Contesting Megawati:
The Mediation of Islam and Nation in Times of Political Transition

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Abstract
Sparked by threats of religious fatwa deriving from different Islamic groups in contemporary Indonesian society, the issue on whether or not, according to Islam, a woman could become leader of a nation, was heavily discussed among religious scholars, politicians, intellectuals, and feminists in mass media. In this debate, the figure of Megawati Sukarnoputri came to represent multiple symbols in the realm of nationalism and religion. Three dominant discourses – namely the nationalist, the Islamic, and the feminist discourse – prevailed during the debate. Their respective arguments, nevertheless, were complex and layered, and did not always pertain to the same ideological framework. Exploring the debate on female leadership in the mass media, this article outlines these complex socio-political and religious layers by assessing how the gendered body is contested and politicized in each of these discourses. I argue foremost that the politics of the media played a crucial role in constituting chaos and polarization between different opposing groups. The mediated effect of the media coverage, nevertheless, showed how the politics of gender in debating female leadership articulated ways of negotiating nationalist, religious, and feminist politics in the 'new' national political arena. Thus, I hold forth that rather than seeing the debate as an indication of Islamic radicalization, it pertains more towards the rearrangement of 'publicness' according to new priorities in imagining the Indonesian nation-state.

Introduction

In the political euphoria of President Suharto's downfall and in the advent of the first democratic elections in Indonesia held since 1955, it was Megawati Sukarnoputri who emerged on the national scene as the most eligible candidate for the presidency. Megawati played a pivotal role in the struggle for democratic reform and being the daughter of the much-respected first president of the republic, the late Sukarno, she obtained a revolutionary status. Her party, the Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle (PDIP), had been most visible in opposing Suharto's authoritarian regime, which strongly contributed to Megawati's popularity throughout the country. Illustrated by the salience of the party's red colors and the multiple images of Megawati decorating Indonesia's public

landscapes, this unprecedented appeal from the 'masses' took up proportional heights in the advent of the presidential election in 1999, and resurfaced in 2004 when she ran for re-election.

However, sparked by statements from the Congress of the Indonesian Muslim Community (KUII) the issue whether or not, according to Islam, a woman could become leader of a nation, came to be heavily discussed among religious scholars (ulama), politicians, intellectuals, and feminists. Secular nationalists supporting Megawati from inside and outside her party believed the statements undermined the success of their political campaign. They reacted fiercely against the claims arguing that the religious statements were in fact nothing but a political manoeuver. In response, Islamists and Islamic conservatives referred to verses in the Qur'an and traditions of the prophet (hadith) to legitimize their stance. This, in turn, triggered moderate factions within the Islamic mainstream to respond to these scripturalist arguments, pointing out alternative theological interpretations. At the same time liberal and Muslim feminists voiced their concerns about the sexism and misogyny underlying the claims against female leadership. In short, female leadership in general, and the figure of Megawati in particular, came to represent multiple symbols in the realm of nationalism, religion, politics, and feminism.

This article examines the complex positions taken in the debate on female leadership. Initially, I argue that the politics of the media played a crucial role in constituting polarization between different opposing groups. Nevertheless, the effect of the press coverage showed how gender became a point of reference through which other political issues were raised. Thus, I subsequently concentrate on the way in which issues pertaining to gender – including sexuality or the gendered body – were used or made to work in the dominant discourses that prevailed during the debate, namely the Islamic, the nationalist, and the feminist discourse. Through a reading of the debate, culminating in 1999 and 2004, I outline these complex socio-political and religious layers. Furthermore, by analyzing different representations of the political woman in general, and the figure of Megawati in particular, I assess how the gendered body was contested and politicized in each of the dominant discourses. As I will argue, the politics of gender in debating female leadership articulated ways of negotiating nationalist, religious, and feminist politics in the 'new' national political arena. The debate also made visible how the public or how 'publicness' is being rearranged according to new priorities in imagining the nation-state.

Media and Fatwa Politics

According to Siti Musdah Mulia, a public officer for the governmental Department of Religion who participated at the KUII Congress, there were opponents as well as proponents of female presidency. While one committee, the Committee of Religious Affairs, was in favor of female presidency, the Committee of Socio-political Affairs concluded that only Muslims and men should occupy the presidential and vice-presidential seat. The mass media, however, only repeated the conclusions of the committee dealing with socio-political issues (2005, 298). By only reporting one side of the conclusions, the media played in on religious sentiments leading to controversy in the public sphere. Moreover, in doing so, they sided with the perspective of the Indonesian Council of Ulama, the MUI, a perspective that did not represent the attitude of the Congress, let alone that of a so-called Muslim community (Ibid, 299).

