The Cinematic Contest of Popular Post-Islamism

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BEYOND A CLASH OF CIVILISATIONS

In early 2008 a strongly Islamic film, titled Ayat-ayat Cinta (Verses of Love) took the Indonesian public by storm. The film is based on the best-selling novel of the same title, authored by a devout and prolific Muslim writer and proselytiser, Habiburrahman El Shirazy, who claims he writes for the primary purpose of propagating Islam. Ayat-ayat Cintais set in Egypt, with background music and scenes that are markedly Middle Eastern and Islamic throughout the film. Its commercial success surpassed any other titles previously screened in the country, regardless of country of origin, language, or genre. Indeed, the film is now best remembered as the single most popular Islamic film ever by most Indonesians.

The release of Ayat-ayat Cinta took place when in many parts of the world public life remained overshadowed by the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the

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US, and the US-led War in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was a time when a crude dichotomy between the secular, modern and liberal West versus the conservative or radical Islamism became normalised in the media and public discussion. In response to the films’ unprecedented popularity, one US-based columnist, writing in the international media in English, described Ayat-ayat Cinta as “a vehicle for marketing fundamentalism” (Bev 2008). According to the columnist, this cultural product has “been embraced by Indonesian Islamists” and other “common people who don’t think critically” (Bev 2008). Speaking from a completely different position, the Indonesian state officials who enthusiastically welcome the film have also described the film’s merits in terms of the globally familiar framework of an “Islam versus the West” binary opposition. Upon viewing the film, President Yudhoyono argued in his speech that the film performs an extremely important favour for promoting Islam as a peace-loving and tolerant religion. This could be considered as a counter-statement to the further stigmatisation of Islam provoked by the controversial anti-Islam video Firma, produced by Dutch politician Geert Wilders, and released online just a few weeks earlier. Yudhoyono’s point was reiterated by Junus Effendi Habibie, the Indonesian Ambassador to the Netherlands, in anticipation of the screening of Ayat-ayat Cinta in The Hague on 26 October 2008.

Under such circumstances, what many analysts have frequently overlooked are the deep and long-standing internal conflicts within Muslim communities, whose differences and occasional violent conflicts manifest with no less intensity than those between Islam and its distant foes. Clifford Geertz’s (1976) classic distinction between the santri and abangan Muslims is clearly inadequate for dealing with today’s situation in Indonesia. Merle Ricklefs acutely perceived the inadequacy of the more recently popular terms such as “liberals and moderates on the one hand and radicals and extremists on the other” (Ricklefs 2008: 123). Internal conflicts have surfaced on multiple fronts, articulating a range of differing concerns, such as those between the conservative established institutions (for instance the state-sanctioned Islam Cleric Council at the national and provincial levels) and the liberal-minded minority groups (such as the Jakarta-based Liberal Islam Network) or sects within Islam (for instance between the Sunni majority and the Ahmadiyyah and the Shia minorities). Serious tension has also escalated between mainstream organisations either separately or collectively (involving members of the Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, the nations’ two largest Muslim organisations) and the militant and violent tendencies of a scattered network of Islamists (with the Islam Defender Front being the most prominent).

FOCUSING ON THE CASE OF INDONESIA, this essay is a preliminary attempt to examine a recent set of tensions within the Muslim communities, set against a backdrop of newly emerging forms of religious piety and practices among the urban Muslim youth, which can be conceptualised as post-Islamism. Its advocates and followers are largely unbound by formal organisation, but their collective expressions are strongly visible in public spaces, both in Indonesia and in many societies in the Middle East, South Asia, West Asia and North Africa which have a considerable sized Muslim population. It is necessary to briefly introduce the concept of “post-Islamism” in the next section. In the subsequent section, I will examine a case of a cinematic battle in contemporary Indonesia, taking the success story of Ayat-ayat Cinta as a starting point for illustrating the strong assertion of Indonesian post-Islamism and its compelling political significance for Indonesia’s current political trajectory. This essay will conclude with a section that discusses the broader political context of Indonesia’s post-Islamism, by identifying its historic specificities and distinctions from counterparts in other Muslim majority nations.

