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Interpreting Public Opinion in Indonesia: Does Religion Matter?

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Co-organized by
Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Jakarta
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Interpreting Public Opinion in Indonesia: Does Religion Matter?

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This short paper is intended to stimulate discussion at the panel on “Patterns and Trends in Indonesian Views on the US and US Security Policy” at a workshop on “America in Question: Indonesian Democracy and the Challenge of Counter-terrorism in Southeast Asia.” This workshop is held in Jakarta on January 28-29, 2006 and organized by Liu Institute for Global Issues, University of British Columbia, Canada and The Center for Strategic and International Studies, Jakarta, Indonesia.

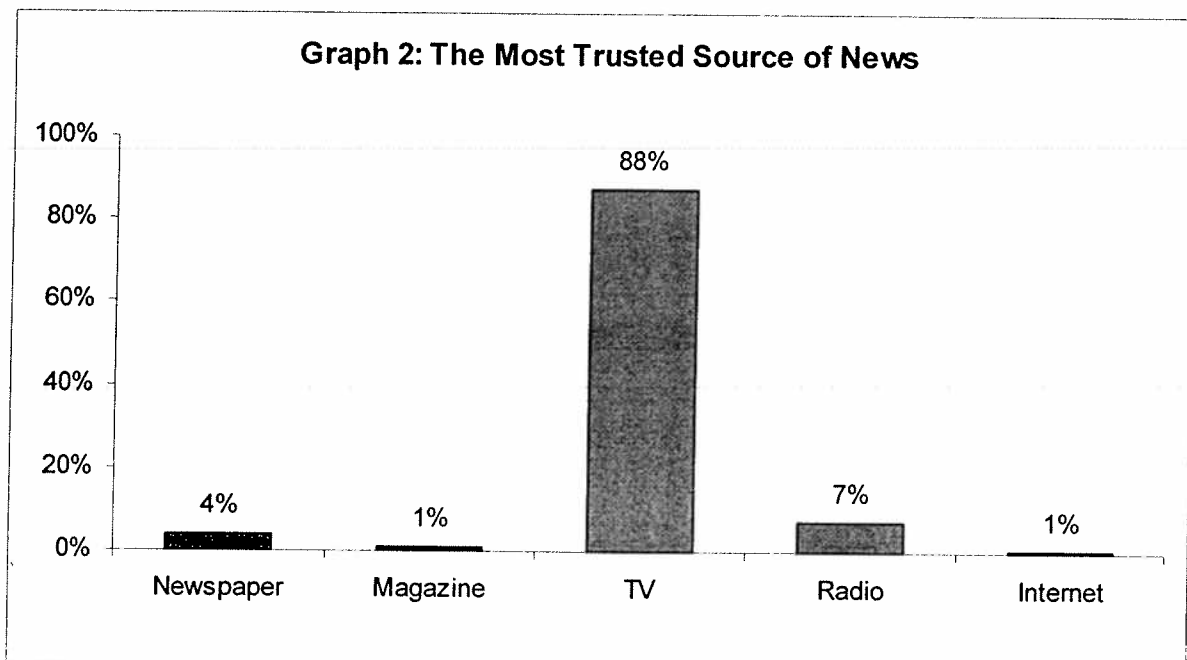
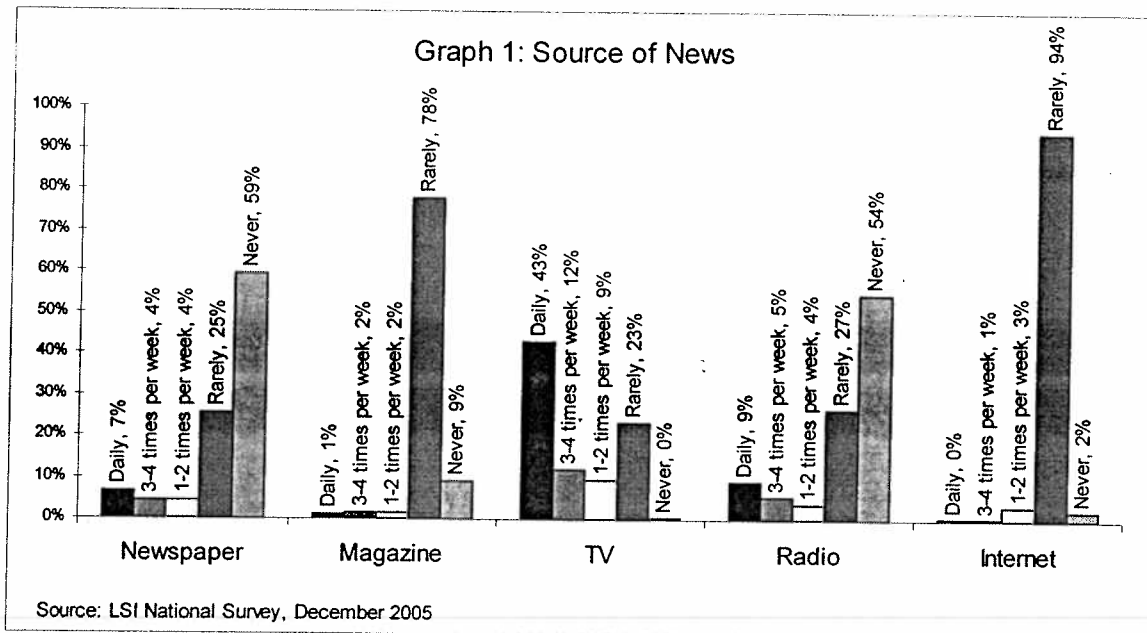
I. Public Opinions.