The 1998 conclusions of the Congress anticipated a fatwa from the MUI to be issued against female leadership. This anticipation was loosely formulated. It did not mention for instance any possible sanctions. However, although the MUI never issued a fatwa, the threat of a fatwa, nevertheless, caused much confusion and controversy. In the advent of the 2004 election period, the mass media did report on an actual fatwa (rather than a threat of a fatwa). On June 3rd, the East Java regional faction of the traditionalist organization Nahdlatul Ulama – led by the local religious leader Abdullah Faqih – urged the public not to vote for a female president. As an explanation they argued that Indonesia was not in a state of emergency that it needed to install a woman leader. They argued that women could become leaders of a country only when there were no eligible male candidates. However, according to an article published in jawapos.com, written by Abdullah Faqih himself, he states the following:

> The forum that consumed more than four hours of our time did not at all raise or discuss the issue of female presidency because that subject had already been articulated in Islamic teachings and recognized as such. Thus, forbidding female presidency, which was disseminated so widely by mass media, was not a fatwa resulting from the local religious leaders forum from Pasuruan (2004).[1]

Irrespectively, the national and international media eagerly wrote about the fatwa while ignoring Faqih's disclaimer. By representing the fatwa in a sensational way and by disseminating the message so widely, the mass media played a vital role in giving authority to the fatwa. As Eickelman and Anderson argue, 'fatwas have conventionally responded to unique instances and have not been meant as generic pronouncements of doctrine or practice (…) When published or broadcast and thus widely distributed, however, they fill different, more anonymous and "public" functions' (1999, 13). Thus, having cashed in on fatwa news, by connoting fatwa

with doctrinal or discriminatory practices, the mass media dismissed alternative understandings of the fatwa that are geared towards everyday practices of Muslim identity and Islamic piety.

The combination of fatwa and gender in bringing about news seemed to be most effective in generating this media attention. The way in which 'fatwa sells' – inherent to a market-driven form of media production – apparently turned fatwas, and in this case gender, into successful commodities. In this respect, the manner in which the Indonesian press – in particular the non-Islamic oriented press – handled the news of fatwas much resembled the way in which Western press in the past and present has covered news of Islam or the Middle East. Rather than depicting power relations at the Congress, mainstream, nationalist media reported the sensational conclusions containing prohibitions and admonitions preferably in the form of fatwas which reduced Islam to some sort of essence.

Islamic Appeals in a Changing Political Landscape

Albeit at times sensational or even orientalist, media coverage on female leadership established the grounds for an exploding public debate. It foremost triggered a theological debate because theological justifications were given to legitimize the claim that women could not become head of state.

Although comprising the largest Muslim population in the world, the majority of Indonesia's population can be considered as nominal Muslims (also known as *abangan*). Besides the smaller non-Muslim minorities, devout Muslims (*santri*) represent the greater minority.[2] Until the 1970s this devout Muslim population can be divided into the modernists and the traditionalists, who found their homes in the respective mass organizations Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama.[3] This form of Indonesian Islam has always been defined by moderation – meaning that generally, it does not desire an Islamic state or an Islamic caliphate. The dominant discourse therefore, especially in late New Order, was characterized by the popular phrase from the neo-modernist Nurcholish Madjid 'Islam yes, partai Islam no' or by Abdurrachman Wahid's 'indigenization of Indonesian Islam' (Azra 2000, 313). For many observers then, it was surprising to find out that Islamic organizations – all of a sudden – had started politicizing theological justifications.

The theological debate was restricted to the *santri* population consisting generally of four main players, namely the traditionalists, modernists, neo-modernists, and Islamists (Van Doorn-Harder 2002). Islamists and conservatives from both modernist and traditionalist factions voiced arguments against female leadership. Islamists, such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) or the Indonesian Mujahedin Council (MMI) were clear on the subject and supported the (anticipation of a)

fatwa against female leadership from a clear group perspective. Conservative opponents of female leadership from mainstream groups such as Muhammadiyah or Nahdlatul Ulama could not speak from a group membership for clearly these mainstream groups were internally divided on the issue.

In her insightful analysis of the debate, the theologian Nelly Van Doorn-Harder analyzed the different religious arguments used in the discussion. According to Van Doorn-Harder, the theological arguments used against female presidency were primarily based on the sayings and traditions of the prophet (*hadith*) and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and secondarily on the Qur'an (2002, 181).[4] With respect to the *hadith* and the *fiqh*, three kinds of references were especially significant when we look at what has been covered by the media, namely: a) a *hadith* that posits a nation would never succeed if it made a woman their ruler, b) references from the *hadith* and *fiqh* that state that the highest leader of a Muslim country should be adult, male, intelligent, and from the Quraish tribe, and c) references from the *hadith* and *fiqh* that point out that the highest leader should be male.[5] Opponents of using these theological arguments from the fiqh and *hadith* to counter female leadership argue against these interpretations by referring to the historical contexts in which the texts were written; the weaknesses and biases of the interpreters; and the discrepancies and inconsistencies created when compared to other *hadith* and *fiqh* texts.

