

Media of Religious Morality in Indonesia

For News from Australia and the Pacific, we ask contributors to reflect on their own research and the broader academic field in Australia and the Pacific, of which it is a part. Our contributions aim to give a select overview of Asia-related studies in Australia and beyond, and to highlight exciting intellectual debates on and with Asia. In the current edition, we focus on the theme of “Media of Religious Morality in Indonesia.”

In the current edition, we focus on the theme of “Media of Religious Morality in Indonesia.” Our authors demonstrate how mediated forms of religious morality shape fundamental aspects of people’s everyday lives, working conditions, education, national identity, gender, and sexuality. The information, communication, and entertainment media they discuss range from books (Millie) and films (Wejak and Winarnita) to apps (Yasih and Hadiz), and social media (Husein). Some of these media also function as platforms to reflect on and

criticise the far-reaching social and political role and impact of religious morality in contemporary Indonesia.

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Technologies of Learning and Islamic Authority

Julian Millie

Over the last two decades, the uptake of media and communications technologies into religious practice has been a striking phenomenon in Indonesian Islamic society. It is commonly connected with the emergence of a Muslim middle class.¹ Islamic banking and financial products, social media, Islamic fashions, Islamic television drama, preachers with styles aimed at middle-class sensibilities, extended pilgrimage tours are markers of increased prosperity amongst the Muslim community. They also correspond to emerging loci of authority in the Muslim community. After all, new communications and media technologies involve the arrival of new forms of authority, and the weakening of others.

Communications technologies have effects more broadly than class division alone. They are also highly influential in one of the most significant divisions in Indonesian Muslim society, namely the one that differentiates traditional from modernist Muslims. A fascinating example of the relevance of technology to this ongoing divide is the ‘yellow books’ (*kitab kuning*), which are the texts used in the learning practices of traditional Islamic schools (*pesantren*).² This learning technology is certainly not new, but it has recently acquired an expanded political meaning.

In 2019, the Indonesian parliament passed the ‘Pesantren Law of 2019.’ This is the latest in a string of reforms,

Fig. 1: Students of the ‘yellow books’ internalise scholarly lineages when they study a text side by side with a commentary on it by a related scholar. (Photo by Julian Millie)



Fig. 2: Posters such as this one, photographed by the author in a pesantren, inform students about genealogies of teachers and scholars. (Photo by Julian Millie)

commencing in the 1970s, through which the Indonesian government has sought to bring the country’s traditional Islamic schools – pesantren – within the orbit of state-provided education. The pesantren environment is a very hierarchical one, presided over by the figure known as *kyai* (equivalent to school principal), who is qualified to lead the community by virtue of qualities such as scholarly achievement, family lineage, and charisma. The Pesantren Law of 2019 formally affirms the *kyai* and pesantren as official components of the national education system. For the first time, the ‘yellow books’ are formally stipulated (in sub-article 1(2)) as a defining feature of pesantren education.

The books are distinctive due to the yellow paper on which they are printed. Their true uniqueness, however, lies in the way they express and affirm the traditional hierarchy of the pesantren world.

There is a close fit between the ‘yellow books’ and the hierarchical pedagogical styles of the pesantren.³ Many *kyai* are known for their mastery of specific works, and advanced students often plan their study programs around the reputations of individual *kyai* who are renowned as teachers of specific works. Such students

participate in learning practices that are heavily determined by the pesantren hierarchy: the *kyai* progresses through the book, translating and interpreting while the students take notes and listen. On finalisation, the student receives a qualification that ties their achievement to the name and reputation of the *kyai*. The completion of the book enables the student to become a new link in the teacher’s genealogy.

The physical form of these books is shaped by this pedagogical context: the language is almost always Arabic, the mastery of which is a basic competency of the *kyai*. The books are written by scholars revered in lineages that are commemorated in the pesantren, space is sometimes provided under each line of text for annotations that are added during the face-to-face learning practices, and commentaries by other noted scholars are published in the spaces around the primary text. Based on these features, the yellow books are learning technologies that preserve the hierarchies and genealogies that define the pesantren world.

Other groups in Indonesia’s Muslim community have moved past this media technology. Modernist Islamic educators

have adopted pedagogical styles from secular models that have enormous authority in Indonesia, and use the same classroom styles and textbook formats as are used in the non-religious educational system. They have largely abandoned this book technology, along with the hierarchies that it reflects.

Yet, for a numerically significant segment of Indonesia's population, the 'yellow books' must be preserved in Islamic education. Teachers in the *pesantren* watched on throughout the early and mid-twentieth century as modernists took up new learning technologies, ones that seemed more appropriate for evolving social and political conditions, but refused to 'downtake' the yellow books, realising their important role in preserving the distinctiveness of this religious segment.

That is why the statutory definition is so important. By defining the *pesantren* as an institution where the 'yellow books' are taught, the government is formally bringing the hierarchy of the *pesantren* environment closer to the centre of public life in the Republic.

