our safety...By saying *bismillahi majreha wa mursaba*, and being accompanied by the light of *ahlul bayt ‘Alaibi Salam*, we launch the ark of IJABI that would protect all the lovers of the *ahl al-bayt* from their enemies, would develop their thinking spiritually, intellectually and morally, as well as would offer prosperity for all Muslims...”

This congress is a momentous event for the Indonesian Shi’a to be recognized extensively by society.<sup>31</sup> This also becomes a medium for them to be able to integrate with the Sunni-Muslim fellows, as a

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<sup>29</sup> “Kang Jalal: Tujuan IJABI, berdayakan yang lemah,” *Pikiran Rakyat*, 2 July 2000.

<sup>30</sup> “Ijabi Dideklarasikan di Bandung,” *Kompas*, 4 July 2000.

<sup>31</sup> Being recognized by society is an essential step in seeking cultural, social and legal justification. In the process of internalization, according Berger and Luckmann, legitimacy is an important phase, especially where the established organizations belonging to the minority, in this case Shi’a, need social recognition and religious justifications. Nevertheless, this community has still faced religious, cultural and even political boundaries to be justified by Sunni due to different perspective held by Indonesian Sunni. Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Book Edition, 1967), pp. 92-116.

majority, by sharing and voicing resemblances with Sunnis without reducing Shi'a identity. Jalaluddin Rahmat, for example, the chairman and one of the initiators of this association, frequently emphasizes that the IJABI is an open mass organization whose membership is not restricted to Shi'a. "We would like to open a wide definition of the lovers of the *ahl al-bayt*," Jalal adds. In a wider definition, therefore, the IJABI will cover all divisions of Shi'a that exist in Indonesia, and welcome those (among Sunnism) who know, feel sympathy and, more importantly, love the *ahl al-bayt* and their descendants.<sup>32</sup> IJABI then set up its branches in several provinces and became the largest Shi'i association at that time. Jalaluddin Rahmat was elected as a chairperson. In this sense, the participation of ITB's and Qum's alumni cannot be neglected from the establishment of IJABI. It goes without saying nevertheless that rivalry or conflict between them disappears. Like other mass organizations, Shi'i communities were to some extent fragmented into different groups: IJABI and non-IJABI that in some way have been connected to such a rivalry between Qum alumni and non-Qum alumni. In recent days, IJABI is not as strong as in its early period. The first group, called LKAB (Ahlul Bayt Communication Forum), comprises Qum alumni. It is sponsored by Islamic Cultural Center (ICC) and recognized by the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. ICC is headed by Sheikh Mohsen Hakimollahi. A number of Qum alumni and Shi'i ustadhs such as Ali Hussein Alatas, Umar Shahab, Hussein Shahab, Muhsin Labib, Abdullah Beik, Mahdi Alaydrus and others affiliate to this institution. The second group is IJABI. Compare to the previous group, the IJABI seems to be more inclusive in a way that they welcome to Sunni Muslims who are willing to join "*ahl al-bayt madhhab*." It is also reported that some activists of "*Qumiyun*" and "*Ijabiyun*" have attempted to reconcile the existing groups.

### ***"A process of socialization" and "producing culture"***

The majority of Indonesian Shi'a is the Ithna 'Ash'ariyah. The appearance of this group in the public sphere is more often than the two others. Therefore, since *Zaidia* and *Isma'ilia* are sociologically insignificant in the region, they would not be discussed further in this piece. In the Indonesian context, being a 'true' Shi'i remains

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<sup>32</sup> "Mumpung Gus Dur Jadi Presiden," *Gatra*, 15 July 2000.



interpretable, at least, as shown by Shi'a sympathizers. Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke present various definitions in their observation of Shi'a communities in several Sunni populated countries. For most Shi'a, "the definition of Shi'a is compound of religious, cultural, historical, and social attributes, and it is ultimately a definition determined by individual."<sup>33</sup> Some perhaps give emphasis to the religious component, while others may put emphasis on cultural and social aspect. In a more strict definition, Shi'a is "a religious faith and a way of life based on that faith."<sup>34</sup> According to this view, therefore, Shi'a as an identity is "inseparable from adherence to religious faith, and it is the active practice of Shi'a, that expresses identity."<sup>35</sup> If we take such a definition into account, we may observe how the Indonesian Shi'a expresses their identity through the so called "active practice" that distinguishes them from the Sunni faith.

If it is true that the Iranian Revolution had attracted Sunni Muslims' attention across the world, the further questions are: to what extent the Indonesian Muslims (students and activists) are admired by such a revolution, to what extent the works written by Shi'a intellectuals have characterized both Sunni Muslim youths and new Shi'a converts? Have new Shi'a sympathizers been only interested in Shi'a theological doctrines, or in both socio-political and religious practices? The sympathizers of Shi'a themselves have faced a great deal of difficulties to define their specific Indonesian Shi'a identity because their theological and ideological viewpoint are as varied as their religious, social and educational backgrounds.<sup>36</sup> Some sympathizers of the Shi'a are simply admired by the intellectual treasure and socio-political dimension of Shi'a. Others are concerned with its theological doctrines. There are also those who deal with philosophy, theology and religious practices.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the variants of Indonesian Shi'a are actually

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<sup>33</sup> Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'ism: The Forgotten Muslims* (Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press, 1999), p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Rahmat, "Dikotomi Sunni-Syi'ah," p. 148.