Second, with respect to the theological arguments based on the Qur'an, they were especially grounded in the interpretation of *Sura* 4 (*An Nisa*) verse 34, which read that 'Men are the protectors (*qawwamun*) and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them with their means' (Van Doorn-Harder 2003, 182). According to many scholars, it is how you interpret the term *qawwamun* that is crucial in locating the gender bias. To demonstrate, the Department of Religious Affairs translates the term *qawwamun* as meaning 'leader', contrasting with other translations, for instance, from that of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, a prominent English translator of the Qur'an, who translates it as meaning 'protector'. While some interpreters use the *An nisa* 34 verse to legitimize the prohibition of female leadership within Islam, other interpreters put it into use to contest that claim emphasizing its informative rather than normative character (Marcoes-Natsir and Kodir 2004).

The groups themselves seemed to represent a multitude of different voices, all wanting to speak for 'true Islam', 'Indonesian Islam', or the 'Muslim community'. The pro-contra arguments were highly unpredictable, sometimes contradictory, and often did not form a consistent attitude of a group or community as a whole. Instead, they represented different opinions *within* a group, party or organization. This is especially the case for the larger Muslim organizations Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah representing the traditionalist and the modernist groups of

Indonesian Islam. Here, we see to what extent conservative factions of both groups share the same legitimacy in absolutizing scripturalist understandings of the Qur'an and the hadith as Islamists do. Moderate and progressive factions of the mainstream mass Islamic organizations could not afford to be supportive of the conservative claims because they had always favored gender-equality.[6]

Although arguments were presumably cast in a theological framework, a closer look at the totality of the arguments conveys that most were socio-politically rather than theologically informed. This is not to say that a theological debate did not take place. On the contrary, as described in length by Van Doorn-Harder and others, the theological debate did take place in a fierce way. However, it was exclusively cast within a *santri* framework. To understand the total scope of the controversy, and to find out what it entailed and effectuated in the end, the debate on female presidency cannot be separated from the discussion of the person of Megawati Sukarnoputri herself. Thus, although the tendency in media discourse was to tackle the *Islamic* debate on female leadership, the overall skepticism was not (only) geared towards Islam prohibiting women from becoming head of state but was geared towards *Megawati* not becoming head of state. This latter struggle involved the power struggle – or struggle for recognition – between the devout Muslim population (*santri*) and the nominal Muslim population (*abangan*).

The prevailing 'Islamic' argument that did not refer back to a theological framework states that the future leader of the largest Muslim country should foremost be a Muslim representative. In the eyes of many opponents to Megawati, Megawati did not represent the Muslim community. The Indonesian Muslim Intellectual Association (ICMI), for instance, claimed that in choosing Megawati to become president, people would opting for minority politics. The ICMI chairman at that time, Achmad Tirtosudiro, stated that since eighty-five per cent of Indonesia's population consisted of Muslims, it would not be right for it to be represented by the secular PDIP (Ratnaningsih 1999). This minority/majority argument was often used to indicate the dominance of the *abangan*, the more 'secular' groups in society over the *santri*, the pious Muslim groups. A poignant illustration in this respect was also the case of AM Saefuddin, the State Minister of Food and Horticulture under the Habibie government and executive member of the United Development Party (PPP), who repeatedly made public statements on the ambiguity of Megawati's religion. Supporting his remarks by showing pictures of Megawati praying in a Hindu temple in Bali, he pointed out that people should prefer him as a future president rather than Megawati for he was a Muslim while she was a Hindu. Claiming Megawati was non-Islamic and demanding the presidential seat to go to Muslims only, he contributed to antagonizing Muslim and non-Muslim communities, especially in Bali, where mass demonstrations against the minister took place (*Bali Post* 1998)

This distrust was further enhanced by PDIP's attitude towards Muslims or Muslim issues. Many Islamic groups found Megawati and the PDIP to be insensitive towards the pleas of Muslims and Muslim communities. They became very suspicious towards the PDIP, with regard to Megawati's willingness to cooperate economically with Israel or her plan to abolish the Ministry of Religious Affairs, but most of all they criticized PDIP's great number of non-Muslim members and representatives. A mere sixty-two per cent of the PDIP in the House of Representatives were Muslim (Baswedan 2004).[7] Megawati, on the other hand, did nothing to counter these claims (Azra 2000, 515).