One tentative argument that this paper puts forward is that Indonesian post-Islamism has been adopted by many young, urban, middle-class Indonesians as the preferred alternative mode for being modern and being Muslim. Their choice also signifies a negative response to the pressures from two other dominant and competing models that have prevailed in their society. One of these models is the persona of an old-fashioned, provincial and orthodox Muslim who cherishes local wisdom and long established “tradition” in the image of their teachers’ or parents’ generation. The other is the persona of a radical, but nonetheless modernist militant with a commitment to pursuing some moral and political agenda for a better world inspired by religious teachings, with the ability to use modern science and technology as weapons, and a willingness to sacrifice one’s life if deemed necessary, to achieve this aim. By embracing post-Islamism, these Indonesians defy the secular-West versus radical-Islamism dichotomy that has become so familiar in public discussion in the early decade of this century.

POST-ISLAMISM

There are several versions of Islamism, which in turn generate several forms of post-Islamism, as will be shown below. Any definition of Islamism or post-Islamism is necessarily subject to contestations (see Yilmaz 2011: 247-249 for a brief review), which we need not go into here. At the risk of being simplistic, I wish to focus my discussion of Islamism and post-Islamism by referring primar-
ily to the work of Asef Bayat, which has made major impacts on contemporary studies of the Middle East and Islamic politics, Bayat extends his post-Islamist perspective from state politics and the study of democracy to areas of popular culture (Bayat 2002a, 2007b), which is my concern in this essay. In Indonesia, Bayat’s work draws some attention from some scholars, although not prominently.

In this discussion, I take Islamism to refer to any social movement that advocates for a maximal application of Islamic teachings (as understood by its proponents) in the widest possible scope of public life, including but not restricted to the formal adoption and enforcement of sharia law as the basis of government in a given nation-state. Regardless of their variations, Islamist movements share several things in common:

“Islamism emerged as the language of self-assertion to mobilize those largely middle class high achievers who felt marginalized by the dominant economic, political or cultural processes in their societies; [...] for whom the perceived failure of both capitalist modernity and socialist utopia made the language of morality (religion) a substitute for politics.” (Bayat 2007a: 14)

Bayat observes that in many parts of the Middle East around the 1950s-1960s “Islamist movements succeeded for three decades in activating large numbers of the disenchanted population with […] cheap Islamization, that is, by resorting to the language of moral and cultural purity” (Bayat 2007a: 16). However, after three decades, many of these movements experienced an impasse, as they encountered many difficulties delivering “a more costly Islamization, that is, establishing an Islamic polity and economy and conducting international relations compatible with the modern national and global citizenry” (Bayat 2007a: 16). What followed was “Islamist rule faced profound crisis wherever it was put into practice (as in Iran, Sudan, or Pakistan); and the violent strategies, and armed struggles, that the radical Islamists had adopted, failed to make major inroads (as in Egypt and Algeria)” (Bayat 2007a: 16). It was under the condition of such a crisis that new thinking emerged, and aspirations which he calls “post-Islamism” began to flourish and rapidly spread across the Muslim-majority societies especially, but not exclusively, among the youth and the new middle classes in urban areas.

By post-Islamism, Bayat means a condition as well as a project. As a condition, the term “refers to a political and social condition where, following a phase of experimentation, the appeal, energy, and sources of legitimacy of Islamism get exhausted even among its once-ardent supporters” (Bayat 2002b: 5). As a project, it “is neither anti-Islamic nor un-Islamic or secular” (Bayat 2007a: 19). Rather,

“it represents an endeavor to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty, [...] emphasizing rights instead of duties, plurality in place of a singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scriptures, and the future instead of the past. It wants to marry Islam with individual choice and freedom, with democracy and modernity.” (Bayat 2002b: 5)

Bayat’s original study was based on analyses of the political trajectories of Turkey and Iran. In both countries Bayat noted a period of Islamist rule preceded the discontent, disenchantment, and disillusionment that were generated among many, even those who had formerly supported Islamist politics. Bayat is careful not to suggest post-Islamism as the end of an “Islamist political agenda” in any deterministic sense. He reminds us “[I]n reality we may witness simultaneous processes of both Islamization and post-Islamization” (Bayat 2007a: 20), a pertinent point for our discussion of contemporary Indonesia.