<sup>37</sup> The Shi'a religious practices performed and organized by the Shi'ism organizations as the way they preserve Shi'ism traditions include prayers (*thabarab*, *salat*, routine recitation of *Du'a Kumayl*, *Tawassul*, *Faraj*, etc.), religious events (i.e. the commemoration of religious festivals: the born of Muhammad, Fatimah b. Muhammad, 'Ali b. 'Ali Thalib, Hasan b. 'Ali, Husein b 'Ali, etc.) and other rituals. As

coherent with the problem of definition that has been pointed out earlier by Fuller and Francke. In this regard, there are some factors that have presumably shaped some sympathizers to deal with particular aspects of Shi'a and at the same time overlook others. A university student who often comes to one of Shi'a foundation told me that he is impressed by Shi'a political experience, either in classical Islamic period or contemporary Iran, and the influence Shi'a thinkers. Yet, he avoids practicing particular religious practice that a Shi'i does. There are also some possibilities why he and other sympathizers do so: First, they may have not been interested in the *fiqh*, but merely in political or philosophical ideas of Shi'a. Second, they may have been faced by firm cultural and political obstacles in their religious and social environment. Third, they may have achieved Shi'a teachings simply from their readings, not from an intensive gathering with Indonesian Shi'a scholars. In another case, my informant (female, 42), a sympathizer of Shi'a regularly recites *Kumail* and the prayer belonging to Zainal 'Abidin. However, she is trying to avoid "exaggerated expression" of her devotion to main Shi'a saints.<sup>38</sup>

As mentioned before, Qum alumni's contribution to characterizing Indonesian Shi'is is noteworthy, fulfilling the need of those interested in practicing Shi'a *fiqh*. It is mentioned that whereas the first generation of Qum alumni are deeply concerned with intellectual discourse, the second generation began practicing Shi'a *fiqh*. The former is more inclusive and open-minded, while the later is in some way more exclusive in attitudes. In this respect, Jalaluddin Rahmat points out that since Shi'a *fiqh* coagulates among Shi'a sympathizers, the system of *marja'yyah* or *marja' at-taqlid* ("sources of imitation") comes instantaneously into existence. There are some prominent Iraqi and Iranian Shi'a '*ulama*' whom Indonesian Shi'a much refer to, such as Ayyatullah Al-Uzhma Sayyid Ali Huseini Sistani (Najaf, Iraq), Ayyatullah Al-Uzhma Al-Imam Ruhullah Al-Musawi Al-Khomeini (Iran), Ayyatullah Al-Uzhma Sayyid Ali Huseini Khemenei (Iran), Ayyatullah Al-Uzhma Syekh Muhammad Taqi Bahjat Fumani (Qum,

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for the theology, it is primarily concerned with *imamah* and the need of *ummah* of the *ma'sum imam*.

<sup>38</sup> For the prayer of Zayn al-Abidin, see *The Psalm of Islam (Al-Shahifah al-Sajjadiyya)*, translated with introduction and annotation by William Chitick (Oxford, New York, etc.: The Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 1988).

Iran), Ayyatullah Al-Uzhma Syeikh Lutfullah Shafi Gulpaegani (Qum, Iran), and Ayyatullah Al-Uzhma Syeikh Muhammad Fahdl Lankarani (Qum, Iran). My interview with a Shi'i (a male, 38 years old) reveals that the Qum alumni have a strong determination in shaping the characteristic of religious outlooks of new Shi'a sympathizers through their intensive and regular religious gatherings.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, most of the *maraj'* of the Indonesian Shi'a are Iranian *'Ulama's*. Accordingly, nearly all teachers or ustadhs in the Shi'a organizations are Qum alumni, and they are able to share deeply the Ja'faria School of law in addition to the philosophy and Shi'a theological doctrines.

The typical Indonesian Shi'a is less-obvious. When the history of Shi'a community has long been characterized by political encounter with the state and Sunni domination, why the Shi'a communities in Indonesia are less political is another interesting issue. Martin Van Bruinessen, in relation to this case, argues that Shi'is political character has been changed by their intellectual sense. The Shi'a movement in Indonesia, Bruinessen emphasizes, "is no longer considered revolutionary sectarian movement; rather it becomes introversionist."<sup>40</sup> Since the Shi'a community in Southeast Asia is a minority, as Fred R. von der Mehden has pointed out, there is "no natural base for Iranian influence as exists in parts of the Middle East."<sup>41</sup> One of the

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<sup>39</sup> Interview, 28 July 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, "Gerakan Sempalan di Kalangan Umat Islam Indonesia: Latar Belakang Sosial Budaya," *'Ulumul Qur'an*, Vol III no 1 (1992): pp. 16-27.