The 1999 elections proved to be a victory for the Democratic Party of Struggle. However, against all odds, Megawati was not elected president. The parliamentary votes went to Abdurrahman Wahid, illustrating the different tensions within parliament on nominating Megawati. Some political observers saw this political move as a sign of sexism or misogyny displayed by Islamic political parties voting against her. However, although a popular Muslim leader was heading the nation, it was clear that the Islamic parties failed to consolidate their political hold in parliament. As pointed out by Syamsuddin Haris, a researcher at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI), during the 1999 elections all seventeen (exclusive) Islamic parties together managed to secure only seventeen per cent of the votes (2004, 61). Most people voted for the secular parties such as the PDIP or Golkar.[8] As Harris explains, the reason why Islamic parties failed to succeed was primarily a consequence of the neglect of Islamic political parties to acknowledge the process of Islamization – albeit superficially – in the secular parties, therefore weakening their own plea for a more Islamic politics (Ibid, 67). This process of (institutionalized) Islamization was initiated during late New Order and even though many saw the Islamizing endeavors as a form of appropriation it also established a sense of willingness of the New Order in accommodating the pursuits and desires of Muslim communities (Ibid, 68).

Nostalgia and Gender in Representing Nation

In his concise article on Megawati and populism, the anthropologist Daniel Ziv describes the different ways in which Megawati attracted such immense popularity. He argues that, foremost, her popularity cannot be understood outside the framework of resistance to the authoritarian New Order state (2001, 76). This aura of resistance around the figure of Megawati developed throughout her activities as the leader of PDIP, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle. One important event – amply televised – that had established the PDIP as a resistance party was the attack on the headquarters of the party's building in Jakarta by the Indonesian army and police on the 27th of July 1996. This violent event killed several Megawati supporters and around two hundred others were arrested. It also gained

the sympathy of many people who saw the attacks as a crack in Suharto's New Order (Atkinson 2000, 99). Since then, PDIP manifested itself as the most important oppositional party that had enough weight to counter Suharto's regime.

The proponents of female presidency were proponents of Megawati and her party PDIP. They were known to be nominal Muslims (*abangan*) and carried the political ideology of nationalism and the national constitution known as the *pancasila*.[9] In countering the statements against female presidency, proponents argued foremost that this was an issue for the state to discuss, not religion. Referring to the 1945 constitution, they pointed out that from the very beginning of the formation of the nation-state, the *pancasila* did not discriminate between men and women and nowhere in the constitution does it say that women cannot become head of state. In the light of the newly acclaimed democracy, moreover, the nationalist *abangan* argued that it was about the popular vote. If a woman were elected it was the choice of the people. Often, this argument was accompanied by the thought that popular democracy was analogous to modernity.

The greater part of Megawati's followers came from the lower class community. Often, they were referred to in print and electronic media as 'the masses' (*massa*) which appealed to the idea of 'floating mass', a term used by both the Old and the New Order. This concept – formally implemented in state policies – depended on the understanding that 'ordinary people' were still ignorant in terms of their political needs and that they needed 'guidance' in articulating and pursuing their political aspirations. This was underscored, for instance, by the idea of 'guided democracy' introduced by Sukarno at the beginning of Indonesia's independence. The result of appropriating a 'floating mass' principle to a majority of the population, however, was the depoliticization of the people. This depoliticization culminated during Suharto's administration where – in the name of order and stability and for the sake of development – serious political opposition was shut down. The 'floating mass' principle did not dissappear during times of reform , on the contrary, as media scholar Krishna Sen argued, the skepticism against Megawati 'needs to be understood against [the] simultaneous rejection of mass politics and valorization of a "deliberative" (and necessarily intellectual) model of democracy' (2002, 24-25). Elitist attitudes towards the masses' appeal for Megawati seemed to emphasize a remaining distrust of the political capabilities of ordinary people. The powerful rhetoric underneath Megawati and PDIP's campaign, however, entailed the promise of giving back power to 'the people', thus, turning masses back into people and giving them the legitimacy of a political voice in the public domain.

Advertisements for the party were inseparable from the figure of Megawati, establishing her as a symbol for opposition and struggle. Less in mere formal terms

but more so in representational and symbolic terms should Megawati be placed in the context of the nation and national myth making. This was amply emphasized during the election campaigns in 1999, illustrated in the election material of her party that was spread around the country, mainly in the densely populated Java, Sumatra, and Bali. Many of these election materials – ranging from posters, banners, flags, to buttons and t-shirts – depicted glorious images of Megawati.

