



START OF TRANSCRIPT

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Hello. I'm Clement Paligaru, and welcome to *Ear to Asia*, the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne. In *Ear to Asia* we talk with researchers who focus on Asia and its diverse peoples, societies and histories. In this episode the purchasing power of piety in Indonesia.

Indonesia can boast more Muslims than any other country on the globe but, at the same time, Indonesia's 260 million people, who live on more than 6000 islands stretched across 5000 kilometres, are highly culturally diverse. Indonesia has experienced considerable economic growth over the last two decades, with a sharp rise in the number of people becoming upwardly mobile and joining the middle class.

Not unexpectedly, this has been accompanied by growing consumerism. However, unlike in the west, where material wealth and consumerism seem to have contributed to a more secular and less religious society, Indonesia's burgeoning middle class Muslims have

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become more conservative and more pious. This Islamic morality is part of a phenomenon some observers refer to as the *conservative turn*.

Indonesia media expert, Dr Inaya Rakhmani has been examining this trend closely. She joins us on this episode of *Ear to Asia* to discuss how and why Indonesia's Muslim middle class has become more religiously conservative and what this trajectory means for minorities of other faiths in the island republic.

Dr Rakhmani is a lecturer in the Department of Communication, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Indonesia, and head of the Communication Research Centre in the same university. She's the author of the 2016 book *Mainstreaming Islam in Indonesia: Television, Identity and the Middle Class*, published by Palgrave MacMillan. Inaya is visiting the University of Melbourne as part of the Faculty of Arts Indonesia Initiative and is based at Asia Institute.

Inaya, welcome, and thanks for joining us.

INAYA RAKHMANI

Thank you.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

How rapidly has Indonesia's middle class been growing? And what is the projection for 2020?

INAYA RAKHMANI

Very rapidly. In 1999 only 25 per cent of the population were classified as the middle class. By 2010 it grew into 45 per cent of the population. By 2020, if the growth is maintained, then it would, according to McKinsey, reach 85 per cent. Although some might think that this number is exaggerated. Other research - such as by the Boston Consulting Group - says that by 2020 it would reach 141 million people. So that is virtually half of the population, so to say that the majority of Indonesians will be middle class by 2020 is a safe assumption.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

And what are the economic drivers for this enormous and still rapidly growing middle class?

INAYA RAKHMANI

By the late '80s, roughly, there was more open policies to open markets around the world, and Indonesia is part of that global neoliberal reorganisation of economies. In the past 30 years or so there have been massive privatisation of public institutions. You can see it education sectors. You can see it in housing. You can see it in health. You can see it in telecommunications. And all of these sectors contribute to creating a culture of consumerism among the expanding middle class.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

And can you just expand on it? When it comes to the actual lives and lifestyles of the growing middle class, how has that actually changed?

INAYA RAKHMANI

I've written about this in my book and several other articles, that such rapid changes that is experienced by large sections of the middle class - it creates - it instils a sense of anxiety in people about how to respond to these fast changes. It goes out in the way they consume products. It could be global products. It could be global products manufactured in Indonesia. It could be in the form of buying a property.

And finding a sense of safety in such fast changes has resulted in some of the middle class - because they are majority Muslim - to prefer halal products because it helps them navigate through these changes, because if I buy this product, if I watch this film, this Islamic film, if I was into this Islamic program on radio, it would help me maintain my piety in facing these inevitable changes.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Can you explain and make that link between that growing prosperity and the anxiety? What is the link between the two?

INAYA RAKHMANI

Islam was largely suppressed during the New Order between '65 to '98, and Islamic politics have been contained. And some observers have called this the conservative Islamic turn when Islamic politics was permitted to permeate public spaces. As they did, media industries, marketing agencies, corporates began looking into the Muslim as a market. And it's really difficult to say which is the driver, although I would argue that market mechanisms actually drive a type of consumption pattern that leans towards as you consume you would like to exert your religious identity.

You would like to exert religious expression, Islamic expression, because it's very useful to hold on to certain religious values that can be more fixed. It feels more comfortable to hold on to religion, religious values or doctrines, amidst social insecurity, social changes. And that's how it grew into a huge habitus in which Muslims - middle class Muslims - prefer to consume Islamic halal products to maintain their piety amid these rapid changes.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Is it mainly products? Are there other areas where halal consumerism actually spills over? What's the breadth of this phenomenon?

INAYA RAKHMANI

It goes into all of the institutions that have been privatised throughout the 30 years. It goes into finances, banking. You have Islamic banking that help Muslims save money to do the Hajj. There are vast examples in the media sector from Islamic films, Islamic television shows. Islamic television shows - in the early '90s there were virtually none in popular television programs. They were mainly, in the '90s, talking heads like evangelists giving sermons. And early 2000s there were Islamic horror shows. There was Islamic religious shows, Islamic melodrama.