In one essay, Bayat (2002a) discusses the phenomenal popularity of the Egypt-born televangelist Amr Khalid as something of an unprecedented trend and a case of “post-Islamist piety”. Indonesia has Khalid’s equivalents, among whom AA Gym, Jeffry al-Buchori or Muhammad Arifin Ilham count as being some of the most popular (see Hasan 2009: 239-241; Hoeстерey 2007; 2008; Howell 2008; Muzakki 2007). In another study, Bayat (2007b) expands and elaborates his study of the Islamic “politics of fun”, critically asking why Islamic regimes, like most other modern secular regimes whether revolutionary or conservative, have a tendency to be “anti-fun-damentalist” (Bayat 2007b: 435), while young Muslims in the Middle East continue in their pursuit of fun, without disavowing their religious piety, despite knowing they will face severe penalties for challenging the anti-fun regimes. While being mindful of the different religious histories in the Middle East and Indonesia, I find Bayat’s insights and phraseology inspiring in my work on Indonesian popular culture, with the recent Islamic films being a case in point.

**A CINEMATIC BATTLE**

Earlier I referred to the remarkable success of the melodrama film *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, based on a best-selling novel under the same title. Set in Egypt, the storyline revolves around the life of Fahri, an Indonesian graduate student of Al-
Azhar University from a modest family background back in his homeland. His personality, religious piety, and intelligence charmed several women around him. Fahri marries one of these women, a German citizen of Turkish descent. During critical circumstances and upon her insistence, Fahri takes a second wife Marin, an Egyptian Coptic Christian, near the end of her life due to serious illness.

Ayat-ayat Cinta is not the first Islamic film in Indonesia, but no other title has made an impact anywhere close to the enthusiastic reception of this film. One reason for Ayat-ayat Cinta’s popularity lies precisely in it being both more, and less, than Islamic: it is hybrid in both substance and style (Heryanto 2011). Despite its richly and markedly Islamic elements, the film resembles in many sections elements belonging to Hollywood and Bollywood movies, as well as local Indonesian television drama (sinetron). In defiance of the new trend among Indonesian Muslims for wearing typical Middle Eastern dress, the male protagonist Fahri sports a trendy haircut, growing no beard, and wears stylish Western casual clothes. His physical appearance allows him to be almost any character in any one of the mainstream films from Asia or the West. In his wedding ceremony Fahri wears a Western suit and tie. The scenes of the wedding itself are strongly reminiscent of Bollywood films. The leading male character displays a most attractive blend of the following favorable attributes: a devout and intelligent Muslim, a post-colonial Indonesian citizen who is at ease with the world of classical Islamic texts, and a Western-dominated global lifestyle of consumption. Here is a case of the amalgamation of what used to be seen as a binary of opposites: tradition and modernity, East and West, religious piety and worldly pleasure.

However, not everyone is impressed by Ayat-ayat Cinta. The film received only a lukewarm response from local film critics, and it performed poorly during the Indonesian Film Festival by the year-end. Worse still, the more Islam-oriented groups condemned both the novel and film as heresy. Some of the devout young Muslims who were avid readers of the novel Ayat-ayat Cinta expressed their serious grievances in public, viewing the film fell short of bringing what they considered to be the Islamic values and spirit in the novel onto the silver screen. Many of the novel’s fans accused the director of manipulating the symbols of Islam for material gain and fame.

The case of Ayat-ayat Cinta is solid testament to not only centuries-long diversity and hybridity within the Muslim communities, but also to something novel in the dynamics of such diversity and hybridity. For instance, the embrace of religious piety, strong desire for wealth and consumerist lifestyle, and the pleasure from displaying all of them in public appears to be a more recent trend. Despite its questionable artistic merits in the eyes of cinephiles, Ayat-ayat Cinta is but one expression of Indonesia’s post-Islamism that has struck a significant chord with the majority of largely apolitical, urban-based, new rich segments among the Indonesian Muslim communities. And it did so with greater impact than the filmmaker had intended or hoped. This new, perhaps first, generation of post-Islamism is distinct from an earlier generation of Indonesian Muslims. Many of the latter remain aloof or ambivalent to the idea of bringing the divine values of Islam into the film industry. For them cinemas carry the stigma of bad taste and sleaziness. These post-Islamists also distinguish themselves from the Indonesian Muslims who have rapidly grown strong in the past two decades, and who took offence and fiercely denounced Ayat-ayat Cinta. Ayat-ayat Cinta is an experiment in meshing together different streams of ideologically-loaded desires and consciousness which historically have not always got along. It took considerable compromise from each of three key persons behind the making of the film. The first is prolific Muslim writer and proselytiser Habiburrahman El Shirazy whose novels became best-sellers as an unprecedented increase in the pace and scale of Islamisation swept Indonesia. The second is award-winning film director Hanung Bramantyo who gained a prominent reputation in the secular field. The third is producer Manoj Punjabi of MD Entertainment, one of the most prolific producers of Indonesian film and television drama, who took the risk of making a record-breaking investment for the production of Ayat-ayat Cinta, clearly with the expectation of a handsome return.