During mass rallies and demonstrations of the PDIP, banners read 'I Love Mama Mega' [in English] or 'Ibu Mega will save our country'. The figure of Megawati Sukarnoputri here served foremost as the embodiment of the 'mother of the nation'. These symbols were highly associative and easily understood by ordinary people, particularly in 1998, when the economic crisis hit people in their everyday lives and when ethnic and religious conflicts were erupting in many parts of the country, and Megawati was hailed as the mother that could save the nation from disintegration. In times of socio-political and communal violence, the symbol of the mother here to help the 'crying' nation was often a very effective mode of advocating peace politics.

Fetishizing women as mothers had a direct link to the politics of Sukarno. As described by Wieringa, Sukarno's early political program preferred so-called feminine organizations rather than emancipationist organizations for the following reasons:

> Especially with regards to the "feminine" duty of educating the children, it is to be hoped that they [women] realize with the fullest consciousness that disaster or salvation of the nation is in actual fact in their hands. Therefore it is to be hoped that they all have the virtues of the great mother (Bodden in Wieringa 2002, 70).

Ironically, the appeal of motherhood in the imagination of the nation as constructed during the Old Order fits well in the ideological constructions of New Order womanhood. Here, so-called 'state motherism', a term coined by Julia Suryakusuma (1996, 101), precisely described the power of the mother in defending the nation and protecting its children. The woman was defined by her position as a wife and as a mother. The direct link with the state referred to the strong hold of the state in creating and sustaining this idea of the woman through the implementation of *dharma wanita*, women's organizations in every city and village (Ibid, 99).

The bulk of election posters portrayed Megawati with her father Sukarno. Often he stands either behind her or besides her as if he is there ready to help her when in need. Images of Sukarno are often 'classic' in that he is wearing his Javanese Islamic beret, his military uniform, and his dark sunglasses. The red and white

Indonesian flag is almost always present in the background. The continual depiction of Sukarno in the election campaign material draws on the political dependency of Megawati on the popular heritage of her father as being the ultimate symbol of struggle. Through her status as the daughter of the much-loved Sukarno, Megawati could nurture the nostalgic longing to return to a romantic past. Tapping in on her father's national popularity of being the symbol of anti-colonialism, Megawati appealed to the nationalist masses that had felt betrayed by the (western-style) modernization and neo-liberalism embraced by the New Order. In this respect, then, a vote for Megawati was also (or actually) a vote for Sukarno and with that it was not a vote for a woman per se, but rather a vote for a return to a politics with a nationalist and masculine leader who can keep the nation together.

As described by the political scientist Mark Thompson (2002), this 'tapping in' on the popularity of one's father or husband is not something novel but occurred in several Asian countries such as Bangladesh (Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wajed), Burma (Aung San Suu Kyi), Malaysia (Wan Azizah Wan Ismail), Pakistan (Benazir Bhutto), and the Philippines (Corazon C. Aquino). Thompson illustrates this for instance through the case of Pakistan where the imprisonment and execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto by the ruling regime had become the 'running gag' through which Benazir Bhutto received her mass support. By deploying traditional gender stereotypes of being the 'mother' or 'daughter' of the nation, 'female leaders were not considered to be threatening to potential rivals, making it easier to unite the opposition' (Thompson 2002, 554).

In their attempts to disqualify Megawati, prominent people have pointed out her lack of political experience. Abdurrahman Wahid, for instance, advised her a number of times to 'show more wisdom' (*Jakarta Post* 1999). The political observer and respected intellectual, Arief Budiman, criticized her intellectual incapability and that of her voters, arguing that the masses vote instinctively rather than rationally. Many have also attacked her for being incapable of running the nation, drawing on her past of having 'only been a housewife'. Nevertheless, these criticisms have often strengthened rather than weakened her political position. As Sreberny and van Zoonen argue, 'women as traditional symbols of innocence and virtue often figure to demarcate the opposition of corrupt politics with humanity and decency, not only in expressions of popular culture but also in the self conceptions of women active in politics and in serious political reporting' (2000, 2). Emphasis on Megawati's political ineptitude also emphasized her innocence in the world of corruption and social ills that fell upon her predecessors. The inexperienced and apolitical background of Megawati engendered a non-partisan connotation and her 'clean' image shaped her as the antidote to the ills of contemporary Indonesian society.

Feminist Strategies

Feminist groups at the end of the New Order consisted mostly of middle class, highly-educated women who worked within the context of secular and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They had familiarized themselves with an internationalist gender equality paradigm that heavily depended on a human rights framework. It was not so surprising therefore, that the dominant discourse from women's groups as covered in the mass media – as a response both to the KUII conclusions in 1998 and to the news of the fatwa in 2004 – depended on this same universal human rights discourse.