In the early 2000s it was contained mainly during the Islamic fasting month, but by the mid-2000s it became mainstreamed into annual programming. You can see Islamic melodrama on prime time, four hours every day. It answers to a market demand. At the same time it constructs a certain kind of Islamic morality that people feel is useful for them in their daily lives.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

And of course, these are commercial television stations as well, so advertising is important for them and, I suppose, the advertisements that were broadcast have to comply or sit well with these television programs you've just mentioned. Did that drive halal consumerism as well when it came to the type of advertising, the types of products that then proliferated?

INAYA RAKHMANI

Yes, exactly. The market mechanism within it - there are brands, there are products, there are advertising. And the media acts as an intermediary between brands, advertisers and the markets through these television programs. You have this whole ecosystem of halal consumerism because all of the institutions work well in monetising this conservative turn.

Television stations which are not commercial used to be public spaces controlled by the state in which all of the religious groups acknowledged by the state had to have equal representations because it was crucial in nation building. And that moderation, that suppression, so to speak, when it was alleviated, then it went into the public spaces through market mechanisms, I would argue.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

You mentioned public spaces - and I'm really interested in the landscape though. In public what does more pious, more moral look like in public now?

INAYA RAKHMANI

I will take the case of television to answer your question. In popular Islamic melodrama you can see that whenever the main character is facing turmoil. It could be losing his job. It could be not being able to pay hospital bills, basic issues that you can feel in any country in the world if you're a part of the middle class. And during those moments usually the scenes change into a prayer scene in which the person does his pre-prayer washing and he puts on Islamic garments and he would pray to God.

It would be a five minute scene, which Islamic versus the audience can relate to. These scenes were produced through very careful group discussions by television station executives. And these scenes are actually the scenes that have the highest rating and which it continues to be reproduced on television. And these are the mechanisms that I think were crucial, and reproducing Islamic morality you can see in the media and other sectors as well.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

So this is about practice and adherence to religious faith. What about fashion?

INAYA RAKHMANI

There has yet to be research regarding how many women are donning the hijab, but if you see that female Muslims are driving the fashion sector for the hijab fashion, you can really see the role of women in building this fashion consumerist culture. And Indonesian fashion designers are also now participating in global Islamic fashion weeks. They also have online communities. One of the most famous is called Hijabers. Female Muslims teach each other how to wear the hijab or how to combine your garments, what to wear in public settings and ceremonials ,et cetera. So you can see that not only through the more

established market institutions. It also goes into informal spaces in which social media is crucial.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

I'm Clement Paligaru. On *Ear to Asia* we're talking with Indonesia media analyst Dr Inaya Rakhmani about how Indonesia's Muslims have bought into consumerism and neoliberal economics while simultaneously becoming more conservative and pious.

Now, on 9 May 2017 Jakarta's outgoing Governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama - also known as Ahok - was sentenced to two years in prison for blasphemy. Ahok was the Indonesian capital's first Christian and ethnic Chinese Governor since the 1960s. The charge of blasphemy was filed by several conservative Islamic groups after a statement he made on his re-election campaign trail went viral on YouTube. Indonesia saw some of the largest protests in its history as a result of the allegations against Ahok.

Now, after that video was published hundreds of thousands of Indonesians marched in the streets of the capital demanding his arrest. Now, in your research you made the connection that the Ahok case arises from the changing consumption patterns of a rapidly growing middle class of Muslim Indonesians. We'll discuss Ahok's case in a bit but, Inaya, you mentioned the inequality earlier on and poverty still co-existing with the middle class. Now, as large numbers of Indonesians become upwardly mobile do the poorer Muslims get left behind because they can't participate in halal consumerism?

INAYA RAKHMANI

Market mechanisms has a way to permeate all sections of society. So if there are, by definition, lower middle class, then they would still be able to spend money on leisure activities. So in the case of Jakarta there are shopping malls that sell brands according to the class that they target. So it doesn't mean that the lower middle class are excluded from the halal consumerist culture. They have different sets of brands that they can afford. You can tell their social statuses by the way they dress, but it doesn't mean that they are excluded from the market, from the halal experience.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

And yet, at the same time, could the halal experience, or halal consumerism, be actively driving a wedge somehow between the wealthier middle class and the lower socioeconomic classes?

INAYA RAKHMANI

Yes, of course, because the amount of money you spend goes out in the brands that you buy. And it is a symbol, a status symbol, through which Muslims - like middle classes all around the world - can show their religious identity at the same time their social status, so it does indeed drive a wedge. What's unique here is that what's driving a wedge is not the kind of Islamic doctrine that they believe in, but the kind of status symbols that they can express in public spaces.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

How do the poor then view this ever growing middle class?

INAYA RAKHMANI

I think this is why the anti-Ahok demonstrations - or the - it's called Aksi Bela Islam, or the action to defend Islam, was really appealing, because it gave an illusion that these wedges did not exist because we're all Muslims, we're part of a community, we're part of an ummah. When our religion is attacked, then we should band together. But the thing is, on a daily setting, these middle classes, they don't interact much with people outside of their social class. But in participating in that mass demonstration, defending your religion, it gave a sense of community that is absent in their daily settings. That's why the movement, I think, was appealing for the middle class.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Well, at independence Indonesia enshrined plurality in its state philosophy of Pancasila. It was aimed at resolving conflict between different groups. Can you tell us more about Pancasila and how it serves to ensure stability?

