

Journalism and Islam in the Malay Archipelago: Five Approaches

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Abstract: *Although the principles of journalism – truth, verification, balance, and independence from power – are arguably universal, they are interpreted through the prisms of local culture. Five news organizations in Indonesia and Malaysia suggest a variety of approaches to understanding the relationship between journalism and Islam. Whereas writers at Indonesia's Sabili magazine were selected based on their experience in the tarbiyah or education movement, at Republika (an Indonesian newspaper established to serve the Muslim community) journalistic skills are more important than outward demonstrations of piety. Muslim journalists at the two most liberal of these publications, Indonesia's Tempo magazine and Malaysia's news-portal Malaysiakini, see their work in substantive rather than scripturalist terms, and editors of Harakah, the newspaper of the Pan- Malaysian Islamic party, are outspoken champions of freedom of expression. These varied approaches suggest there is much to be learned from the influence of Islam on the practice of journalism in Southeast Asia.*

Keywords: *Islam; journalism; Indonesia, Malaysia; journalistic values*

Introduction

A few months ago, I was invited to be a speaker at a literary conference in Makassar. The organizers wanted me to talk about my research on journalism and Islam in Indonesia. As the dates for the conference drew near, imagine my surprise when I saw the title of my session: “Media and Terrorism in Indonesia.”

Sadly, it is not only Westerners who equate Islam with extremism. During the time I have been researching this topic, the assumption of my friends in both Indonesia and Malaysia is that I want to write about the most conservative publications. Many assume I am interested in the role of conservative Islam in restricting press freedom.

None of this could be farther from the truth. What interests me are good journalists who happen to be Muslim, and how they think about their work. I am interested in journalists who work for publications that are considered secular, as well as those that are avowedly pluralist, see themselves as serving the Muslim community or call themselves Islamic. I am interested in how journalism is taught within the context of Islam, and how Islamic teachings pervade popular understanding of journalism in one of the world's largest but least-understood Muslim regions.

Indonesia and Malaysia together make up nearly 14% of the world's Muslims. Although the press in Malaysia is controlled by the ruling coalition, Indonesia has a vibrant press system that is largely free from government interference. To date, there has been almost no scholarly research on the relationship between journalism and Islam in either country. Although Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim country, its significance as a place that has one of the freest press systems in the Muslim world is not widely recognized.

Conceptual Framework

How do Muslim journalists in Indonesia and Malaysia think about and understand the meaning of the work they do?

In the United States, journalism is rooted in the ideas of the Enlightenment and the doctrine of natural rights. In Indonesia and Malaysia the picture is more complicated, as Muslim journalists, including those who work for media that are generally regarded as secular, interpret what are arguably the universal goals of good journalism -- truth, verification, balance, and independence from power -- through the prism of local culture, which is, in many cases, Islamic. For example both Malaysia's internet news portal Malaysiakini and Indonesia's Tempo magazine are highly respected independent news organizations known for promoting pluralism, tolerance, and religious understanding. Although these two newsrooms are demonstrably pluralist spaces, embracing diversity and explicitly standing for religious tolerance, Muslim journalists who work there combine international news norms with what I have elsewhere called a local "idiom" of Islam. When asked to explain basic journalistic concepts, Muslim journalists at both publications use the language of religion, and draw upon stories and examples from the Qur'an and Hadith. Although in some ways this is not surprising, given that it is widely understood that news reflects cultural values, the relationship between journalism and Islam has not yet been explored by scholars of journalism.

The differing histories and political cultures of Indonesia and Malaysia also influence the ways that journalists think about their work. Factors such as the legacy of colonial rule, the development of the early nationalist press, the politicization of religion, the locus of religious authority, and the role of the state likewise affect the way that journalism is practiced and understood. In Malaysia, for example, the state is involved in religious affairs to an extent that is unimaginable in Indonesia. This level of state involvement, along with the politicization of Islam, has had profound implications for the ways in which Muslims and non-Muslims interact even in otherwise pluralist spaces.

Five news organizations in Indonesia and Malaysia suggest a variety of different approaches to understanding the relationship between journalism and Islam. Whereas writers at Indonesia's Sabili magazine were hired based on their experience in the tarbiyah or Islamic education movement, at Republika (an Indonesian newspaper established to serve the Muslim community) journalistic skills are more important than outward demonstrations of piety. Muslim journalists at the two most liberal of the publications under consideration (Indonesia's Tempo magazine and Malaysia's news-portal Malaysiakini) see their work in substantive rather than scripturalist terms, and editors of Harakah, the newspaper of the Pan- Malaysian Islamic party, are required to be party members, but are nonetheless outspoken champions of freedom of expression. These varied approaches suggest there is much to be learned from the influence of Islam on the practice of journalism in Southeast Asia. Muslim journalists in Indonesia and Malaysia understand the meaning of their work in a variety of ways, suggesting that the relationship between journalism and Islam is far more nuanced than what is generally assumed.