In a series of weblog posts made periodically during the course of the film production, Director Bramantyo vented his frustration at the many compromises demanded of him from the pious Muslim novelist in one direction, and the producers from the other direction. For instance, the casting process was complicated by a series of bitter disputes with the novelist. Heeding the novelist’s recommendation, casting for the lead character began with a search for the potential second wife Murin, later, when Bramantyo found the two actors he wanted for the lead roles, novelist Shirey vetoed the decision because they were not Muslims. The production proceeded with the final choice of Fedi Nuril as the lead actor. In an interview that he would consult with him before deciding the final casts. When the news broke about Fedi Nuril taking the lead role, many of the novel’s readers expressed anger and disappointment, because in a previous film the actor was shown kissing a woman who was not his wife (both on and off screen).
From the other direction, Bramantyo had to face the demand from producer Punjabi to make the film as entertaining as possible, in order to appeal to the widest possible audience, and ensure a good return on the investment of 7 billion rupiah (approximately US$770,000) which was then double the average cost required for domestic film production. Producer Punjabi expected Bramantyo to copy as many of the ideas as possible from the sounds and images of Hollywood and Bollywood cinema. As production for the film continued, director Bramantyo faced numerous difficulties with logistics and budget constraints which led to further compromises on the original project. He was so discouraged by the entire process of production and so apprehensive about the outcome that he "even feared it would be his last movie" (Emond 2012). He did not attend the screening of the film at its premiere, and hid outside the movie theatre in anticipation of how badly the audience, and especially the avid readers of the novel, would react to the film. All of this underscores that the novel’s was no guarantee of the film’s success.

Interestingly, novelist Shirazy admits to have confronted similar conflicting pressures in an attempt to seek what he views as the middle ground. During the course of my conversation with the novelist Shirazy (Canberra, 7/03/2011), he describes how he and his novel have also been subjected to hostile criticisms. The secular criticized him for being fanatically Islamic, while the Islamist-oriented fundamentalists accused him of forsaking Islam’s values and mission for his own fame and fortune. Indeed, one magazine accused him of sowing the dangerous seed of liberalism in his novel, in line with the international conspiracy of Zionism (Risalah Mujahidin 2008).

All the above illustrates how complex and tension-ridden Islamisation is in contemporary Indonesia. Far from being primarily a tension between “traditional” and backward looking Islamist radicalism and a secular, “modern” and liberal West, what has occupied the minds of many equally modernist-oriented Muslims in Indonesia comprise a series of internal conflicts. Both novelist Shirazy and film director Bramantyo are contemporary Indonesian artists with two variants of post-Islamist orientation, which are not only distinct but also potentially conflictual. The conversion of the novel into the film represents a conversion from one variant representing a didactic post-Islamism into a variant that is more liberal-minded. Each variant has its own dedicated group of followers, who do not necessarily get along, but who all share a strong objection to the Islamist politics currently running high in Indonesia. This will be further discussed in the final section of this essay.

The film’s dazzling impact is of a scale far greater than that of the novel, and it took those involved in its production by surprise. Ironically, internal disputes made it difficult for those responsible for the production of the film to share in the joy of celebrating their huge public success. Immediately after the completion of the legendary film, and before the public excitement subsided, three key forces behind the making of Ayat-ayat Cinta went separate ways in subsequent film projects. None achieved anything near the success of their Ayat-ayat Cinta. Of particular interest is what film director Bramantyo and novelist Shirazy did in the months following the release of Ayat-ayat Cinta. Their actions bring into sharper relief the divisions between what can be collectively understood as Indonesia’s nascent post-Islamism.