<sup>41</sup> Even so, it does not mean there was no political tendency among them. There were a few actions that could be regarded as a direct political impact of the Iranian Revolution either among Sunnis or Shi'is. For example, in 1986 the Soeharto regime persecuted those getting involved in Malang bombings. They, through an organization called "The Indonesian Islamic Revolution Board," attempted to bring down the regime by seeking political support from Iran and Libya. In another case, the pattern of Iran as an "Islamic State" has been idealized by a certain Sunni Muslim who sought the implementation of Islamic state in the country. See Mehden, *Two World of Islam*, p. 73. It was Irfan Suryahadi who was sentenced to thirteen years in the prison after accused of being subversive by the regime. He was the editor of magazine *Risalah*, and published an article entitled "Wejangan Ayatullah Khomeini" (The Advices of Ayatullah Khomeini). It is reported that Suryahadi had frequently contacted the Iranian Embassy in Jakarta. Ibid.; see also Amnesty International, "The imprisonment of Irfan Suryahadi," in Indonesian Report, Human Rights Supplements no. 18 October 1986, pp. 5-9; ICG Asia Briefing, TK August 2002, "Al-Qaeda in Southeast Asia: The Case of the Ngruki Network" in Indonesia, <http://www.indonesia-house.org/archive/BaliAriefB.pdf>; Currently, Irfan Suryahadi Awwas is the executive

sympathizers says that “Shi’a politics” is a topic that is rarely discussed in his community for the duration of his participation in the “Shi’a *hikmah*”. There are probably two reasons compel them to do so: first, up to now the position of Shi’a remains marginal. In the context of nation state, they are numerical and functional minorities. Second, they perhaps realized that there are numerous Sunni groups who feel threaten by such a discourse. Juan Cole in his study of the Shi’a minority asserts: “Among the key struggles of the Twelver Shi’a communities in the twentieth century was the problem of coming to terms with being minorities in a nation state.” He then presents two categories of Shi’a minorities, which are numerical minorities (i.e. Shi’a communities in Iran Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan), and functional minorities (i.e. Bahrain, Iraq and Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan). It seems that he does not include Indonesia into his discussion because most of Indonesian Shi’is are the recent converts whose political roles remain insignificant.<sup>42</sup>

There are some policies issued by minority groups in facing the majorities. A sociologist and political scientist Terence E. Cook contrasts three main different policies and strategies that can be used by a minority group, namely separation, assimilation, or accommodation.<sup>43</sup> His study concerning ethnic and religious minorities in several regions reveals that the “stronger minorities,” including religious communities, typically use “separation as segregation,” “assimilation as controls,” and “accommodation as minimal.” In contrast, the “weaker minorities” employ “separation as separatism,” “assimilation as integration,” and “accommodation as maximal.” If we take such a formulation into account, I would say at this point that Indonesian Shi’a is not strong enough in number. Therefore, “assimilation as

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chairman of the Majlis Mujahidin Indonesia, an organization that strongly encourages the establishment of Islamic state in Indonesia.

<sup>42</sup> See Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Shi’ism Islam* (New York & London: I.B. Tauris Publisher, 2002), p. 173. Therefore, the Shi’is do not face any significant political barrier from the government; instead they have been faced with the Sunni theological outlooks. However, unlike Shi’a in the Middle Eastern countries that has a long historical tension with the Sunnism politically and religiously, Indonesian Shi’a for the most part are the recent converts especially after the Iranian Revolution.

<sup>43</sup> Terrence A. Cook, *Separation, Assimilation, or Accommodation: Contrasting Ethnic Minority Policies* (London: Westport, Connecticut, 2003).

integration” and “accommodation as maximal” are two strategies that have been used by Shi’a communities in order to preserve their ongoing missions and institutions. In a broader context, up to now, the “accommodation as maximal” strategy has been employed by most of the Shi’is. As the “weaker minorities,” being recognized socially and religiously by the Sunni>Muslims and the government in the region where they are able to practice their beliefs, commemorate Asyura ritual, memorialize the *hul* of Imam Khomeini, establish their organizations, and publish their books is a good result of their accommodation strategy. By taking this strategy, therefore, the Indonesian Shi’a put their political tendencies aside, at least for a while. This actually differs from such Sunni Muslim groups as the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI)<sup>44</sup> and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI)<sup>45</sup> that openly campaign for the establishment of Islamic state and that of *khilafah* system in order to replace the ongoing Indonesian democracy. In my consideration, the silence of Shi’a in regards to the absent of Shi’a political dimension as a revolutionary sectarian movement in the era of transition of Indonesian politics when other religious communities, notably Sunnis have opportunities to communicate their interest freely is not caused by their fear of the government; instead they are anxious of their Sunni purists, especially the radical ones.