Literature Review

Most scholarly work on journalism in Indonesia and Malaysia has focused either on individual publications (Author, 2005; Tarrant, 2008) the overall press system (Hill, 1994; Romano, 2003), or the transition to democracy (Hill and Sen, 2011; Williams and Rich, 2000). Despite some academic debate on broad questions of Islam and communication

(Khiabany, 2006; Mowlana, 2003) there are only a handful of Western studies of Islam and the ideology of journalism (Author, 2011; Pintak and Ginges, 2008). Although there is a growing literature on Islam and democracy in Indonesia (Tomsa, 2010; Hefner, 2000), there has been no serious study of ordinary day-to-day journalism as it is understood and practiced by Muslim professionals.

Scholars of Southeast Asia have long focused on the ties between Islam in Southeast Asia and in the Middle East (Tagliacozzo, 2009). Steamship travel and the opening of the Suez Canal in the late-19th century made the Hajj far more affordable for Muslim pilgrims, and allowed for increased intellectual contact between Muslims of the Malay Archipelago and scholars in the two most important centers of Islamic thought, Mecca and Cairo. Al-Azhar's Sheik Muhammad Abduh and his disciple Rashid Rida influenced a generation of young Muslims who studied in Cairo at the turn of the twentieth-century (Zakariah, 2007), while the Arab-language newspaper *Al-Manar* (The Lighthouse) likewise inspired the establishment of a number of short-lived newspapers in the Straits Settlements that were edited by Malayan Muslims (Roff, 1967: 59-60).

More recently, the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization that traces its history to the same reform sentiment in Islam that was propagated by Mohammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, has drawn considerable scholarly attention, but mostly in studies of the Arab world (Nada, 2012; Rubin, 2012; Wickham, 2013). Although some scholars who write about the late-twentieth century wave of piety and growth of political Islam in Southeast Asia have acknowledged the influence of the ideas of the Brotherhood and its founder Hassan al-Banna (Tomsa, 2010: 489; Liow, 2009: 8; Bubalo & Fealy, 2005: 66-74; Jomo and Cheek, 1992: 85), little is known about how the ideology is actually transmitted. My experience at both Harakah and Sabili suggests that the transmission occurs largely as the result of personal connections and professional ties.

One of the key questions that comes up with any study of Islamist political movements is how compatible is the goal of the Islamic state with democratic institutions? Is it possible to imagine an Islamic state that claims, with the Muslim Brotherhood, that "Islam is the solution" while at the same time promoting participatory rights for non-Muslims as well as basic freedom of expression and the press? A focus on Malaysia's Harakah newspaper (a political party organ) and Indonesia's Sabili magazine, which grew out of the *tarbiyah* [education] and *dakwah* [propagation] movements that created the Indonesian party PKS, can shed light on both of these issues.

Muslim scholars have argued that there is significant justification for press freedom in Islam. Kamali, for example, contends that the principles of commanding good and forbidding evil, sincere advice, consultation, independent reasoning, and the right to criticize government leaders are each premised on the recognition of freedom of expression that is basic to the Sharia (2002: 26). Although journalists interviewed in Indonesia and Malaysia frequently referred to passages from the Qur'an in talking about their day-to-day work, their knowledge of Islam is not the focus of this study, nor is the accuracy of their interpretation. Rather my concern is with how ordinary journalists anchor the meaning of their work in a context of Islam.

Inspired by the work of Herbert Gans (1979), this paper focuses on five publications in Indonesia and Malaysia, each one representing a different relationship between journalism and Islam: conservative, political, commercial, liberal, and secular. It draws on a series of semi-structured interviews with elite journalists in Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur, as

well as multiple newsroom visits and observation. Fieldwork at the five publications under consideration was supplemented by meetings with journalists from other news organizations, and by interviews with instructors of journalism in both countries. After a brief overview of how Muslim journalists in Indonesia and Malaysia talk about their work using the language of Islam, the paper examines each of the five cases. It concludes with a brief discussion of journalism, Islam, freedom of expression, pluralism, and what the rest of the world can learn from the influence of Islam on journalism in the Malay Archipelago.

Journalism and Islam

Journalists in Indonesia and Malaysia are well versed in Western notions of the principles of journalism, as well as in what makes journalism “good.” In Indonesia, the Dr. Soetomo Press Institute has been conducting trainings in the basics of journalism since its establishment in 1988. Goenawan Mohamad's Institute for the Study of the Free-Flow of Information (ISAI) has received USAID funding to assist in the development of press freedom (Author, 2005). ISAI and the Pantau Institute in Jakarta translated Kovach and Rosenstiel's *Elements of Journalism* (1997) with a grant from the US Department of State, and have conducted trainings throughout the Indonesian archipelago. In Malaysia, the government-supported Malaysian Press Institute offers basic and advanced training for journalists, and the politically independent news organization *Malaysiakini* has received multiple grants from the US Department of State to conduct trainings for citizen journalists. But when journalists in Indonesia and Malaysia speak about such basic elements of journalism as truth, balance, verification, and independence from power, what exactly do they mean?