Bramantyo’s subsequent film Perempuan Berkalung Sorban (Woman With a Turban), was released in the early months of the following year (2009). This film was based on a novel of the same title by feminist Muslim author, Abidah El Khaliquey. It tells the story of Annisa, a daughter of an Islamic teacher in a local Islamic boarding house, who is engaged in a struggle with gender discrimination in her family and immediate social environment. As the story is set in a devout Muslim community, critics of the novel and the film have received it as a ferocious attack against Islam, rather than a genuine criticism of patriarchy per se (see Hellwig 2011). Nearly all Muslim males in the story are self-serving, conservative, incredibly irrational, narrow minded, and intolerant. Some of these men are depicted as morally corrupt, others as violent and aggressive. To settle a financial debt Annisa’s father arranges her marriage to an unemployed man who is a drunkard, sexually abusive, and a pervert. Critics acknowledge that such characters do exist, but they find offense in what they perceive to be a one-sided portrayal of the Islamic community, and the fact that there appears no solution in Islam to the social and moral problems represented in the story.

The film stirred up a bigger outrage than Ayat-Ayat Cinta did among Muslim communities, alienating the director from many of his religiously devout fans and peers in the industry. Film critic Eicky Imanjaya in publishing a fierce criticism of the film questioned the director’s ideological intentions, his knowledge of Islam as well as his cinematic skills (Imanjaya 2009a). Senior cleric and deputy on the fatwa commission of the Indonesian Council of Clerics (Majelis

2 In an interview with the media, the novelist acknowledges that she took inspiration from the Indonesian translation (Perempuan di Titik Nol) of Nawal el-Sadawi's novel Emra'a enda noktar el sifr (via the English version Women at Point Zero) and a few other feminist literary works that were widely discussed among student activists in the previous decade (el-Sadawi 1989). Like El Sadawi’s novel, there is not a single male character in Perempuan Berkalung Sorban with admirable merits, except short-lived Khudori, who is Annisa’s first love.
Ulama Indonesia or MUI), Ali Mustafa Yaqib called on Muslims to boycott the film.

One interviewee for my research on this issue described an informal meeting in Jakarta, attended by some of the most revered names in the Indonesian film industry, who are known for their strong commitment to Islam. Shared anger about the film had brought them together to discuss a joint response. A few months later the public learned about the production of Ketika Cinta Bertasbih (When Love Has a Tasbih), a film that appears to be intended as a corrective response to Bramantyo’s films. Ketika Cinta Bertasbih is based on another novel by Shirazy, but this time directed by Chaerul Umam, whose reputation for producing Islamic films was well established many years prior to the phenomenon of Ayat-ayat Cinta. In a media interview, Umam was asked for his comments on the call for a boycott of Perempuan Berkalung Sorban. Umam replied that a boycott was inadequate: “I think, this is a crime, and must be brought to the court. The Council for Film Censorship is also implicated for having let it go to the public” (Anshor 2009).

The film Ketika Cinta Bertasbih purposefully distinguishes itself from the two recent Islamic films by Bramantyo in both content and mode of production. Rather than pursuing commercial success or high aesthetics above all else, as Bramantyo presumably had done, those behind the production of Ketika Cinta Bertasbih were first and foremost committed to producing this new film to propagate the “correct” Islamic teachings, and as a corrective to previously circulated films with Islamic themes, which were currently in vogue. With implicit criticism of Ayat-ayat Cinta, those in charge of the production Ketika Cinta Bertasbih made public statements to the effect that the film would be made as identical as possible to the novel’s original narrative. As a result, it took two sequels (Ketika Cinta Bertasbih I and II) to present the whole story. To ensure readers of the novel would not be disappointed author Shirazy was directly involved in the production of the film and took a supporting role. With a budget of “40 billion rupiah (around US$ 4 million), KCB [Ketika Cinta Bertasbih] is the most expensive film ever to be produced in Indonesia” (Imanjaya 2009b), and more than five times the budget of Ayat-Ayat Cinta.