### **“Islam Alternatif”: In Search of New Identity of Indonesian Islam**

*Islam alternatif* (“alternative Islam”) is basically a book’s title written by Jalaluddin Rahmat by the late 1980s. This is a collection of his speeches in many campuses. Presenting dimensions of Islam such as spiritualism, philosophy, Sufism and notably social critiques in a more popular way, this book gained respect from younger readers and university student activists. In recent times, this term has been adopted by a group of Indonesian students, especially those studying at Qum, and those interested in Shi’a tradition. It is very common among Indonesians to have labeled certain groups of Muslims based on their

<sup>44</sup> See Irfan Suryahadi Awwas, *Risalah Kongres Mujahidin I dan Pengakuan Syari’ah Islam* (Yogyakarta: Wihdah Press, 2001).

<sup>45</sup> Muhammad Ismail Yusanto, “The Demand for *Shari’ah* as positive law in Indonesia,” (Paper presented on Panel 4 “Islam in Positive Law and the Indonesian Legal System” at the Conference “Islamic Law in Modern Indonesia,” Legal Islamic Studies Program, Harvard Law School, 17-18 April 2004).

religious viewpoints. We note "*Islam Liberal*" that is often abbreviated to "*Islib*", signifying progressive and liberal Muslim thinkers; and "*Islam Literal*" (*Islit*) that marks conservative and fundamentalist groups. Contemporary Shi'i sympathizers especially among youth have also popularized "*Islam Alternatif*" (*Islat*) to identify themselves. Using this term they attempted to offer the possibility of choice on being a Muslim, something that is different from the existing one. The word "alternative" in this respect primarily relates to the worldview, philosophical and religious standpoint of Shi'a tradition.

If we take a look closer at the issues and topics that the existing Muslim groups have often dealt with, we may assume that *Islat*, comparing to *Islib* and *Islit*, captures nuance of Islamic discourse in general, and Shi'i tradition in particular. They also intend to enrich the Indonesian Muslims' horizons, claiming to be in the middle path. Then tension between the progressive-liberal Muslims and conservative-radical Muslims in recent times has also led Shi'a Islam to become more acceptable for younger Indonesian Muslim activists. The progressive-liberal Muslims and conservative-radical younger Muslims have different religious backgrounds. It is mentioned that, on the one hand, some students having no sufficient religious education from their family are often radicalized when they found Islam as a new thing at the university. They hold literal interpretation of Islam as formulated by Muslim purist 'ulama either on the matters of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) or *al-siyasah* (politics). They much refer to such scholars as Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab and Abdullah b. Baz for Islamic theology and jurisprudence, as well as Hassan al-Banna and Sa'id Hawa for politics and Islamic movement (*haraka al-Islamiyya*). On the other hand, some Muslim liberal thinkers witnessed the opposite experience. After having graduated from traditional Islamic schools, they pursue their higher education at university and receive materials on Islam by adopting western 'secular' methodology. Their enthusiasm on being a good Muslim reflects in the efforts of enhancing the substance of religion by neglecting literal understanding. When the two groups meet in the public sphere, the tension between them is unavoidable. For several years, Indonesian Muslims witnessed remarkable encounters among the competing groups (*Islib* and *Islit*) that lead them to ineffective conflict instead of prolific dialogue. Due to this, Shi'a sympathizers come up with the ideas that, according to their expectation, can make "difference", promoting Shi'a tradition and

intellectual treasure. The *Islat* claims to have combined between text and rationalism. One Qum alumni writes “It is particularly expected that the alumni of Hawzah Qum in Indonesia can fill the *vacuum* left by liberal...and literal...Muslims.”<sup>46</sup>

The Shi’is in general and *Islat*’s activists in particular also have called their religious perspective “*Madhab ahl al-bayt*” (ahlul bayt school of thought). In recent times, they have shared their opinion and religious standpoint by publishing articles in their own website. This endeavor, as far as their experience is concerned, also helps them to communicate further with other Sunnis, notably the younger Indonesian Muslims studying abroad such as in Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, as well as those studying in European or American higher education institutions. Indonesian Student Association (HPI) in Iran has played active role in the making of stronger relations with other Indonesian Muslim students in the Middle East. It is worth emphasizing that even though not all Sunni Muslim students agree with particular aspects of Shi’i Islam, in my consideration, some younger Shi’a sympathizers (HPI and *Islat*) have begun to promote openness and inclusivity. It goes without saying that the encounters between Sunnis and Shi’is always develop in harmony. Since some kinds of religious issues that they ‘by nature’ disagree with, such as *Imama* and *khilafa*, *mutjah* married, and the like, are brought into discussion, disagreement and warm debates among them occur.