INAYA RAKHMANI

Pancasila was a doctrine that was enshrined during the independence. It was crucial for the anti-colonialist struggle. Throughout the New Order it was a doctrine that was reproduced through national curriculum, through the moral civil codes that we had to abide to - whether civil servants or students in the state national schools.

Paradoxically, it also contained the kinds of cultural representation that can emerge in public spaces because the religious groups, the ethnic groups that can appear in national television or national curriculum, had to go well with modernisation projects by the state as

part of state developmentalism. So religious groups that are animist, for instance, that are Indigenous, are under-represented because it does not go well with economic growth, for instance.

On one hand Pancasila enshrined plurality. At the same time it contained the kind of diversity that can be represented in public spaces. The condition we have today is actually continuity of that because the kind of Islamic morality that can appear in public spaces are still mainly middle class, modern, consumerist, economically productive, able to consume products that maintain a certain social status.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

So how would you describe what neoliberal market driven economics is doing to Pancasila?

INAYA RAKHMANI

Today what we see - especially with the anti-Ahok demonstrations, and you have the pro-Ahok demonstrations, the middle class who fight for plurality - but the kind of diversity that they imagine is problematically linked to the type of national imagination that was contained under the Suharto regime. Groups that are not modern, groups that are not urbanised, are largely outside of the plurality that is imagined. If you're an Indonesian citizen - whether you're advocating for Islamic morality or if you're vouching for plurality - both of those political views are contained by authoritarian legacies and then through neoliberal reorganisation of society.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

How would you describe the diversity of groups in Islamic Indonesia, in Muslim Indonesia? And how is that being impacted by what's happening, this trend we've been discussing?

INAYA RAKHMANI

Indonesian Muslims are actually very, very diverse. The two main organisations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah - Nahdlatul Ulama has been fighting for the pluralist discourse, whereas Muhammadiyah has been fighting for a more modernised version of Islam. But then you have the everyday Muslims, who are not aligned to any large political group or Islamic organisation, that kind of go about their daily lives with Islamic rituals.

But if we go back to the market mechanisms, these are the Muslim middle classes who demand a mosque in a shopping mall. These are the kinds of Muslims that demand more up-scale Islamic boarding school or Islamic school for their children. They are the Muslims who demand Islamic housing compounds. This contributes to a kind of segregation that is enabled by the market that marginalises religious minorities, other religious groups, in their daily lives.

So Asef Bayat said that these are a passive piety, political consequences of apoliticism. It may seem as if consumerism is mundane or it has no direct consequences to politics but, in the case of Indonesian Muslim middle class, it does have direct consequences to the political trajectory of the country.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

And what implications does this embrace of Islamic morality have for religious minorities in Indonesia?

INAYA RAKHMANI

I think what's important to note is the fact that this is not a case of monolithic Islam, so to speak, marginalising other religions. It's the way neoliberal economy is organising our society. So along with religious minorities you have the poor. You have different sexual orientations. You have women. You have children. The disabled. You have all social groups that are marginalised by the kind of economy that celebrates productivity. It's not enough to speak about how conservative Islamic values have marginalised religious communities or religious groups.

We need to also speak of the ways that neoliberal society actually marginalises all types of groups who can't participate in the economy. And without a sound social security plan by the state, then we would find ourselves in a situation in which political views are actually vulnerable to be manipulated by the elite every time we have an election.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Inaya, what challenges do you face in researching these areas?

INAYA RAKHMANI

Actually, the main challenges have been economic restraints because Indonesia does not have much research funding into academic basic research. Without that, without

international collaboration, for instance, it would be difficult to do academic research that is rigorous and, theoretically, informed. So as other public institutions, state universities are also constrained. That's the main constraint.

The second is actually - because I'm researching my colleagues, the people I live with - and it's basically participant observation - I'm trying to understand the society we live in. At the same time, trying to communicate your evidence to people is difficult because it's like giving a mirror. Not many people want to see that.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Why did you decide to study Islamic consumerism in Indonesia?

INAYA RAKHMANI

Because I was smack in the middle of the change. I was a New Order child [laughs] and I was raised as a Muslim. I experienced Islamic education for several years and national education, and I see that contradiction. It's a way to unlearn the things that have been instilled in myself and, perhaps, my peers, as a critical exercise, hopefully, for the next generation to not repeat the same legacies that was inherited to us.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Inaya, many thanks for your time on *Ear to Asia*. And thank you for joining us.

INAYA RAKHMANI

Thank you, Clement, and thank you for having me.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

We've been speaking with Indonesia media analyst, Dr Inaya Rakhmani, about how Indonesia's middle class is adapting consumerism to be in harmony with their increasingly conservative religious values.

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