Casting for Ketika Cinta Bertasbih was done with greater prudence and more publicity than usual, with the intention of preventing the problems that pit the novelist against the director, namely the religious credentials of the actors. Rigorous compliance with the teachings of Islam also required that actors and actresses who are not married do not touch one another before the camera. An ability to recite the Koran was required as part of the casting. Selection of the finalists for casting was televised nationally in the style of a talent-scout reality show.

In addition, Deddy Mizwar also stars in this film as a supporting actor. With the exception of the director Chaerul Umam, no one is more prominent and respected in contemporary Indonesia than Mizwar for his commitment to propagating Islamic values through culture and the arts in cinema and television.

A large-scale promotion of Ketika Cinta Bertasbih was launched to announce the mega ambition behind the production. Endorsements from top politicians representing Islamic political parties filled the mediascape and urban public spaces to draw attention to the film’s Islamic credentials at the highest possible levels. These efforts did indeed achieve significant outcomes for the film, including record sales for the year 2009: 2.4 million viewers for the Ketika Cinta Bertasbih I in the middle of the year and 1.4 millions of viewers for Ketika Cinta Bertasbih II by the year’s end. Each sequel reached a smaller size of viewers than Ayat-ayat Cinta did at 3.7 million viewers. Ketika Cinta Bertasbih was also less successful in impressing film critics. Published reviews of the film in both parts are generally critical of its cinematic merits. Many reviewers could not help making unfavourable comparisons to Ayat-Ayat Cinta, which since 2008 continued to overshadow discussions on any Islamic film.

That was not the end of the cinematic battle. In 2011 Bramantyo took his boldest step yet by electing to direct a film dealing with the most sensitive issue of the day: inter-religious intolerance in Indonesia. The title of the film consists of a single punctuation mark, that of a question: “?”. It provoked the much-feared militia group Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, aka FPI) into action, whose violent actions ironically bring into reality what the film depicts on screen. In two separate incidents, the Bandung local government in West Java (May 2011), and a major nation-wide television network SCTV (September 2011) decided to cancel scheduled screenings of the film after public statements were issued containing threats of violent retaliation from the militia group. In another development, the preacher-cum-novelist Shirazy made his first task directing a film based on his other novel Dalam Mihrab Cinta (Under the Arch of Love) (2010) in order to further his mission of promoting his own variant of post-Islamism.

What lesson can we learn from the cinematic battle depicted above? The secret of Ayat-ayat Cinta’s unrivaled success lies in its correctly proportioned blending of various elements, some with Islamic values and others not, for the right audience in Indonesia in the early decades of the twenty-first century. Of course, all other films must also accommodate various elements, which also make them somewhat hybrid. However, in any of the subsequent attempts by the same and other film-makers to produce newer films that are more, or less, Islamic (in whatever sense), or more or less liberal, progressive or entertaining,
none has been able to achieve the same level of public impact as Ayat-ayat Cinta did. Presumably, this general failure to excite the public is due to their less successful combination of similar elements blended. What we need to ask next is whether we can locate the significance of this cinematic battle, and particularly the towering success of Ayat-ayat Cinta within the broader context of Indonesia’s Islamisation. The next and final section will be devoted to answering that question, by returning to Bayat’s concept of post-Islamism, and critically examining the limits of its use value.

**Post-Islamism: The Indonesian Case**

Earlier, I introduced Bayat’s concept of post-Islamism, which he developed on the basis of empirical references to the political history and dynamics of Iran and Turkey. Bayat observed this birth of post-Islamism in Iran as growing out of a moral, political and religious crisis, following an extended period of Islamist state rule. Indonesia is certainly not Iran. No Islamist regime seized state power in the formal sense, and there is no sign of such a prospect in the near future. In the 1980s some observers were partial to an analysis that drew a comparison of state politics in Indonesia and Turkey, which considered the privileged status of the military and its antagonism towards Islamic politics. Such similarities diminished from the 1990s. Turkey has achieved a status of being the most outstanding model for an inclusive, democratically-oriented post-Islamist country with a Muslim-majority population (Yilmaz 2011). Contrarily, in Indonesia, an exclusivist politics of Islamism has been rising at an alarming pace, even if the prospect of an Islamist state remains nil or distant. Given all these differences, can there be some justification for adopting the concept of post-Islamism for an analysis of the situation in Indonesia today? In the following section I wish to argue for an answer in the affirmative.