In response to claims of a fatwa against female leadership in the media, Ciciek Farha from *Rahima*, the Information and Education Centre for Islam and Women's Rights, argued:

> We are a country that signed the CEDAW, a convention protecting the human rights of women. This means that in our country it is forbidden to allow acts or speech that point towards the violation of women's human rights. Thus, when this fatwa forbids women to become leaders, the fatwa is violating women's human rights and human rights in general (2004).

Although in Indonesia CEDAW had been ratified, national legislation did not follow-up on any of the ratifications to see that the law was implemented in practice. Moreover, unlike *pancasila* or Islam, international agreements such as the CEDAW were not part of common public knowledge. Therefore, it seemed that in calling upon CEDAW as a reference point, women activists failed in engaging the larger public in the debate on gender equality and the question of leadership. The convention, thus, did not 'intervene' in the wider discussions of Islam and nation. When people engaged in the debate, also with respect to gender equality, they did so within the contexts of nation or religion and not within contexts of an international or global understanding of gender equality. However, it was this human rights discourse that was most prominently present as representing the feminist side of the debate.

Although some of the secular feminists would define themselves as also being Muslim (often in a nominal way), they felt uncomfortable responding to theological claims. According to Andrée Feillard, this is because they did not feel familiar or knowledgeable enough to deal with theological issues (1997, 105). In the meantime, however, Muslim feminist voices started to emerge in the public sphere, albeit in small numbers.

When we look at the women's factions of the mainstream religious organizations of the traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama and the modernist Muhammadiyah, we find that they have officially approved of women becoming national leaders (Platzdasch

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2000, 343). In their statements they have not linked the debate on female leadership to the debate on Megawati. The Islamist and more conservative women's groups were hesitant in showing their approval. Women from the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), for instance, did not find top positions to be appropriate for women. They believed women could have important positions in politics but not the top positions.

In reacting to the debate on female leadership, Siti Musda Mulia – a prominent Muslim feminist and also a public officer for the department of Religion – radically called for a re-evaluation of Islamic texts, contending that the texts referred to by conservative ulama and used to formulate fatwas are misogynist interpretations (2005). However, many Muslim women who considered themselves feminist found it difficult to respond publicly to the theological claims put forward by conservative clerics. Apart from a few prominent figures, many Muslim feminists were not as vocal as they would like to have been. It became apparent that it was not so easy for them to articulate their concerns because they often felt their loyalties were split between Islam and feminism. They appealed to the feminist cause, but did not want to use the same rhetoric as secular feminists. The search for their own strategy moreover, encompassed much reading and study of the Qur'an and hadith in order to theologically resist misogynist interpretations of holy texts. It was therefore not an easy task to formulate a counter discourse to the conservative theological claims. Like their secular colleagues, they too were limited in their knowledge about Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), primarily because they often lacked sufficient religious education.

De/sexing the Political 'Woman'
The image of women in the public sphere or women as political actors is a much discussed topic in feminist literature. According to Saraswati Sunindyo, the Old Order exclusively constructed 'public women' – for instance female combatants in the military - as either sisters or daughters (1998). The New Order sustained this construction of 'motherism' and 'daughterism' and included the idea of the housewife or homemaker (Sen 2002). The end of the New Order nonetheless, called for some sort of 'public womanhood'. Here, women were portrayed as producers and consumers and constructed the notion of the careerwoman (Brenner 1999). In contrast to the de-sexualization of women in the Old Order, where for instance make-up was seen as a form of neo-colonialism or imperialism, women were now 'allowed' to commodify or sexualize themselves with the means of clothes and make-up. Rather than generating some form of autonomy, however, this 'public womanhood' was based on and anticipated as a capitalist and consumerist vehicle for the image of modernity (Sen 2002). The idea of *kodrat* nevertheless never disappeared. Although women (primarily middle class) were

now imagined to work and even have a career (although limited to white collar office jobs), they were still defined through their femininity. Women were in the end not to forget their so-called biological or female destiny, which defines women by their domesticity and reproductivity.

Returning to Megawati, her appeal in the elections was inextricably linked to different metaphors of family, mother, and daughter. In this respect, the nationalist discourse in post-Suharto times remained loyal to constructions created and mediated during the Old Order, but also catered to a 'public intimacy' (Brenner 1999) promoted by the New Order. The deployment of de-sexualized family metaphors in promoting Megawati worked especially well when placed in the chaotic and uncertain transition period. Religious, ethnic and regional tensions plagued the nation. In this respect, the country needed a consolidating factor and Megawati was able to provide the hope and belief that she could re-unite the nation.