The innovation made by Shi’a sympathizers can be seen in their perspective on international issues. Immediately after America under George W. Bush’s administration decided to attack Iraq, and Bush’ vigorous campaign against nuclear weapon of Iran launched, strong reaction emerged among Indonesian muslims, both Sunnis and Shi’is. Indonesian Shi’is in particular have a great deal of criticizing America by referring to the sayings of Iranian Muslim scholars. The sayings of Rahbar or prominent Shi’a ulama, and the messages of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ahmadinejad, are frequently translated from Persian into Bahasa Indonesia and published in their website. These sayings seem very influential for Indonesian Shi’a sympathizers, especially in determining their religious and political attitudes in response to international political situation. Not only this, the tension between Iran

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<sup>46</sup> See Muhsin Labib, “Islat: Antara Islib dan Islit,” in <http://islamalternatif-net/iph/content/view/72/32/>

and Israel has also become their deep concern as Shi'i Iranian ulama carry out forceful campaign against Israel. Seen from this, we may not neglect from the discussion the network between Indonesian Shi'i sympathizers', Shi'a ulama and Iranian government. Inhospitable relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United State of America, Saudi Arabia, or Israel has certainly had a greater influence over Indonesian Shi'i discourse on global imperialism, ideology of capitalism, westernization as well as Islamic Wahabia.

### **Between Vigorous Campaign against Shi'a and Intra-religious Dialogue**

The relationship between Sunnis and Shi'is is contingent upon several factors. Religious outlooks and political tendencies of Indonesian Sunnis and Shi'is are as varied as their social and political backgrounds. Some of Sunni groups accuse Shi'a of deviating from Islam. The Shi'is are condemned as apostates. Others see them simply as a Muslim entity whose religious viewpoints and attitudes differ in some way from Sunnis. Nonetheless, we have to note that, in the Indonesian case, serious campaigns against Shi'a emerged along with the growth of Shi'i sympathizers in the country and the dissemination of Shi'a doctrines following the Iranian Revolution. By the early 1980s and even before, some works dealing with Shi'i tradition were written by Sunni scholars. Aboebakar Atjeh in 1965, for example, wrote Shi'i and rationalism in Islam.<sup>47</sup> Some others penned Shi'a tradition whether in popular or academic ways. M. Rasjidi published his piece on Shi'a in 1984 from the Sunni's point of view.<sup>48</sup> In recent times, a very well-known Indonesian Muslim scholar who is also a professor on Tafsir (Quranic Exegesis), Quraish Shihab, launched his work that promotes dialogue and mutual understanding between Sunni and Shi'i.<sup>49</sup> It is interesting to note that although both Rasdjidi and Shihab are members of Indonesian 'Ulama Council (MUI) in different period, and

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<sup>47</sup> Aboebakar Atjeh, *Syi'ah: Rasionalisme dalam Islam* (Djakarta: Jajasan Pendjelidikan Islam, 1965).

<sup>48</sup> H. M. Rasdjidi, *Apa itu Syiah* (Jakarta: Pelita, 1984).

<sup>49</sup> Quraish Shihab, *Sunnah Syi'ah Bergandengan Tangan, Mungkinkah? Kajian atas Konsep Ajaran dan Pemikiran* (Jakarta: Lenter Hati, 2007). It should be noted that such a spirit of dialogue is also held by Husein al-Habsyi. Based on his dialogue with some Muslim student activists, he published *Sunnah Syi'ah dalam Dialog antara Mahasiswa UGM dan UII Yogyakarta dengan Ustadz Husein al-Habsyi* (Solo: Yayasan Ats-Tsaqalain, 1991).



both are professors at the State Institute of Islamic Studies, the typical perspective they have raised is rather different. The later seems to have been more open-minded in response to Shi'a than the former. In recent times, some works resembling a sort of 'heresiography' that covers Islamic sects were also written by conservative purist Muslims.<sup>50</sup>

The variety of literature on Shi'a mentioned above certainly reflects the typical Sunni's response to Shi'i in the real life. It is Dewan Dakwah Islamiyyah Indonesia (DDII) that since 1980s has very active campaigning against Shi'a in the region. Some activists of DDII graduated from Middle Eastern countries, notable Saudi Arabia, and have close connection with Saudi's government and 'ulama. They publish numerous works criticizing Shi'a tradition as well as other Muslim sects such as Ahmadiyya. This is then followed by the MUI, semi-governmental body of *ulama*, where some DDII activists along with other Muslim scholars affiliating to such Muslim organizations as the Muhammadiyah, Persatuan Islam, and the Nahdlatul Ulama were also MUI's members. There some points concerning Shi'a doctrines issued by the MUI five years subsequent to the Iranian Revolution. To begin with, the Shi'a Islam, according to MUI, has fragmented the *hadith* transmission by rejecting the non-Shi'a transmitters; while Sunni, as the MUI has claimed, has never differentiated *hadith* transmitters, whether they are coming prophet's family or not. Second, Shi'a believes that an *imam* (leader) is *ma'sum* ("free from making any mistake"). This outlook is considered misleading by the MUI because *imam* is simply regarded as an ordinary human being who is be able to make mistakes. Another aspect relates to *ijma* consensus or agreement among 'ulama concerning certain religious matters. According to Shi'a tradition, *ijma* needs Imam's approval. By contrast, Sunnis do not require *ijma* to have such kind of approval. Next to it, Shi'a Islam suggests that Islamic leadership is mandatory and a part of Islamic principle, and thus Muslim community should be led by an imam. According to some Sunnis, however, Islam has nothing to with a particular concept of Islamic state or political leadership. Islam just offers general principles and ethics how to govern society. Fifth, Shi'is for the most part disapprove the leadership of Abu Bakar, Umar bin