Bayat is cautious not to over-generalise the applicability of his theory of post-Islamism to other parts of the Muslim world (Bayat 2009). I wish to contend that with due diligence and some modifications, Bayat’s theory can be highly useful to an understanding of the case in Indonesia. This is the case, despite the different social forces and historical contexts in the two regions that have led to their highly comparable post-Islamist trends. One important step for such a modification is to draw a necessary distinction between political post-Islamism, as that which pertains to formal governance at the state level (Bayat’s main area of enquiry), and cultural post-Islamism (the concerns of this essay), which pertains to both the highbrow intellectual culture, as well as the more lowbrow expressions to be found in the multiple forms of popular culture, lifestyle and everyday life.

In the formal institutional sense, political Islam has been the single generic framework within which all major political battles in Indonesia have been fought and shaped since the 1990s. The wave of Islamisation expanded to include other areas beyond the formal political institutions, such as the mass media, education, banking, arts, popular culture and everyday life (see Heryanto 1999). In this study, Indonesia’s Islamisation is understood broadly to mean the rapid expansion and increased visibility of the social practices of Islam, and those material elements, which are widely understood in their immediate social contexts to bear Islamic value. Of course, Islamisation cannot be reduced exclusively to Islamist politics, about which we need to discuss a little further.

At the end of 1990, President Suharto began a series of dramatic political moves and about turns, by courting Islamic politics of various ideological orientations, including the radical militias. It was a hasty and desperate attempt on his part to rescue his power by building a new power base and legitimacy, when intra-elite conflicts between his inner circle and segments within the military top brass, reached a critical level and brought his New Order regime to the brink of its demise. Suharto’s dangerous move managed to delay, but not prevent, his humiliating downfall in 1998. In fact, in subsequent years the politics of faith have stepped over his dead regime, and marched on to take a life of their own.

Until 1990, political Islam was the New Order government’s primary victim of repression and stigmatisation. The Anti-subversion Law was deployed most frequently to prosecute those suspected of engaging in “right extremist” politics, as the “left extremists” had already been crushed once and for all in the mid-1960s. And then suddenly, from the 1990s, the courts were busy with the trials of individuals and institutions accused of having made public statements that were disrespectful of Islam. Prisoners bearing the label of “right extremists” were freed from prison, without having to spend the remainder of their long-term sentences. President Suharto went on a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1991. The number of mosques in East and Central Java suddenly rose to almost double the number twenty years earlier (Hefner 1993:10).

The aftermath of 09/11 galvanised some of the more radical elements and strengthened the siege mentality of a world divided by President Bush’s declara­tory mantra: you are either with us or against us. In the everyday activities of the majority of Indonesians, the strident march of Islamisation has affected many. In the mid-1980s school aged girls were not allowed to wear the veil in school. The ban was lifted in the early 1990s, when President Suharto’s eldest daughter stunned the public by donning a veil at almost all formal functions. In the few
years immediately before and after Suharto’s death in 2008, school aged girls faced a penalty if they did not wear the veil in a number of provinces where sharia-based bylaws had been adopted.

The process of Islamisation that Suharto initiated in 1990 experienced a major Islamist turn when Suharto involuntarily stepped down in May 1998 and Vice-President BJ Habibie took over as interim President. Having no power base, but determined to upgrade his presidency constitutionally at the next election, Habibie relied on the assistance of General Wiranto, the Chief Commander of the Armed Forces. Wiranto took a new emergency step in a long tradition of the state exercising its repressive power, by mobilising existing street thugs. In late 1998, Wiranto recruited and trained new ones, for a paramilitary group called Pam Swakarsa, drawing its ranks from the many young people who had been rendered unemployed as a result of the 1998 economic crisis. Under the banner of Islam, these groups were deployed to violently confront street protestors who had called for Suharto’s resignation, now rejecting Habibie’s presidency, and further demanding a full overhaul of the New Order regime. Numerous fatal clashes took place between the civilian protestors and the newly trained militias, before Habibie lost the 1999 elections and the new state-sponsored militias were dissolved. A strong element of the disbanded militia groups regrouped and independently founded a new mass organisation which has now become the strongest and most-feared of its kind: Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) (Wilson 2006; 2008).