As Syamsuddin Haris argues, the social mobility of Muslims during the last decade of the New Order did not imply any strong impetus for Islamic politics. On the contrary, the 'new Islamic middle class strengthened the position of the state *vis-a-vis* the aspirations of other Islamic communities […] the expanded socio-economic opportunities that became available to the upwardly mobile Muslims seemed merely to give the government a justification to claim that the New Order state was concerned with the progress of Islam in Indonesia' (2004, 66). The political transition however, set an opportunity for these mobile Muslims to reinstate political power. The transition also created room for Islamic groups and organizations to reinstate political authority. The debate on female leadership therefore should be set against class positions, privileges, and new identities for Muslims in the newly created spaces away from Suharto's incorporations of Islam.

The popularity of Megawati brought a serious challenge to this accreditation. In contrast to the nationalist discourse, in which Megawati was the de-sexualized mother or daughter of the nation, Islamic discourse needed to *sexualize* her in order to de-mythologize the strong nationalist image of motherhood and daughterhood. Sexualizing Megawati by making her into a woman effectively dismisses the powerful myth of 'motherhood' or 'daughter' that was necessary to replace nationalist hegemony by a more Islamic paradigm. More generally, the de-mystification of Megawati can be seen as a way for religious movements and groups to re-shape national mythology or ideology into one which includes religious identity; an Indonesia where Muslimness plays a bigger role in the myth-making of the nation. The sexualization of a de-sexualized myth, thus, is here the intensification of religious nationalism at play in times of political transition

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When returning to the controversy around female leadership this strategy proved most effective. The socio-political arguments (majority/minority) in particular worked most effectively because they triggered in people their sense of nation, citizenship and identity. However strong the support for Megawati was in that period, the PDIP and Megawati's nationalist followers needed to relate or respond in some way to these appropriations for they touched upon the nationalist framework in which Megawati was operating. The claim for instance that she would not be Muslim (enough) led her to start wearing headscarves on different formal occasions. Most clearly, her Muslimness was emphasized on election posters in 2004. Here she appeared veiled with Hasyim Muzadi, a prominent member of the traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama.

Finally, the human rights discourse voiced by feminists competes with these two other discourses only in the way that it dismisses both ideologies. Neither nationalist nor Islamic paradigms are part of the gender-equality model promoted by an internationalist human rights discourse. Here, Megawati is neither sexualized or de-sexualized, but becomes a feminist icon or project through the *principle* of her gender. She becomes a means through which gender-equality can be introduced in the public realm – a long-awaited liberal-feminist goal. Thus, the debate should not be seen primarily as a feminist issue in the way that Islam is a threat to gender equality, but it should be seen in the way that feminists, too, saw the opportunity to reinstate their authority in public discourse. As a result, Megawati's (eventual) success in obtaining the presidential seat could not be interpreted as 'proof' of women's emancipation or as an enhancement of women's rights.

Albeit gendered and fraught with sexualized strategies, debating Megawati had little to do with discrediting feminism or emancipation, but all the more with gendered strategies to counterattack opposing 'truths' or mythologies in nationalism and religion, with the search for the role of the nation in Indonesian Islam and the role of Islam in the Indonesian nation-state. Although theological implications were debated, the controversy can be more aptly described as a way in which Islamic groups and communities sought to re-assert themselves within the new political constellation. Nationalists, on the other hand, have discovered the necessity to Islamize and have found (gendered) strategies to include Muslimness in their national imaginations. Feminists are stuck in between. Although represented in both groups, they have a common ground, which rises above the dichotomy of nationalism/Islam. In between these discourses – albeit Islamic, nationalist, or feminist – there are forces that seek new paradigms of politicking that challenge the dichotomy nationalism and Islam, as well as the dichotomy Islam/nationalism and the West.

Conclusion

Since the fall of President Suharto and his New Order regime, political transformations occurred at a rapid pace allowing for certain socio-political spaces to be open for new democratic impulses. In the arena of formal politics, the new political situation resulted in a re-organization of the electorate system, in the formation of a great number of new parties, and in the re-emergence of old political organizations that had been banned during the New Order. Not necessarily recognized as such, gender or gendered representations played an important role in imagining this new culture of democratic politics. Modes of masculinities and femininities prevailed – constituting and deliberating certain political realities – in the mechanisms of politics, as well as in the representation, presence, and visibility of women within formal politics.