My previous research suggests that Muslim journalists in Indonesia and Malaysia often illustrate the fundamental principles of journalism with verses from the Qur'an, or examples from the Hadith (Author, 2011). For example when asked about the relationship between his faith and his work, former Jawa Post editor Dhimam Abror began with the Qur'anic obligation to tell others the truth, even if you know only one verse.

We believe that the Prophet Mohammad says if you get from me only one verse from the Qur'an, you have an obligation to tell that verse to other people. I think that yes, dakwah [propagation] in the biggest understanding is dakwah in front of many people, but dakwah in the smallest understanding is that if you only know one verse from the Qur'an, you have an obligation to tell it to other people (interview, June 6, 2009).

The notion of balance can likewise be seen as Islamic. As in English, a synonym for balance in news is “fair,” which Indonesians translate as *adil*, or just. Not only is justice [*keadilan*] a principle theme of the Qur'an, it is also a fundamental concept in journalism. Tuchman (1972:665) has shown that the presentation of conflicting possibilities is one element of the “strategic ritual of objectivity” and this news norm is widely recognized in both Indonesia and Malaysia, where it is generally referred to (in English) as “covering both sides.” The concept of justice is so important to journalists in both Indonesia and Malaysia that elsewhere (2009: 553) I have called it the *paraideology* of journalism. As *Tempo* magazine's founding editor Goenawan Mohamad once said, “it is very difficult in Indonesia if you don't speak about justice. Indonesian history is the history of searching for justice, more than searching for freedom” (quoted in Author, 2005: 23). Toriq Hadad, a former chief editor of *Tempo*, likewise noted that “the mission of *Tempo* is justice” (ibid: 23).

Like balance, verification is often described by journalists in Islamic terms. During the past five years of studying the relationship between Islam and journalism, the Qur'anic verse

that I've heard cited most frequently is this one:

O believers, if an evildoer comes to you with some news, verify it (investigate to ascertain the truth), lest you should harm others unwittingly and then regret what you have done (Al- Hujuraat: 49:6).

As will be seen below, often journalists will cite the process of *isnad*, or verifying "the chain of transmission" of the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad as being similar to the journalistic principle of verification. IAIN lecturer Anam explicitly connects *isnad* with the process of journalistic verification in *Fikih Jurnalistik* [Journalistic Jurisprudence], noting that when a journalist hears a story he or she must ask 'Who said that? From where did you hear about this?' (2009: 57)

Kamali, of the International Islamic University of Malaysia provides numerous examples from the Qur'an and Hadith of the importance of speaking truth to power, including the Prophet's statement that "the best form of Jihad is to tell a word of truth to an oppressive ruler" (2002: 23). Indonesian journalists frequently mention this passage -- as well as the sayings of the first two Caliphs that the people should correct them if they deviated from the truth -- to support their conviction that it is wrong to support a despot, even if that despot is nominally Muslim.

Although scholars have long debated whether there is a uniquely "Islamic" form of communication (Khibany 2006 and Mowlana, 2003) for journalism faculty at Indonesia's Islamic Universities and State Islamic Institutes, as well as their counterparts at the International Islamic University of Malaysia, there is no question that for Muslims, Islamic journalism has to be different from -- and better than -- ordinary journalism.

Discussions with faculty at these universities or institutes suggest that for Muslim journalists, journalism should be inspirational and "Prophetic." Faculty at each of the Indonesian universities and institutes I visited have written small books for use in class, and many of these works make explicit the connection between journalism and Islam. One such book, used at UIN Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta and simply titled *Jurnalistik*, defines the mission of Islamic journalism as news "with an important meaning" (Daulay, Rifa'i, & Musthofa, 2006: 64). According to the authors, Islamic journalism has to be interesting, honest, and true. The facts must be credible and consistent with the mission of *amarra'rufnahimunkar*, or inviting good and forbidding evil. For the authors, the mission could not be clearer: Islamic journalism should have the characteristics of Islamic teachings. If the obligation to point out what is wrong is familiar to Western journalists, especially in watchdog journalism, the equal and opposite drive to invite good may be less so. H. M. Kolili, a lecturer of journalism at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, explained the obligation of Muslim journalists to "motivate" their readers and to lead by providing examples of "those who are good":

When we report on the Muslim people, is that we have to look for examples not only those who are bad, but also of those who are good, who have become successful, so they can become examples. With good examples, others will also want to become good. Journalistic principles and duties can't be separated from the values of the journalists themselves, because the journalists are going to influence, to motivate (interview, August 2, 2011).

While all journalists are trained to avoid libel (*fitnah*), Muslim journalists have an additional obligation to steer clear of gossip and backbiting (*ghibbah*).