While there are many advocates of Islamist politics other than the FPI and other militia groups, political parties with Islamist agendas have consistently been the losers in elections (Buehler 2009; Hadiz 2011). So, while Islamisation is in vogue, and Islamist politics in street violence has been a major cause for concern among many, an Indonesian Islamist state (such as in Iran following the 1979 revolution) still remains out of the picture under Indonesia’s new formal democracy.

In the meantime, in the sphere of culture, the overwhelming success story of the film Ayat-ayat Cinta attests to a wider and growing trend of Indonesian-styled post-Islamism beyond the cinema. In contrast to the situation in Iran and the other countries in the Middle East analysed by Bayat, post-Islamist piety in Indonesia has not developed out of a crisis following an exhausted Islamist rule. Rather, it has grown out of the exhausted secularist regime of the New Order. For these reasons, the term “post-secularist piety” (Khalid 2012) could be considered an attractive substitute for “post-Islamism”, with one important caveat. As Bayat emphasises, and I agree, post-Islamism is not a secular movement or trend. It is deeply religious, but not at the expense of, or in contradiction to, the worldly aspirations for cosmopolitanism, democracy, human rights, gender equality, and everyday forms of pleasure. Nor is it immune from adopting the trendy life styles prevalent amongst youth across the globe.

Whichever term is adopted for use in Indonesia, popular religious pietism in this country as demonstrated in the case of Ayat-ayat Cinta, articulates widely held moral convictions for correcting New Order secular developmentalism-modernisation. At the same time it also implies a rejection of both the older and “traditional” religious forms of piety as well as the sharia-based Islamist utopia—both promoted by less popular and less commercially successful films. In the first decade of the new century, Indonesians, especially the young, urban, middle-class segments of the population appeared to have warmly welcome post-Islamism as a preferred mode for being modern and being Muslim. Off screen, the majority of the Indonesian population has repeatedly given their electoral votes of confidence to candidates other than the overtly Islamic political parties, forcing the latter to give up much of their rhetoric and many of their original stances in order to appear accommodative and inclusive, much to the dismay of their staunch supporters (Buehler 2009; Hadiz 2011).

Seen from the perspective above, any serious analysis of contemporary Indonesia requires that more rigorous attention be directed beyond the details of a religion’s sacred books, its formal political institutions such as the elections and the parliament, or the provocative statements from leaders of a few terrorist networks. It is time for analysts to direct serious attention to the everyday life of the majority of the population, the forms of popular culture that occupy their mind and off-line that shape and articulate their identity.

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3 I refer to the political alliances of the state institutions and formally illegal groups of gangsters. Although such relationships have a long history, which can be traced back to the colonial time, it was not until the New Order assumed power in the mid-1960s that such alliances were institutionalised nation-wide (Ryter 1998).

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**INTRODUCTION**

Following the 1998 fall of former president Suharto and his strongly centralized authoritarian regime, Indonesia underwent multiple processes of decentralisation. This not only concerns the political dimension of the Regional Autonomy (otonomi daerah) laws from 2001, which were intended to decentralise certain political, administrative and financial functions from the capital Jakarta towards the outer regions (Bün­te 2003: 13). It also encompassed a new awakening of local, regional, and cultural identity, which in turn had been (and still are) invoked for political reasons. Accordingly, the formation of new provinces, districts and subdistricts, as well as the call for autonomy of certain regions were often linked to cultural, ethnical and/or historical argumentation (cf. Bün­te 2003: 12; Morrell 2005; Prasojo 2003: 257-262). This can be witnessed amongst others by the struggle for autonomy in the provinces of Aceh and Riau (on a religious, namely Islamist basis), as well as in the formation of the province West Sulawesi (based on ethnic, namely Mandar, affiliations) (cf. Erb 2005; Faucher 2005; Satriyo 2003; Morrell 2005). In this context, the notions of “culture” (budaya), “tradition” and “custom” (both synonyms for the Indonesian term adat) as well as “re­ligion” (agama) and their respective revivals or reinventions play an important role as they represent commonly recognized means of cultural justification (Davidson/Henley 2007; Bouchier 2007; Picard 2005; Erb 2005, 2007; cf. also Laskar Pelangi Anak Bangsa 2011).
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