This definition was opposed by modernists before the passing of the bill.⁴ They queried, amongst other things, the way the bill constructs within the national education system a particular educational space specifically around the pedagogical traditions of a single segment. Behind this concern is a conviction that the national education system ought to be available universally for all Indonesians on equal terms.

As is often the case with Islam and public life in Indonesia, practical politics is part of the conversation. The current government has obtained crucial electoral support from the populations in which the 'yellow books' are authoritative learning technologies. The success of the current President, Joko Widodo and his party relied upon voters in these communities, especially in Java. The formal recognition of the *pesantren* and *kyai*, along with the financial largesse that might flow in its wake, are regarded by many as sweeteners for its voting constituency.

Although they do not feature in the media studies conversation about religion and emergent class, the 'yellow books' are a striking example of the connection between technologies of mediation and religious authority. What is under focus here is not the uptake of new technology by a Muslim segment, but a refusal to 'downtake' a specific mediating technology. The technology is essential to the preservation of a nationally significant Islamic culture. On the broader public stage, however, its affirmation within the national educational repertoire might turn out to be a fragmenting move.

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Notes

- 1 Examples are Heryanto, Ariel (2014) *Identity and pleasure: The politics of Indonesian screen culture*. Singapore: NUS; and James B. Hoesterey & Marshall Clark (2012) 'Film Islami: Gender, Piety and Pop Culture in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia', *Asian Studies Review*, 36:2, 207-226.
- 2 A standard account of *pesantren* culture is Van Bruinessen, M. (1995). *Kitab kuning pesantren dan tarekat: tradisi-tradisi Islam di Indonesia*. Bandung: Mizan.
- 3 Links between pedagogical styles and the *pesantren* hierarchy are explored in Nurtawab, E. (2019). 'The Decline of Traditional Learning Methods in Changing Indonesia: Trends of Bandongan-Kitāb Readings in Pesantrens'. *Studia Islamika*, 26(3), 511-541.
- 4 Azzahra, Nadia Fairuza (2019). *Effects of the Pesantren Law on Indonesia's Education System – A Projection*. Center for Indonesian Policy Studies: Jakarta.

Being Religious and Nationalist in Contemporary Indonesia: Soegijapranata's Ethos

Justin Wejak

In 1940, Albertus Soegijapranata (1896–1963) was the first Indigenous Indonesian clergyman appointed by the Vatican to be a bishop in the East Indies. His episcopal position ended in 1963, the year of his passing. No one in his extended family ever imagined then that the Muslim converted-Catholic Soegija would one day become a priest, then a bishop, and ultimately an archbishop. Educated in a Dutch system first in the East Indies, then in the Netherlands, and with strong Indigenous roots in Java, Soegija became an uncompromised advocate for universal humanity and nationalism. His deep sense of humanity and his religiously diverse background enabled him to interact with people beyond his Catholic circle.

As Indonesia is preparing for the 2024 general elections, renewed concerns about the intersections between religious identity and nationalism are widely under discussion. With this in mind, Soegija's motto – "100 percent Catholic, 100 percent Indonesian"¹ – can be a source of inspiration for reflection on the theme of nationalism. The motto demonstrates his strong nationalist feeling centred on the message that to be Catholic is to be fully Indonesian. Such a maxim suggests that, even though Christianity was still closely associated with Western colonialism in the mid-twentieth century, the two identities – being Catholic and being Indonesian – are complementary, not contradictory. Christianity was then perceived as a colonial product and, therefore, suspected simplistically as an agent of colonialism.

To deconstruct this perception, Soegija, as reflected in his motto, tried to appeal to all Indigenous Catholics in the archipelago to show love of, and commitment to the country. The same motivation saw him actively involved in the national aspirations to bring about prosperity and social justice to the Muslim-majority nation. This partly explains why the Church has enhanced its ministry in education and healthcare post-independence. Education, in particular, is widely recognised as the key to Indonesia's future, as it equips the people of Indonesia with the necessary knowledge, skills, and confidence. Soegija had an important role to play in this trajectory. Nationalism is a project; it is a project of the present for the future, as so well explained for Indonesia by Benedict Anderson, whose account remains formative for studies of contemporary Indonesia.²

A glimpse of Soegija's life and feeling of nationalism can be seen through the feature film – titled *Soegija* – produced in 2012 by Garin Nugroho.³ This historical drama showcases Soegija's reflections on universal humanity that inspired his pursuit of

nationalism.⁴ It tells stories about the struggle for humanity during Indonesia's independence war (1940–1949), through the main figure of Soegija himself. In the film, Soegija is portrayed as a simple man, down-to-earth, and very close to the people. Even though he did not go to war to defend his newly independent nation, he was very involved in organising food for the needy during war time, and he opened the church doors to refugees for their safety. The film also portrays Soegija as a person able to conduct silent diplomacy, including quietly sending a letter to the Vatican demanding recognition for Indonesian sovereignty and independence declared in 1945.⁵ For him, as depicted in the film, war dehumanises individuals and destroys civilisation. *Soegija* is a film about humanity, rather than about religion or Catholicism. Soegija is shown noting in his diary that humanity is the basis for nationalism and religion. Nationalities, languages, way of life, traditions, and modernity all belong to a common home of humanity.