At the Indonesian newspaper *Republika*, which was established in 1993 to serve the

Muslim community (Utomo, 2010), the connections between the values of good journalism and the teachings of Islam are made explicit. When Syahrudin, one of the newspaper's assistant managing editors, teaches new recruits the meaning of "Islamic journalism," he gives participants a handout on journalistic ethics and feature writing that includes a list of verses from the Qur'an that are relevant to the work of journalists. The handout concludes that journalism is a "noble" profession and something that is "very much in keeping with Islamic values":

There are many other verses of both the Qur'an and the Hadith of the Prophet that order the Islamic community to behave honestly, not to lie, to help those who are weak, not to take what doesn't belong to them, and other things like that.

Because of this, I believe that truly all writing that's done by journalists is work that is very Islamic. Whatever the media is—just as long as the writing doesn't spread lies, slander, sex, etc. (Syahrudin, 2010:10)

Even Muslim journalists in Indonesia and Malaysia who work for what might be considered secular media explain the meaning of journalism in terms that are largely Islamic. Tempo's current chief editor Arif Zulkifli, who was involved in the student missionary or dakwah movement in the 1980S, says that he does not see his current work as a journalist as a kind of dakwah. Yet despite Arif's insistence that Islamic values have nothing to do with journalism, his explanation of the significance of his work suggests otherwise.

I believe that I'm in this world to gather goodness. I have to do lots of good things, or "invite good and forbid evil" so that later, when I die, it won't all have been for nothing. I believe in life after death. I believe that each person will be held accountable. I am perhaps not a good Muslim in terms of having a ritual; I am not perfect in that regard. But I believe that what I write, what I report, what I have done for Tempo are good things that I can be proud of after I die (interview, May 28, 2009).

Differing Histories

Despite the commonalities, there are clear differences in the approaches to Islam taken by the five publications I examine from in the neighboring countries of Indonesia and Malaysia.

Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim country, but there has long been a feeling that Muslims have been marginalized despite being the numerical majority. Although there is a long tradition of an Islamic press in Indonesia, these papers have generally had small circulations and been short-lived. This makes Republika, a large, mass-marketed daily that serves the Muslim community and has thrived for more than 20 years all the more remarkable. According to Nielson, Republika is the third most-read newspaper in Indonesia. Koran Tempo, which is generally regarded to be liberal/pluralist in outlook, is tied for the position of number four. At one point, the conservative Islamic magazine Sabili had a circulation of over 400,000, but within recent years its circulation dropped drastically, and it closed at the beginning of April, 2013.

In Malaysia, the press system is large and active, but tightly controlled by the government. Media houses are either owned outright or controlled by members of the ruling coalition Barisan

National, or parties close to them. For this reason I have chosen to focus on two news organizations that are independent of the government: Harakah and Malaysiakini. Harakah newspaper and its online sister publication HarakahDaily.net are political party news

organizations that are owned by the opposition party PAS; Malaysiakini is independent, secular in orientation, and paid for by subscription.

The histories of these five publications illustrate a number of important themes, including the relationship between journalism and Islam, the difficulties of maintaining independence under an authoritarian regime, and the advantages and disadvantages of commercialization. They also suggest what the example of the press in Indonesia and Malaysia might have to offer other developing democracies in the Muslim world, especially with regard to press freedom.

Conservative Islam: Sabili

Of the five media organizations that I examine, Sabili is the only one that forthrightly embraces the term "Islamic." First established in 1984 as an underground paper, it passed from campus to campus, and among members of tarbiyah groups, who became the magazine's most loyal readers. When it was shut down by Soeharto's security apparatus in 1993, it had a circulation of about 60,000.

Like Tempo, Sabili returned to publication in 1998 as the beneficiary of reformasi, and by 2002 it claimed a weekly readership of over 400,000. It went out of business during the first week of April, 2013, a development that most former Sabili writers attribute to bad financial management (HeryNurdi, interview, March 25, 2014).

Although the magazine was spawned by the same tarbiyah or Islamic education movement that resulted in the formation of the Islamic party Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (the Prosperous Justice Party, or PKS), it was never formally affiliated with any political organization. As editor Eman Mulyatman explained to Almah in 2012, Sabili had five goals: to guard the creed and brotherhood of the umat while supporting Sharia, to serve up the teachings of Islam based on the Qur'an and Sunna, to shape a generation of young Muslims, to give birth to professional journalistic dai or preachers, and to develop the image of authoritative Islamic media (2012: 63).