The most recent study on the Indonesian public opinion toward the US was published 3 months ago by PPIM-UIN, Kompas, and the Freedom Institute. The report, “Class of Civilization: Attitude and Behavior of Indonesian Islamist toward America” covers various aspects and key findings related to this discussion as follow:

- Action → A very small fraction of Indonesians ever involved in anti-American actions, around 2% or less who have ever involved in some form of anti-American actions.
- Opinion → 44% Indonesians dislike America; 37% Indonesians think that the purpose of the US anti-terrorism campaign is to attack Islam.
- Values → 27% Indonesians think that American values are negative.

Looking at that picture, the first question that comes to mind is what are the factors that shape public opinions? What is the role of the news media in shaping public opinion in Indonesia?

Media certainly plays a major role in shaping public opinions. On a daily basis, 43% Indonesians get their news from TVs. Only 7% and 9% Indonesians get their news from newspapers and radios on a daily basis (Graph 1). This shows that TVs are the most influential source of news.



Furthermore, TVs are seen as the most trustworthy source of news to 88% Indonesians (Graph 2). The fact that Indonesians watch TVs on a daily basis may not be surprising to us. A recent survey in Jakarta reveals an interesting finding: when Indonesians were asked what TV programs they like the most, 53% say news and only 21% say movies.

This indicates the importance of TV news in shaping public opinions in Indonesia. I think, besides the strong anti-war sentiment that existed prior to the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, it was the reporting from the war zones, especially in Iraq, from various international news agencies that significantly deteriorated the popularity of the US.

This deterioration is clearly seen when we look at the trend in the degree of unfavorability toward the US. In 2002, according the LSI survey, 36% Indonesians had unfavorable opinions on the US. We should note that the survey was conducted after the US military entered Afghanistan (in late 2001), yet “only” four out of ten Indonesians had unfavorable views toward the US. After the war in Iraq, which started in March 2003, 83% Indonesians had unfavorable opinion of the US. This shows how the war in Iraq had doubled the percentage of Indonesians who had unfavorable view on the US.

For the past two years, attention toward the war in Iraq has generally declined. Except on certain incidents, the news media are no longer putting the war in Iraq as their central issues. By December 2005, the degree of un-favorability has declined to the 2002 level. This shows how popularity of the US is correlated to the attention of the public and of the national news media on America and its policies in Iraq.

II. Religious Affiliation and Public Views on the US.

Having said that the media –especially TVs- are influential in shaping public opinion in Indonesia, why the US remains unfavorable for four out of ten Indonesians? Moreover, recent polls, conducted by LSI, showed that there are a higher portion of Muslims than of

Christians who have unfavorable view on America. How do we explain why there is a higher portion of people in Aceh than in Nias who have unfavorable view toward the US? Both regions are heavily damaged by the Tsunami and the US has sent more help to Aceh (predominantly Muslim) than to Nias (predominantly Christian), but the US remains relatively unpopular to the Acehnese. Is it the factor of Islam that produces unfavorable view toward the US?