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<sup>50</sup> Hartono Ahmad Jaiz, *Aliran dan Fahaman Sesat di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Pustaka Al-Kautsar, 2002). The writer is very well-known an Indonesian Sunni "heresiographer" whose works very much focus on "deviant Islamic sects".

Khattab, and Uthman bin 'Affan. They believe that Ali bin Abi Talib and his descendant were the rightful Muhammad successors. Finally, according to the MUI's *fatwas*, there are fundamental differences between Sunni and Shi'a, and the *fatwas* lay emphasis on protecting Sunni Muslims from the influence of the Shi'a doctrines.<sup>51</sup>

Muhammad Atho Mudzhar emphasizes that the major concern of MUI's *fatwa* issued in 8 March 1984 regarding Muslim minorities, especially the Shi'a, include government's anxiety about political impacts of the Iranian Revolution on Indonesia Muslims. He moderately notes:

We know that 1979 was the year of Iranian Revolution, which toppled the secular government of the Shah and replaced it with an Islamic one. Apparently the echo of that resounded beyond Iranian territories and reached Indonesia. It was rumored that some Muslim youths were to be the target for the exportation of the ideas of the Iranian Islamic revolution. It was in this context that the government saw it necessary to take precautionary steps to prevent such Islamic revolutionary ideas from developing in the country, and it was also in this context the M.U.I. made its contribution to the efforts to preserve the establishment by issuing the *fatwa*. Thus, while the arguments of *fatwas* were classical and theological in nature, the goals were contemporary and political. It is too obvious to ignore the fact that the actual concern of the *fatwa* was with the doctrine of the *imama* and nothing else.<sup>52</sup>

On September 1997, a National Seminar was carried out in the Istiqlal Mosque of Jakarta. This seminar was cosponsored by the LPPI (Institute of research and Islamic Studies), Muslim purists-based mass organizations. The seminar aims at condemning Shi'a doctrines and their influence in the country. The speakers joining this seminar were key persons of various Sunni organizations, such as K. H. Mohammad Dawam Anwar (Katib Syuriah, Nahdlatul 'Ulama), K.H. Irfan Zidny (Lajnah Falakiyyah Syuriah of Nahdlatul 'Ulama), K.H. Thohir Al-Kaff (Al-Bayyinat Foundation), Nabhan Hussein (Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah

<sup>51</sup> Muhammad Atho Mudzhar, *Fatwas of the Council of Indonesian Ulama: A Study of Islamic Legal Thought in Indonesia 1975-1988*, bilingual edition (Jakarta: INIS, 1993), pp. 114-115.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

Indonesia), K.H. A. Latif Mukhtar (Persatuan Islam), Hidayat Nurwahid (Al-Haramain Foundation), and Syu'bah Asa (Editor of *Panji Masyarakat* Magazine).

In line with the arguments issued in the MUI's National Meeting, this seminar issued some more points: 1) Shi'a believes that the Quran is imperfect since its complete version will be brought by the *Imam al-Muntazhir* (the waited Imam); 2) they believe in the *taqiyyah*; 3) the Jum'at Prayer is not mandatory without the present of their *imam*; 4) Shi'a has changed the sentences of *adhan* (call to prayer in Islam) by adding the words "*wa ashhadu anna 'Aliyyan waliyullah*" (We testify that 'Ali is a God's Guardian); 5) they practice Mut'ah marriage; and 6) It is the fact that, according to this group, Shi'is were becoming betrayers, agents of crime, and terrorists who have strong resistance against official state led by Sunnis. Moreover, for the sake of political and social stabilities in the region, the seminar's committee members, which were K.H. Djamiluddin, K.H. Mustafa 'Ali Ya'qub, K.H. Ahmad Khalil Ridwan, Abdul Qadir Al-Attas, and Ahmad Zain Al-Kaff, insisted the government to be able to: 1) prohibit the spread of Shi'a doctrines in Indonesia because the Shi'is would be disloyal politically to Indonesian government; 2) forbid the dissemination Shi'i books; 3) invalidate the licenses of their organizations and educational institutions; 4) allow MUI to investigate Shi'a publications; 5) forbid the Iranian Embassy from disseminating the Shi'a teachings.<sup>53</sup> With the purpose of supporting their claims, the Sunnis also quoted sayings and opinions of the Sunni scholars and their refutation of Shi'a, such as Imam Malik, Imam Ahmad, Ibn Qutaiba, Ibn Hazm, Al-Qadhi 'Iyadh, al-Sam'ani, and Ibn Taimiya. Yet, particular Indonesian Shi'is attempt to reply to such a threat by publishing books and articles.<sup>54</sup>