Founded primarily as a publication focusing on dakwah, or Islamic propagation, upon its return to publication in 1998, Sabili focused primarily on political Islam, "typically from the viewpoint of hardliners," and support for the formal application of syariah. (Rijal: 2005: 427). When I interviewed Sabili's final chief editor Eman Mulyatman in March, 2013, he confirmed that the five main topics of the magazine were apostasy, Christianization, deviant sects, the "problem" of liberal Islam, and international Islamic issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Again according to Eman Mulyatman, Sabili reporters not only had to have journalistic capability, they also had to side with Islam (interview, March 21, 2013). All Sabili journalists were active in the Islamic movement, having either a background in Islamic student organizations such as Pelajar Islam Indonesia (PII), or the tarbiyah movement. Some graduated from Islamic institutes such as the Institute of Islamic and Arabic Sciences (LIPIA), which was established in cooperation with the governments of Indonesia and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Alimah: 2012: 64).

Sabili's perspective was clear: it saw Islam and the Muslim community as under siege from a variety of enemies, including Christians, Western governments such as the US, "Orientalists," and those who would argue that all religions are basically the same. Yet ironically, for Sabili the greatest threat to Islam seemed to come from those who were already within the gates: liberal Muslims. With the Liberal Islamic Network (JIL), Tempo

founding editor GoenawanMohamad, and the UtanKayu and Saliharaarts and cultural communities the targets of the most vitriol, Sabili popularized an acronym for what it considered to be the three most dangerous elements of liberal Islam: sepilis, or secularism, liberalism, and pluralism (Satria, 2009: 44; Ruspiyandi, 2013:40).

In 2001, Atmakusumah Astratmadja, the head of the Indonesian Press Council, described Sabili as a “pamphlet.” These words stung, and then- editor Heri Nurdi invited the senior press observer to visit the magazine for a dialogue. Atmakusumah remained firm in his convictions – pointing out that although Sabili had a right to exist and express its views, its reports weren’t in keeping with either journalistic ethics or standards. Journalists have to work hard to be accurate, fair, and not take sides, he said. “If A accuses B, the voice of B has to be heard also” (quoted in Agus, 2001). Although editor Heri Nurdi tried to incorporate “cover both sides” into the publication, content analyses consistently show that the magazine had a clear point of view (Chusjairi, 2014: 141). Heri defended Sabili by arguing the Indonesian media as a whole is not “balanced,” and that his magazine represented a point of view that would not have otherwise been heard in magazines such as Tempo (Author, 2011).

Although the overlap between Sabili journalists and the Islamist party PKS was considerable, there was never any kind of formal affiliation between the two. This stands in stark contrast to Harakah (considered below), which is the organ of the Islamic party PAS. In my view, this has accounted for Sabili’s rigidity, as well as its unwillingness to compromise with those of differing views.

Political Islam: Harakah

Officially the newsletter of the opposition Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), Harakah has a print edition that, during the period of the General Election of 2013, reached 130,000 people twice a week. The paper’s online edition ranks number sixty among all websites accessed in Malaysia. Although the editors of Harakah and Harakahdaily.net struggle to reconcile the principles of journalism with both the teachings of Islam and the needs of the political party PAS, they frequently run afoul of party leaders, who see the publications as vehicles for their own political ambitions. Harakah’s editors are responsible to a board of directors consisting of 10 party officials, one of whom is assigned to sit in on editorial meetings. Disagreements about the role of the news organizations – which often coincide with the conflict between the ulama (Islamic scholar) and professional factions of PAS -- mirror what Wickham has found to be the conflict between the more conservative old guard and the middle-generation reformers of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (2013: 58-70).

Harakah was founded in 1987 as the newspaper of the political party PAS. As Cherian George (2006: 149) has demonstrated, its position as an overtly partisan organ makes it unusual in modern journalism as well as in Malaysia, where “independence” is a commonly expressed news norm. There is of course considerable irony to this, as all mainstream news organizations in Malaysia are owned by those who are close to one faction or another of the ruling coalition.

As Harakah grew in circulation and prestige, the government responded by restricting its ability to publish. Although it initially appeared first as a weekly, it soon went bi-weekly.

On the eve of the 1999 General Election and in the wake of Anwar Ibrahim’s 1998 arrest and conviction, its circulation numbers surged to 380,000. Once the election was over, the Mahathir government struck back at Harakah, restricting the paper’s sales and

circulation to PAS members only. When Harakah's publication license expired in 2000, its new license allowed it only to come out twice-monthly rather than twice-weekly. Both of these restrictions were serious blows to the paper.

It was partly as a result of these restrictions that in 2000 Harakah jumpstarted a dormant online edition that had been used as an election tool during the 1999 General Election. The editor was Zulkifli Sulong, a jolly, bespectacled man who had been with the paper since the very beginning, and became its chief editor in 1997.² With a tiny but devoted staff, Zulkifli made HarakahDaily.net into one of Malaysia's most-read online news sources. His commitment to independent media is as firm to his commitment to the party PAS, and although he has since left HarakahDaily.net, he nevertheless insists that if the Islamic party were ever to come to power, it would remove all existing restrictions on the press with the exception of such things as pornography.

