Rethinking the Politics of Difference in Indonesia: A Foreword

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Besides as a plural society, Indonesia is also known as a Muslim majority country. In the last two decades, following the transition of post New Order to democracy, we see the rise of Muslim identity politics which Martin van Bruinessen (2013) called ‘conservative turn.’ A chapter on MUI (Majelis Ulama Indonesia or the Indonesian Council of Islamic Scholars) described the Council’s attempt to redefine itself as the servant of the ummah (the Muslim community) rather than of the government like they did during the New Order period. Through its front organization, FUI (Forum Ukhuwah Islamiyah or the Forum of Islamic Communion), MUI became indirectly involved in street politics through organized mass demonstrations to support Muslim demands (van Bruinessen, 2013:7), corresponding with the Council’s self-image of representing the interests of the ummah. I believe such a change of attitude was more or less related to the growth of the so-called ‘Islamic populism’ which Hadiz (2016:2) associated it with ‘social and political movements claiming to represent an ummah - a community of believers’ that, in his opinion, was increasingly defined in national rather than supranational terms. In line with Canovan, Hadiz suggested that this new model of Islamic politics was an attempt of its social agents to win state power by redefining it as “an anti-elitist form of politics that exalts ‘the people’ and mobilizes them against an identified powerful political and economic establishment,” in the framework of Mudde’s ‘the pure people versus the corrupted elite’ (Hadiz, 2016:23).

It might be a good strategy to do so because, as Hadiz said, ‘successful populist projects develop agendas that resonate with people of varying social positions,’ and nothing is stronger than the common feeling of being deprived, or the understanding that ‘their life chances are similarly being systematically defined and constrained within the existing social order’ (Hadiz, 2016:28). Nevertheless, such a positioning of Islamic politics is clearly in contradiction with the historical foundation of Indonesian nation-state inscribed in the 1945 Constitution, as well as with the so-called politics of difference as the underlying principle of anti-discrimination movements, because once ‘the people’ becomes the ummah, it will exclude the non-ummah (non-Muslim community). The situation also signifies an essential problem to democracy that, whilst Indonesia was founded on the principle of Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (unity in diversity), the politics of difference has not prevailed as the governing principle in law, society,
polity. Instead, domination of the powerful has claimed of assuming the right to govern. During the Suharto’s New Order, the military dictatorship dominated Indonesia for more than three decades with complete impunity, whereas in the post-Reformasi era, majority–minority paradigm seems to rule the country. In both contexts, the rule of law has never been the top priority. Rather, the state of exception, as Carl Schmitt (2005) coined, governs and even condones the majority–minority paradigm. As the result, the Indonesia’s diversity in ethnicity, religion, and class has been subjected to the domination of the majority and its narrative. Papua was one of the cases. Thus, starting with the Papuan case, this paper will discuss the contextual interconnectedness of the politics of difference in Indonesian studies of identity and ethnicity.

The Contextualization of the Politics of Difference in Indonesian Cases

In spite of the status of ‘special autonomy’ granted by the Government of Indonesia in 2001, Papua continues experiencing protracted conflict, the situation that is far from normal, which according Budi Hernawan, it would match what Cameroonian Philosopher Achilles Mbembe (2003) calls ‘frontier.’ This term refers to zones characterized by war and disorder: “the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of ‘civilization’” (Mbembe, 2003:24). Hernawan believes, in post-Suharto Indonesia, Papua remains under Carl Schmit’s (2005) ‘state of exception’ in which law is suspended to allow executive power of the state to reign with little restrictions.

In analyzing Papua, many tend to solely focus their investigation of the structure of domination on the executive power of the Indonesian state. This approach, according to Budi Hernawan, is not entirely adequate, because the structure of domination that sustains the frontier goes beyond merely state power, as it no longer consists of dichotomy of the state authority and Papuan resistance movements. Rather, it colludes with the power of market (the monopoly of the powerful extractive industry over natural resources) as well as the penetration of Wahhabism (the ultra-conservative stream of Islam) that undermine the existing cultural and social cohesion of the Papuans. Just like the state power, those two major factors treat Papua as the frontier because they believe that Papua is under the state of disorder.