Despite the fact that some of the speakers in the seminar above are main figures in their own organizations, they speak on behalf of themselves. As a matter of fact, the Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Muslim Sunni organization in Indonesia within which K.H. Irfan

<sup>53</sup> See Umar Abduh and Abu Huzaifah (ed.), *Mengapa Kita Menolak Syi'ah: Kumpulan Makalah dan Kesimpulan Seminar Nasional Sehari tentang Syi'ah* (Jakarta: Pustaka Al-Kautsar, 1988), pp. 158-162.

<sup>54</sup> See O Hashem, *Jawaban Lengkap atas Seminar Sehari tentang Syi'ah* (Bangil: YAPI, 1997); Muhammad Babul Ulum, *Merajut Ukhwah Memahami Syi'ah: Memuat Catatan untuk Hidayat Nur Wabid* (Bandung: Marja, 2008).

Zidny and K. H. Mohammad Dawam Anwar were leading members, does not issue any 'official' opinion on this subject. On the other hand, other main figures of this traditionalist organization, such as K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid and K.H. Said Agil Siradj, seem to take the opposite way. They consider Shi'a simply as another Islamic school of thought that attempts to propagate Muhammad's teachings. "In principle, the Shi'is uphold the tradition (*sunnah*) and justice (*'adakah*) whatever the risk," explains Siradj, "while the Sunni paid attention to the tradition (*sunnah*) and the unity of the community (*jama'ah*). Therefore, Siradj adds, "the Shi'is are called *ahlu Sunnah wa al-'adakah*, while the Sunnis *ahlu Sunnah wa al-jama'ah*. Both defend and propagate the teachings of Muhammad."<sup>55</sup> A similar opinion has been voiced by Abdurrahman Wahid. He figures out that there are some similarities between the traditions practiced by the members of the Nahdhatul Ulama and by those of the Shi'a, such as *ziyarah* (make a devotional visit to a sacred place), *taqlid* in jurisprudence, and honoring the *ahlu bayt*. "The members of the Nahdlatul Ulama are basically practicing some of the Shi'a traditions. It can obviously be seen in its *tarekat* and mystical tradition (Sufism)."<sup>56</sup>

While the Indonesian Shi'a has an Iranian connection in their religious traditions, the Indonesian Sunni has a Middle Eastern connection, especially with the countries where the ideology of Wahhabia overwhelmingly exists such as Saudi Arabia. As to his Muslim fellows who condemn the Shi'a tradition, Abdurrahman Wahid points out that Shi'is activities has made Sunnis anxious about long-established Sunni tradition and beliefs in the country. They are, according to Gus Dur, influenced by Saudi's Muslim scholars. "I think this (campaign against Shi'a) reflects their anxiety over the Shi'a. Their point of view has been greatly influenced by Saudi Arabia," Abdurrahman Wahid elucidates. "In fact," he adds, "there is no serious problem in Egypt (regarding the Shi'a). The Shi'a tradition in Egypt has even been considered the fifth School in Islam."<sup>57</sup> Moreover, we have to mention clearly in this case that what Abdurrahman Wahid means in his statement above has simply dealt with religious point of

<sup>55</sup> *Tiras*, No. 3/Year II/15 Ferbruary 1996.

<sup>56</sup> *Editor*, No. 2/Year III/16 September 1989; also *Tiras*, No. 3/Year II/15 Ferbruary 1996.

<sup>57</sup> *Tiras*, No. 3/Year II/15 Ferbruary 1996.

view of the Sunnis, not their social and political point of view. As I have explained previously, since Indonesia is not an Islamic State, the government does not interfere in the existence of Shi'a Islam. Indonesian government's policy therefore differs in essence from the Saudi Arabia's. Fuller and Francke have presented that there are some cases that can be categorized as religious, cultural, legal, and economic discriminations towards Shi'a in Saudi Arabia.<sup>58</sup> Apart from this, the arguments that have been made by Indonesian Sunnis are different from the Saudi Wahhabi. The Indonesian Sunnis, as represented by the MUI's *fatwas* and the recommendations of the seminar, do not see Shi'a as non-believers (*kuffar*), even if there is marked contrast between Sunnis and Shi'is' teachings. While for Saudi's Muslim purists, the veneration of *imam* can be considered *shirk*, Jacob Goldberg in his study describes, "the Wahhabi view of the Shi'is is a logical development of the cornerstone of Wahhabi ideology: the doctrine of *tawhīd* (the unity of God). Abhorrence of such Shi'a practices as saint worship, shrine and grave cults, and veneration of *imams* become the central tenets of Wahhabism."<sup>59</sup>