Zulkifli's counterpart at Harakah newspaper is Ahmad Lutfi, who is if anything an even more unabashed champion of press freedom. As the editor of a party organ, he is bound by party decisions on issues ranging from the implementation of Hudud to the goal of establishing an Islamic state. Although there are of course a range of opinions within the party, as an organization it is run by shura, or decisions made by the group as a whole. As one of the writers for HarakahDaily.net told me, "there is no independent thinking in PAS."

The challenges faced by these two editors have been enormous. In 2012, the news organization was "reprimanded" by the party's Youth Wing at its annual muktamar, or general meeting (<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/214239>). Claiming that the paper had sidelined party conservatives and promoted more liberal points of view, members passed a resolution demanding that the party "restructure the editorial makeup of Harakah so that it can interpret the true aspirations of PAS." Other contentious issues included whether to give space to the party's allies in Pakatan Rakyat, the alliance that consists of Anwar Ibrahim's Justice Party (PK) as well as the largely secular Democratic Action Party (DAP). Photos of Anwar Ibrahim and DAP notables such as Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng rankle with some PAS party members, who feel that the paper should focus exclusively on them (interview with Ahmad Lutfi, July 25, 2013).

Not only do Harakah's editors have to reconcile the needs of the party with their own sense of journalistic professionalism, but they also hold themselves to the higher standards of Islamic journalism. This comes out in Harakah's view of verification that parallels isnad, or the process of verifying the words and actions of the Prophet. HarakahDaily.net's then-editor Zulkifli explained the relationship between verification and isnad this way:

In Islam, there are the Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet Mohammad. And they were written years and years later. The Prophet wasn't there but the scholars had to write them exactly as he said them. So how could they check it? Isnad. Person by person by person to the prophet. Take Imam Buchori for example. He had to go 1000 miles to make it authoritative. A got it from B, B got it from C, C got it from D. And D? Nabi Mohammad. Okay, you can publish, because it is true. It is like our concept of a journalist! We have to verify the news, find out whether it is true or not. That is the first principle. I always tell my friends, my colleagues, my journalists here, I say 'Truth. The story must be true.

That's the first principle' (interview, February 20, 2013).

With a mixture of pride and ruefulness, Zulkifli pointed out that Harakah can not attack "personalities," either. When asked about the mainstream media's focus on Anwar's "sex

tape," he said: When UMNO attacks Anwar Ibrahim as the head of PKR [Pakatan Rakyat, the opposition alliance], PKR always tends to revenge. 'Attack Najib, attack Rosmah!' But in Harakah, we cannot do that. We cannot do that; we won't do that! Because with PAS, no, you are meeting the ethics of Islamic journalism. You cannot judge a person without proof. We cannot publish that kind of story (interview, February 20, 2013).

Despite their commitment to Islam, PAS, and the Islamic movement, both Zulkifly and Lutfi sometimes chafe under the restrictions of the party. While matter-of-factly referring to their publications as "party organs," both editors acknowledge that they lack the freedom of their counterparts at other media. Lutfi has, by his own count "entered and left Harakah maybe four times." He explains, "Among the reasons I left Harakah, there was a feeling of dissatisfaction with issues connected with media freedom. Not that Harakah was shackling me, not at all, but Harakah as a party organ has many regulations, guidelines, and I as a journalist cum publisher, I wanted to own my own company that could be more free."

But each time he left, he said, his connection with Harakah was still "intimate," and he always came back. "Although PAS leaders understand that I am Lutfi, who sometimes argues, sometimes complains," he said, "if they are in a situation in which it is necessary, I am still available as a choice."

"They don't think 'oh this is Ahmad Lutfi who cannot be controlled,'" he laughed. "All of the leaders of PAS still give me room, as long as I don't do anything that would hurt the party" (interview, July 2, 2013).

Commercial Islam: Republika

Established in 1993 by ICMI, Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia [the Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals], with the blessing of then-president Soeharto, Republika avoids the term "Islamic media," preferring instead to use the phrase "a newspaper serving the Islamic community." Although Republika was initially a product of the Soeharto regime, its Dialog Jumat [Friday Dialogue] section included a wide variety of discourse about Islam, often featuring features by feminists, liberals, Shiites, and foreign academics. Although the journalists who worked there were, like all other Indonesian journalists, limited in their coverage of politics, they nevertheless spoke proudly of being a voice of "Cosmopolitan Islam." Perhaps ironically, it was after the fall of Soeharto -- when Republika needed to find a new investor -- that the paper lost its critical edge and became more commercial in tone. Now catering to Indonesia's growing Muslim middle class, Republika tends to avoid controversy.

Since its founding Republika has had an explicit mission: to serve the Muslim community. With an estimated circulation of 70,000 and a readership of perhaps two to four times that number, it reaches a largely urban, middle class audience. Now published by Mahaka Media, a business venture with many media holdings, Republika divides its own history into two periods, the "political" period under ICMI, and the "business" period under Mahaka.