Although in discussing those three structures of domination in Papua Budi Hernawan stops short of answering the question of whether the state of exception in Papua can be terminated, his article has tacitly highlighted the absence of ‘a politics of difference’ viewpoint among those activists who support the Papuan case. They do not argue for the Papuan’s cultural difference from the non-Papuan, nor emphasize ‘the politics of their positional difference’ (Young, 2005:2), but playing within the rule of the state of exception that places Papua into ‘disorder frontier.’ In this case, the Papuan becomes similar to the ummah which is being exalted as an entity by the populist strategy—that is as the ‘deprived people.’ The difference is that the
Papuan must be vis-à-vis the state, the market, and the ummah, instead of merely versus the state or ‘corrupted elite’ like the ummah has politically been positioned.

In discussing post-Suharto situation of national integration, Sugeng Bayu Wahyono, on the other hand, focuses on the essentialistic standpoint that, he believes, strongly contributes to the disintegration process from within. He argues that the feeling of being differentiated comes on a regular basis through social exclusion of every day life, so that the feeling that they are disparate continues to settle. The feeling of being excluded or ruled out becomes even stronger when it comes to the issue of economic disparity, injustice, and poverty—simply waiting for a trigger to turn it into a violent resentment and hostility. This practice of differentiation through the essentialistic concept of ethnicity and identity has led to a situation of socio-political relations which is engulfed by negative stereotypes and prejudices. It emerges as identity politics, particularly in the political moment of elections, including the presidential election. In his opinion, the essentialistic view is the underlying reason for forcing homogeneity under the pretext of unity. ‘Puritanization’ of religion is one of the cases which result in the subordination of local cultures and beliefs. Wahyono then suggests that that ‘Indonesia’ should not be taken as a closed concept, but an open concept giving space for each citizen to (re)construct their identity according to their own needs and aspirations. This means that the state should provide equal opportunities for all citizens as active subjects to (re)construct their own Indonesian identity.

It means that we should, for example, let the people of Papua or Aceh to (re)construct their Indonesian-ness according to their knowledge, conscience, and necessity. Following Derrida, Wahyono emphasizes the need to properly deconstruct intolerance, namely the removal of the previous system of binary thought.

Similar to Hernawan, Wahyono does not straightforwardly argue for a politics of difference as the basis of his line of reasoning. But, by suggesting to allow all citizens to actively (re)construct their own Indonesian identity, perhaps he has ‘the political of positional difference’ (Young, 2005:2) in his mind as the point of departure. Nonetheless, it is still not clear how attacking the essentialist view of purification could help to promote the politics of difference vis-à-vis the Islamic populism, or the mobilization of the ummah.

Ignatia Dyahapsari and Irfan Nugrahà’s article discusses the significance of the expression of Chinese-ness among young Chinese Indonesians to redefine their position as a minority in the contemporary rise of political exclusion practices. In their opinion, Chinese Indonesian might become a ‘minority which faced permanent liminality’ that ‘cannot escape from those within,’ thus recalling the terminology of ‘iron cage’ or ‘entrapment’ by which Max Weber might characterize the current political condition of Indonesia. Through the journey of Chinese Indonesian in the Indonesian political realm of everyday life, both writers found that the characteristics of today’s medium of social media has enabled young Chinese Indonesians to express themselves, not as what others might
caricaturize or portray, but as reflectively as to what they as young Chinese Indonesian need to address, including that of racial hatred. In other words, it was the story of their personal experiences that define and illuminate their inner spirit of being Chinese Indonesian. So now young Chinese Indonesians could choose to redefine their identity as Chinese Indonesian in contemporary Indonesian society with the intention to voice their existence and living experiences rather than to distinguish themselves from others in demographic categories. Clearly, in their article Dyahapsari and Nugraha indicated the importance of investigating ‘the politics of positional difference’ (Young, 2005:2) even within different generations of a minority group. Unfortunately, such internal dynamics has little influenced to what happens outside the Chinese community because their connection to the non-Chinese community was quite weak. Perhaps, what has been predicted about the Chinese’s entrapment within ‘permanent liminality’ might eventually come true, particularly since the Chinese would never become part of the ummah nor to confront the ummah.