According to the film director Nugroho, without the film, Soegija's reflective notes about humanity could have been lost, and his contribution to ongoing reflections on universal humanity and Indonesian nationalism could have been dismissed. After all, unlike Indonesia's first president, Soekarno (1945–1967) and Lieutenant General Soedirman (1944–1950), for example, Soegija was not a politically popular figure, given that he was merely a bishop of a numerically small religious minority in Semarang. Even though the film is fictional in style, it has a strong emphasis on the unity of Indonesia as a matter of importance above personal interests. The film conveys the idea of self-sacrifice for the sake of that unity and humanity. Like Soegija's motto, the film can be seen as a way to deconstruct the persistent view that Christians in Indonesia are less nationalist than their Muslim counterparts.

In fact, this majority-minority dichotomy was politically exploited during the gubernatorial election in Jakarta in 2017, where Ahok, now called BTP (Basuki Tjahaja Purnama), lost the election mainly because of his double-minority identity – as a Christian, and an ethnic-Chinese.⁶ Ahok's political competitor, Anies Rasyid Baswedan, was able to successfully play the 'identity politics' card. He was associated with a massive fear campaign exploiting religious symbols, such as heaven and hell, to convince Muslim voters to vote for him.⁷

In October 2022, Anies, who completed his term in office as the governor of Jakarta, was declared a potential candidate for presidency in the next general elections scheduled for February 2024. The declaration seemed to create a deep sense of angst among nationalists. There is fear that Indonesia's current secular nationalism may become more religious (Islamic) under Anies. While there was no sign of discrimination against the minority religions in Jakarta during Anies' time in office, people unfortunately remain worried that the religious nationalism movement will gain momentum if he becomes Indonesia's next president.⁸ He may pave the way for religious radicalism to gain more influence and popularity.

The country's ideology of *Pancasila* and the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia may be put under threat. Specifically, as articulated in the Jakarta Charter, the first principle of *Pancasila* is "Belief in God with obligation to carry out Islamic Law for its adherents."⁹ This may be revisited, potentially even accepted, to replace the current, more inclusive version of the first principle as given in the Preamble of the 1945 Constitution: "Belief in the one and only God." Such a prescriptive change to the first

principle would conceivably trigger more separatist movements in places of non-Muslim majority, such as Papua. Moreover, the introduction of Islamic Law in Aceh in 1999 could be seen as a manifestation of the full implications of the Jakarta Charter.¹⁰ This has provided a still-extant window of opportunity for potential implementation of Sharia Law elsewhere in Indonesia associated with a vast Muslim majority. Clearly, then, the rights of religious minorities and those with more secular adherences and lifestyles could be severely limited, as already evidenced in Aceh.¹¹

Indeed, Soegija's motto – "100 percent Catholic, 100 percent Indonesian" – remains an important reminder of the potential pitfalls of the politicisation of religion and ethnicity. The politicisation of identity can dehumanise individuals, and weaken the principle of common sense and rationality in democracy. Soegija's ethos is worth revisiting for its renewed relevance in the lead-up to the 2024 general elections.

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Notes

- 1 Subanar, G. Budi. 2005. *Menuju Gereja Mandiri: Sejarah Keuskupan Agung Semarang di Bawah Dua Uskup (1940–1981)* [Towards an Independent Church: History of the Archdiocese of Semarang under Two Archbishops (1940–1981)]. Yogyakarta: Sanata Dharma University Press.
- 2 Anderson, Benedict. 1983 (1st edition). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- 3 Nugroho, Garin. 2012. Film *Soegija*.
- 4 <https://travel.kompas.com/read/2012/05/26/21323439/Soegija.Sebuah.Film.untuk.Perenungan.?page=all>
- 5 Wijayanto, F.X. Murti Hadi. 2012. *Soegija in frames*. Jakarta: Gramedia.
- 6 <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/10/17/aniess-pribumi-speech-sparks-debate-racist-comments-on-social-media.html>
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- 8 Z, Rijal Mumazzaq and Rohmand, Ahmad Khubby Ali. 2021. 'Becoming an Indonesian Muslim': The Idea of Religious Nationalism by KH. A. Wahid Hasyim 1945–1953. *Academic Journal of Islamic Studies*. Volume 6, Number 1 (January – June 2021), 309–334.
- 9 Elson, R.E. 2009. 'Another Look at the Jakarta Charter Controversy of 1945'. *Indonesia*. Cornell University Press, No. 88 (Oct., 2009), 105–130.
- 10 Afrianti, Dina. 2015. *Women and Sharia Law in Northern Indonesia: Local Women's NGOs and the Reform of Islamic Law in Aceh*. London: Routledge.
- 11 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/6/28/shame-and-humiliation-acehs-islamic-law-violates-human-rights>



Fig. 1: Photograph of Albertus Soegijapranata (1946) (Courtesy Wikimedia Commons)