Chief editor Nasihin Masha likes to say that Republika has five basic principles: It is "modern, moderate, Muslim, nationalist, and populist" (interview, June 4, 2010). Republika's previous editor, Ikhwanul Kiram Mashuri, a graduate of both the modern pesantren Gontor and al-Azhar University in Cairo, is even more explicit about Republika's mission. In an in-house history of the paper, he wrote "From the first page to the last...there is nothing outside of the framework of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* [inviting good and forbidding

wrong]”(Utomo, 2010: 1).

But how are such abstract principles implemented in practical journalism? Journalists at *Republika* often speak of the need to be inspiratif, or inspiring. As managing editor Elba Damhuri explains, in practice, this means not only reporting on conditions as they are, but also giving inspiration as to how they should be, and this is what makes *Republika* different from other media. “This is what I mean by ‘substantial’ Islam,” he said. “We cannot stand by and watch our neighbors, who are poor, this is wrong. We cannot see churches burned. This is not permitted. We cannot allow Ahmadiyah communities to be burned. We work because we have something to say: tolerance. This is substantial Islam” (interview, October 15, 2012). During the ICMI years, *Republika* was the vessel for a remarkable range of Islamic discourse, especially in the pages of the weekly *Dialog Jumat* or *Friday Dialogue*. With an editorial board and council made up of some of Indonesia’s most respected Muslim scholars, including Nurcholis Madjid, Haider Bagir, and Amien Rais, the stable of editors and writers was a “who’s who” of Muslim intellectuals. Former *Republika* journalist Daru Priyambodo explained:

The kind of Islam we tried to serve with this newspaper was cosmopolitan Islam, urban Islam. We wanted an Islam that was educated, open-minded, and that understood Islamic values. And that wasn’t too quick to say that the other person is kafir[unbeliever/infidel]! But we weren’t able to succeed, because there was too much pressure from other Islamic groups (interview, January 2, 2013).

The problem with being ICMI’s newspaper was that it was almost impossible not to become politicized. According to journalists who were working for *Republika* at the time, the biggest change in the newspaper didn’t occur when Suharto was forced to resign in May 1998, but rather before. On the exact date of the Indonesian election, Muhammadiyah head Amien Rais wrote a column entitled *Kejujuran* (Honesty), in which he called upon “all of us, the people, the government, and those running the election,” to uphold honesty and justice (quoted in Utomo, 2010: 31).

Soeharto was furious, and he demanded that the chief editor step down. Again in the words of Daru, “when this happened, for those of us inside, it was hopeless” (interview, January 2, 2012).

In 1999, after B.J. Habibie was defeated in the presidential election, *Republika* foundered. Times had changed, and *Republika* needed a new investor. In 2000, Mahaka Media bought *Republika*, and changed its economic basis, if not its Islamic orientation.

Pointing out that one reason for the frequent failures of Islamic media in Indonesia was that they weren’t on a sound financial footing, Mahaka CEO Erick Thorir promised that *Republika* would continue to serve the Muslim community, but on a commercial basis. With a new emphasis on advertising and marketing, the paper would thrive.

To a large extent this has happened. The newspaper is now a successful business venture. *Republika* has dispelled the myth that Islamic media is a poor place in which to advertise. Today’s readers are from Indonesia’s urban middle class, comfortable with both their religious values and a more consumption-oriented lifestyle. Every Tuesday, for example, *Republika* publishes a special supplement called “Leisure.” The section contains interesting and readable articles on fashion, food, travel, and beauty tips. Although the supplement has a section called “Hijabbers’ Corner,” not all of the models in *Leisure* are shown wearing head scarves.

What differentiates *Leisure* from women’s sections in other newspapers is the context

of Republika itself. As Leisure editor Indira Rezkisari noted, "I'm sure our readers read the other sections, including Islam Digest and DialogJumat." Of course, she joked, "our readers don't pray all the time!" (interview June 8, 2012).

Is Republika a better, more independent newspaper now that it is run on a commercial basis than it was under the controlled press of the Suharto years? On the surface, it is obvious that as with the rest of the Indonesian press, the news that is published in Republika is much more comprehensive and hard-hitting now than it was before. The kinds of issues that the paper reports on – corruption, poverty, politics, and economics -- are done with an openness and vigor that was simply not possible during the Suharto years.

Clearly Republika's market segment has become more important, and drives story selection. As chief editor Nasihin Masha explained, "Like toothpaste," each media has its own segment, and Republika is a Muslim community newspaper. As a result, the paper focuses more on Islamic political parties and matters of interest to the Muslim community than one would find in other Indonesian newspapers. Anything deemed "pornographic," including photos of women in skimpy clothing, is completely off limits. One frequently hears the statement that Republika is a family newspaper, and something that everyone in the house should be comfortable reading. In Dialog Jumat and the other supplements that focus on religion, Republika appears to be less willing to take on controversial positions that run the risk of offending the readers. Whereas in the early 1990S, the Friday Dialogue section incorporated a wide range of opinion, including those of feminists, religious "liberals," experts on human rights, and even non- Muslims, today's sections on religion cater to the majority view.