The element of class and its vested interests, however, has been overlooked in the discussion of politics of difference in Indonesia. Thung Ju Lan in her article tries to rethink the power struggle between ethnicity, religion, and class that underpins the politics of difference, by addressing the following questions: how does the power struggle between ethnicity, religion, and class shape and re-shape the politics of difference in Indonesia’s future? The issue of socio-economic gap between ethnic groups is complicated by digital divide between those with access to social media and those without. Information and opinion are mostly constructed by surveys conducted among those with access to internet or social media. As such, group differences are not marked by poverty per se like the previous era. Politics of difference might have been dictated by new type of ethnicity, namely class-based ethnicity, and it might work in the opposite way of the ummah, which has been mobilized according to cross-class alliances.

The four articles discussed here are only a few examples of the contextualization of politics of difference within the Indonesia’s plural society, to underline the importance of ‘the politics of positional difference’ for democracy and national integration of Indonesia. Without the understanding of a politics of positional difference, there is a strong tendency to ignore ‘deep material differences in social position, division of labor, socialized capacities, normalized standards and ways of living that continue to disadvantage members of historically excluded groups’ (Young, 2005:1). As Iris Marion Young (2005:1) said,

‘the politics of difference has involved the claims of feminist, anti-racist, and gay liberation activists that the structural inequalities of gender, race, and sexuality were not well perceived or combated by the dominant paradigm of equality and inclusion. In this dominant paradigm, the promotion of justice and equality requires non-discrimination: the application of the same principles of evaluation and distribution to all persons regardless of their particular social positions or backgrounds. In this ideal, which many understood as the liberal paradigm, social justice means ignoring gender, racial or sexual differences among people. Social movements
asserting a politics of difference, and the theorists following them argued that this difference-blind ideal was part of the problem.'

**Interconnectedness and the Challenge of the Future Studies of Ethnicity in Indonesia**

Writing about the Papuan, the Chinese-Indonesian, or Indonesian in general, we might find that the issue of ethnicity that underlines the relationship between various communities in the plural Indonesia has become more complex, compared to the post-Independence time, or to the New Order period. Papua as an ethnicity and an entity seems to trapped in the border space which Hernawan refers to as ‘frontier’, similar to that of the Chinese-Indonesian who has clearly been entrapped within their liminality of position as ‘an alien’ and ‘a citizen.’ The entrapment becomes more obvious when today Indonesia faces the challenge of Islamic populism that questions the state injustice. The Papuan and the Chinese-Indonesian become the ‘strangers within,’ because the concept of ummah which accommodates various social positions of Muslim people has at the same time excluded them on the grounds of such a positioning: the Chinese as part of ‘the alleged perpetrators of social injustices’ (Hadiz, 2016:28), and the Papuan as being ‘under the state of disorder’ which could not properly be merged into their organized ummah. Wahyono’s anti-essentialism might fail to deconstruct what he considered as ‘religious puritanization,’ because essentialism is not the basis of the ummah. Here, Muslim identity is not an ethnicity which is anthropologically understood. It should be comprehended as ‘the people’ in the relationship between the state and its citizens.

Following the above argument, I believe, similar to what Hadiz (2016:14) suggested, perhaps we should try to find ‘insights [or perhaps answers] from political economy and historical sociology,’ in rethinking the relationship between ethnicity, the politics of difference, and the state. As we can see from the work of Wahyono and that of Dyahapsari and Nugraha, in so far the general perspective on ethnicity is predominantly that of cultural and behavioral standpoints, it would lack understanding of the struggles over power and resources that define politics of identity and ethnicity in modern world. Hernawan has started the macro level argument about how the state colludes with the power of market in controlling the powerful extractive industry over natural resources in Papua. But, we require a micro level analysis of how class and ethnicity, or what Thung Ju Lan called as class-based ethnicity, regulate the relationship between citizens, the state, and the market in order to find alternative to the entrapment conditions of the Papuan and the Chinese-Indonesian, or to the possible drawback Islamic populism has created in the plural Indonesia. As Hadiz (2016:26) has reminded us, ‘how religion (or ethnicity) figures significantly in the forging of populist politics in some contexts requires investigation too,’ and it is absolutely necessary for the future of Indonesia. Further studies on this topic are highly recommended.
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