The Sunnis' reaction to Shi'a Islam can also be seen at a grassroots level in particular regions where the Shi'is directly interact with Sunnis. Ahmad Barakbah, the principal of the Pesantren Al-Hadi, explains that when he established his *pesantren* in Pekalongan, local government and people surrounding the given region were unenthusiastic. He was even often interrogated by police officers to explain the purpose of his *pesantren*.<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, a similar experience was faced by the Pesantren YAPI, a *pesantren* erected by Husein al-Habshy, a famous Shi'a cleric in Indonesia. In the 1980s, this *pesantren* made some projects on education by collaborating with some other (Sunnī) *pesantrens* in East Java. Immediately after other Sunni-based *pesantrens* recognized that Pesantren YAPI belongs to Shi'a Islam, they (the Sunnis) suspended their partnership.<sup>61</sup> From the Indonesian Sunnis' perspective, as reflected in the MUI's *fatwas*, the recommendation of the above

<sup>58</sup> For further discussion see Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shi'ism*, pp. 183-186.

<sup>59</sup> Jacob Goldberg, "The Shi'i Minority in Saudi Arabia," in Juan R.I. Cole and Nikki R. Keddie, *Shi'ism and Social Protest* (New Haven and London: Yale University, 1986), pp. 231-232.

<sup>60</sup> *Tiras*, No. 3/Year II/15 February 1996.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

seminar, as well as the reaction performed by Sunnis in some regions, the Shi'a doctrines are considered unsuited to Indonesian religious environment. Those claims and opinion basically represent political and sociological rivalries. In fact, one issue which has often been raised is that the emergence of Shi'a will hinder social and political stability of the country. In a religious point of view, the practice of Shi'a *fiqh* such as *Mut'ah* marriage and their devotion to *imam* generated a strong resistance from the Sunnis. This is thanks to the fact that marriage and leadership are parts of the social construction. This assumption is also supported by the fact that in a recent National Congress conducted in July 2005, the MUI issued 11 *fatwas*, one of which emphasizes that the Ahmadiyyah, without mentioning Shi'a, has deviated from Islam and therefore is not a part of Islam; while in 1984, the Ahmadiyyah and Shi'a were classified in the same position.

### Conclusion

The explanation above leads me to draw some points as my conclusion: first, negotiating religious identity can be conducted through different ways. In our case, the Shi'a sympathizers attempt to negotiate their identity in a Sunni-majority country by producing a bunch of literature as a tool to be culturally recognized by society. Following the Iranian Revolution, this effort found its imperative meaning for both Shi'is and those impressed by revolutionary movement of Shi'a Islam. As a sort of popular response to the Iranian revolution, this also results in much attention drawn by university students who are able to access to literature on Shi'a Islam. By the early 1980s, for example, Indonesian Muslims began to have been more acquainted with Shi'a literature and the progressive nature of Shi'a Muslim thinkers and ideology. However, revolutionary and progressive ideas created cannot be easily implemented in the Indonesian social and political contexts.

The next point is that although Shi'a identity is inseparable from their religious faith and active practice, their outward appearance is very limited, not as demonstrative as other new Sunni-based religious movements. For the Shi'a sympathizers, being recognized by other Muslim fellows and allowed to practice their religious faith in their own social circle can be regarded as a moderate achievement they have gained. It is also caused by the fact that there is also no agreement among them how to express their identity, how to contextualize Shi'a doctrines in the Indonesian context (especially the one that relate to

the concept of Islamic leadership), and what kind of active practice that Indonesian Muslim mainstream can moderately accept.

As a consequence of differences in defining how to be an Indonesian Shi'i, the rise of new factions among Shi'a sympathizers is finally unavoidable: some attempt to make much more dialogue with other religious community, others seem to be become—to borrow Bruinessen's words—"introversionists". This then brings me to another point: the availability of the public sphere has increasingly prompted younger Shi'a sympathizers to be more openly sharing their ideas with others. They have also been able to define their religious standpoint within variants of Indonesian Muslims by voicing their own perspective on the contested meaning of Islam defined by the "liberal" and "literal" Indonesian Muslims. Some Shi'i activists have so far initiated and been involved in various inter-religious dialogue forums. This may reduce severe resistance from Sunni purists and at the same time led them to being recognized by broader scope of Indonesian society. Finally, the recent tension between Shi'is and Sunnis reflects the coagulation of radicalism among Indonesian religious communities who overlook the meaning of religious pluralism, under which concept the principle of openness, inclusivity and peaceful coexistence developed.

It is also important to note that in the era of transition, the future of Indonesian Shi'is will be contingent upon how Sunni Muslim mainstream, represented by MUI and other mass organizations, define minority groups and accommodate their interest, and how Shi'is negotiate their identity through their outward appearance.[]

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