The debate on female leadership (or the debate on Megawati) proved to be a debate on socio-political authority in the 'new' Indonesia. Megawati – as a nationalist icon – functioned as a site of contestation where different discourses emerged, intersected, and competed with each other in order to claim political recognition. Comparable to Indonesia in the early days of independence – where Islamic parties attempted to consolidate their executive influence in the newly created nation-state – the transition period called upon a re-evaluation and renegotiation of national politics. Conversely, the resurgence of an Islamic discourse in this formal political arena was seen as a threat to the sovereignty of the *pancasila* ideology, the key principles on which the Indonesian constitution rests.

The controversy also made visible the different takes and perspectives *within* the Islamic community. Conservative and moderate modernists, traditionalists, and Islamists embarked upon a theological quest to study whether or not Islamic teachings allowed a woman to become a leader of a country. This *santri* community – previously neglected in important national issues – conquered public space via their (religious) authority on the matter. Reinforcing or problematizing female leadership was a way for the nationalist *abangan* and the Muslim *santri* to re-position their political powers within the new political spheres where everything was still 'open for contestation'.

Finally, the public discussions on female leadership also illustrated the necessity of a local feminist perspective on Islam and Islamic texts. Although I argue that the debate in its entirety proved less about women's emancipation than it was about Muslim and nationalist politics, it ultimately engaged gender and gendered representations in discussing and contesting those politics. In this site of contestation secular feminist discourses appealed to transnational paradigms while Muslim feminists catered to Islamic frameworks. Although still given a marginal space in the public sphere, the feminist discourses in post-authoritarian Indonesia

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have equally contributed to the process of democratization and the imaginings of the nation.

Notes

[1] This letter was originally written for *Kaki Langit*, the magazine of Abdullah Faqih's Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) in East Java. It was not published in the daily newspapers and did not generate a discussion as such. It did however circulate electronically on the Internet.

[2] The terms *abangan* and *santri* are terms coined by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1976) in his famous work on the religion of Java where he classified Javanese society into three groups, the *abangan*, *santri* and *priyayi*. The *abangan* comprise of nominal Muslims that 'follow a lifestyle reflecting religious beliefs and practices popular during the Old Javanese, Hindu, and Buddhist periods, albeit with some adaptation to Islamic and Western cultures that arrived later' (Federspiel 1995, 1). The *santri*,on the other hand, identify themselves foremost as Muslims (as opposed to Javanese) and adhere to the five pillars of classical Sunni Islam. The third group, the *priyayi*, primarily refers to civil servants of bureaucratic parts in society. Recent scholarship have critiqued this distinction by stating that religiosity in Indonesia is much more complex and refined than portrayed by this classification (Fakih 2002, page number?). Nevertheless, much scholarly work still depends on these concepts.

[3] Modernists wanted to reform and purify Indonesian Islam through the central doctrines of mainstream Sunni Islam, thus by strictly adhering to the Al Qur'an and the Sunnah. They opposed cultural appropriations of Islamic thought. This was the case, for instance, in Java where Hindu-Buddhist (for the urban upper class) or Animist (for the rural lower class) elements intersected with Islamic belief. Their reformist agenda is most visible in their network of modern schools called *madrasah* where a modern education system is being combined with religious teachings. In contrast, the traditionalists hold on to traditional and local adaptations of Islam. The organization also has its bases on education, namely the Islamic boarding schools called *pesantren* that are scattered throughout rural Indonesia. In the past 30 years, the Nahdlatul Ulama has often been associated with its influential chairman (and former president) Abdurrahman Wahid, who managed to internally restructure the conservative mainstream. Under the strong influence of Wahid and other key figures, the Nahdlatul Ulama has become a modern and forward-looking organization that regards women's rights, for instance, as an important issue (Barton and Feillard 1999).

[4] A *fiqh* is the codification of principles of conduct drawn by religious scholars from the Qur'an, from Traditions, from an analogy of those two sources, and from the consensus of legalists (Federspiel 1995, 59-60)

[5] Quraish (or *kuraisy*) is the name of an Arab tribe that controlled Makkah and to which Muhammad belonged (Federspiel 1995, 138).

[6] NU and Muhammadiyah in the past have supported women's rights and women's participation in politics. For an elaboration, see Barton and Feillard (1999) and Van Doorn-Harder (2002, 176).

[7] In contrast to Golkar (83.3%); PKB (100%); PPP (100%); PAN (94.1%); PBB 100%); and PKS (100%). See Baswedan (2004) for an elaboration of these figures.

[8] See also Azra (2000, 314).

[9] *Panca* (five) *sila* (principle) is the state philosophy announced by Sukarno in the onset of the new nation-state that was based on five interrelated principles: belief in one supreme God; just and civilized humanitarianism; nationalism as expressed in the unity of Indonesia; popular sovereignty arrived at through deliberation and representation or consultative democracy; and social justice for all Indonesian people.

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