Muslims are taught to view themselves as a single community (*umat*); it is an international and interracial community. In Indonesia, however, the international characters of the majority of Indonesian Muslims are somewhat less apparent. I do not want to simplify, but in general, I think there are two factors that makes Indonesians Muslims to have weaker global Islamic identity:

1. Geographic factors where Indonesia is positioned quite far from the rest of the Muslim world (North Africa, Middle East, and South Asia).
2. Islamic tradition was built on the existing local cultures that are diverse and rooted. With the strong pluralistic nature of Indonesia, Indonesian Muslims tend to have stronger local (ethnic) identity than global Islamic identity.

This does not mean that Indonesian Muslims pay less attention to the world affairs. In fact, they do pay a lot of attentions but they do it in a selective way. Indonesian Muslims certainly tend to pay more attention about international affairs involving other Muslim nations. But the issues that actually interest Indonesians, to be more specific, is not only when they are related to other Muslims but also when the certain Non-Muslim nations were involved.

If it is regarding an international conflict, for instance, the question that interest Indonesian Muslims is not whether another Muslim nation is involved but who the “enemy” is. If the “enemy” is a hegemonic power or somewhat related, Indonesian Muslims tend to pay more attention, otherwise minimum attention was given. Therefore, it is not surprising that Indonesian Muslims show little interest on the conflicts in Kurdi,

Aceh, Moro, Patani, Chechnya, or Kashmir as these conflicts do not involve major world power. However, conflicts that involved major world power (the US, UK or Israel) such as problems in Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan, Indonesian Muslims tend to pay more attention.

It is the hegemonic nature of the US that stimulates Indonesians –and many other nations– to pay closer attention. Despite the fact that Indonesian Muslims pay attention in selective way, they are knowledgeable on international politics when it involves hegemonic powers.

Based on my own observation, I found that Indonesian Muslims have more “sophisticated” understanding of international issues than I had expected. As I returned from my study in the US a couple months ago and attended various discussion sessions related to terrorism or US foreign policies, I found myself feeling “uninformed” about America compared to many Indonesian Muslim students or activists. They pay close attentions to American foreign policy more than I had expected. The question that they often raise is not “why do we dislike America?” but “why should we like America?” These are the views that are often articulated by Muslim activists in Indonesia.

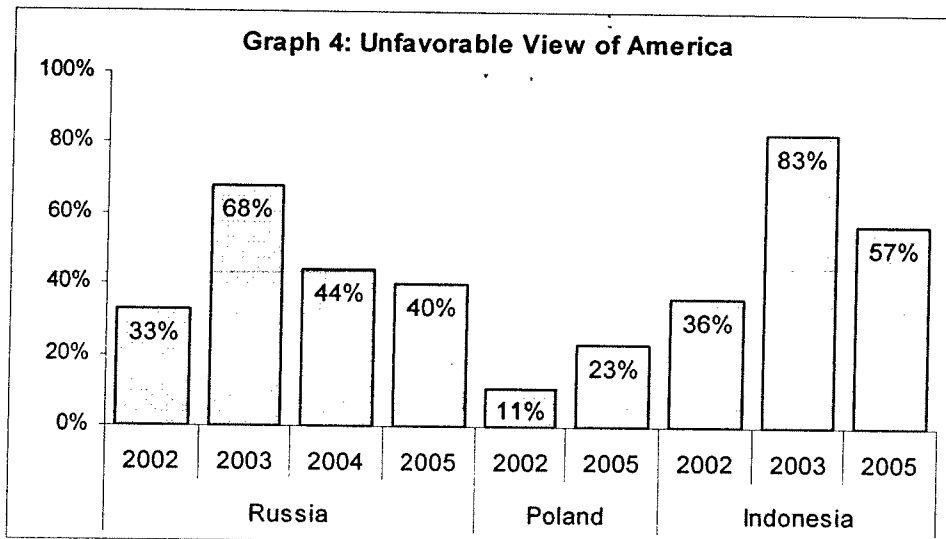
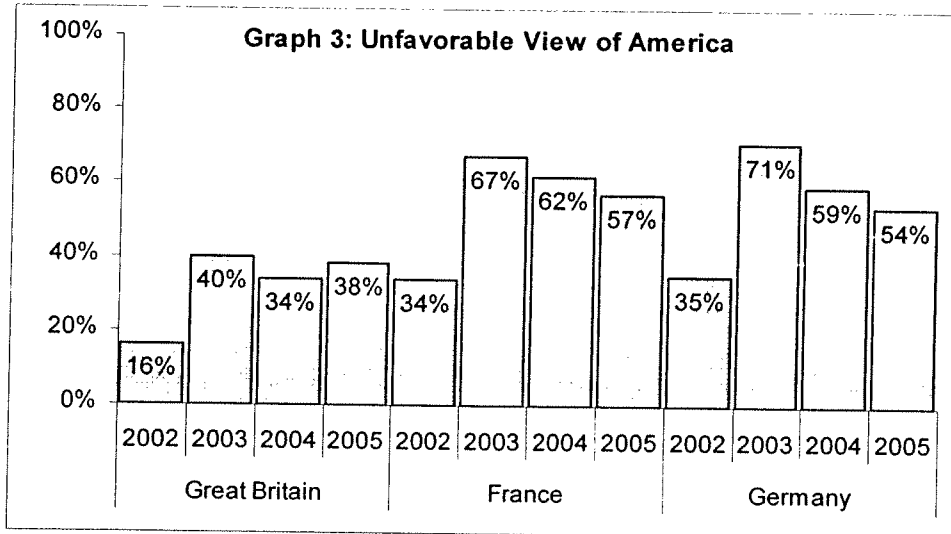
Do the Muslim elites share that view? Is this a new phenomenon? I would argue yes. The Muslim elites share that view but it is relatively new phenomenon. The presence of strong anti-America sentiments among Indonesian Muslims and their leaders have existed for no more than 40 years. The leaders of Masyumi for instance, the largest Islamic party in the 1950s that proposed the establishment of Islam as the ideological foundation of the country, often referred to America in regard to democracy and the freedom of religion in their writings. This is quite interesting because today almost no key Muslim leaders would articulate such a view. However, after the late 1960s and early 1970s, these Islamic leaders stopped referring to America with positive views. Why? In my view, it was the US position on the Palestine-Israel conflict that made it politically incorrect for these Muslim leaders to talk about the “positive” sides of America. Today, it works the

other way around. Muslim leaders can capitalize electoral support from being perceived as anti-America.

Does it mean that internal dynamics within Muslim community are less relevant to the rise of anti-America sentiments? Indeed, Indonesian Muslims have undergone internal transformation in regard to the interpretation of Islamic teaching, as indicated by the emergence of various extremist as well as moderate and liberal groups in Indonesia. However, this dynamic is not new to Muslim and will continue to take place in the Muslim community.

Even if America is being viewed as the major force in promoting liberalism, secular state or democracy, only a small portion of Indonesian Muslims whose concern is on that very subject. It is the role of the US in the international politics, especially in the Middle East which has been broadcasted widely through televisions, may become a subject of concern to a large portion of Indonesian Muslims. Again, I do not want to oversimplify, but I would argue that it is the events in Palestine and Iraq that will continue to determine the degree of popularity of the US among Indonesian Muslims.

Does the public opinion in Indonesia differ from those of other countries? Not really. According to the Pew surveys, the percentage of Indonesians who have unfavorable views toward the US is somewhat the same as other nations who also pay close attention to the US foreign policy (See Graph 3 and 4).



The Pew Global Attitude Survey shows that a portion of Indonesians with unfavorable view toward the US in 2002 was somewhat similar to France, German, and Russia. This indicates that there are other factors –besides religious affiliations- that produce these unfavorable views toward the US. I should also note here, that in all of these countries, the portion of the population who has unfavorable views toward the US was doubled by 2003. It shows how the war in Iraq influences the views toward the US.