Although today's Republika journalists point proudly to how Erick Thorir and Mahaka have taken Republika out of politics and placed it on a sound business footing, it is hard not to conclude that the newspaper has paid a price for this shift towards commercialization, now repeating the conventional wisdom rather than challenging the perceived interests of either the readers or the advertisers. It is thus possible that when the paper was subsidized by ICMI, it may have actually been freer to lead the Muslim community by providing a wide range of viewpoints.

Liberal Islam: Tempo Newspaper and Magazine

Established in 1971, Tempo is Indonesia's leading weekly news magazine. Today Tempo is known for its hard-hitting editorials and journalistic independence, but the magazine did not always enjoy such freedoms.

In 1994 Tempo was banned, ostensibly because of a cover story on the purchase of 39 used East German warships. Although the real reason the magazine was forced to close remains unknown, most analysts agree that the cover story embarrassed the regime by reporting on infighting.

Even under the repressive Soeharto regime, Tempo gave voice to liberal and progressive Muslims, publishing a stunning series of articles in the mid- 1980S on "renewal in Islamic thinking." By publicizing the efforts of liberal Muslim intellectuals to promote an Islamic society rather than an Islamic state, Tempo played a significant role in the development of what anthropologist Robert Hefner (2000: 11) has called "a Muslim public sphere." Suspicious of mass politics, these intellectuals, which most famously included NurcholishMadjid, argued that Indonesian Muslims had been sidetracked by the debate over the creation of an Islamic state. Not only was this impractical given the realities of the New

Order, but it was also not in keeping with the teachings of the Qur'an, which they argued never mandated the creation of an Islamic state. What was important, they said, was that Muslims preserve what is sacred in Islam, while distinguishing the divine from what is merely human (Hefner, 2000: 118).

Upon its return to publication in 1998, Tempowas even more outspoken in its commitment to pluralism. In 2001, the company launched a daily newspaper, Koran Tempo. Like its magazine namesake, Tempo newspaper prides itself on being a defender of the rights of religious minorities – even the Islamic religious movement Ahmadiyah, which the Indonesian government has labeled “deviant.” Significantly, 20 of the new reporters whom founding chief editor MalelaMahagasari hired when the paper was founded were from Republika, and many say that they brought Islam cosmopolitanism with them.

Although Malelais uncomfortable with the term “Islamic” – and most Indonesians would hardly view Tempo as “Islamic” media -- approximately 80% of Tempo’s editorial staff is Muslim. As Malela says, “we do not wave the flag of Islam.” Yet despite this commitment to pluralism, many Tempo journalists are profoundly aware of the relationship between their work and their faith. As national editor Budi Setiyarso (who previously worked at Republika) explained, “yes, I follow the ritual of religion closely, and yes, maybe I see work as ibadah, or worship.

I send my children to an Islamic school. My wife also wears a kerudung. And many of the wives of Tempo journalists wear kerudung. I think that maybe it can be understood this way: work can be seen as ibadah, or worship; to provide for my family, to keep up the ritual of religion and things like that. If I work for Tempo, it doesn't lessen that intent. What is important is that the road is right. Maybe in this way this becomes what you call Islam substantif. Maybe it is a kind of guidance -- I cannot do this, I cannot do that-- but by coincidence these guidelines are also in keeping with the rules of the company. I cannot receive a bribe. Things like that. It is the same road (interview, June 7, 2013).

Most of the Tempo journalists with whom I've spoken are clear not only about substantial Islam, but also about founding editor Goenawan Mohamad's role in promoting this way of thinking. Zaim Uchrowi, for example, a former Tempo journalist and one of the founding editors of the newspaper Berita Buana that was later absorbed into Republika explained:

For me...[I] don't believe too much in Islam symbols. I believe in Islamic values. [nilai]. So when we talk about Islamic press, for us, the press is the press. Media is media. Not Islamic media and non-Islamic media, no. Media is media. It is my view...When I joined Tempo [in 1983] my views were very much in keeping with the slogan of Tempo in 1971, when it was founded. GoenawanMohamad wrote in the very first issue of Tempo that truth and un-truth are not monopolized by any one side. Therefore the method of thinking of Tempo was very strong: We didn't defend a group, we defended truth. This was our way of thinking (interview, May 14, 2013).

The idea of defending the truth rather than a particular group distinguishes Tempo from media that calls itself “Islamic.” Yet for the journalists who work at Tempo and who think about such matters, nothing could be more in keeping with the teachings of Islam.

Muslim journalists in a secular publication: Malaysia kini

The independent online news portal Malaysiakini is not “Islamic.” Its editor, Steven Gan, is very clear that his publication is “secular,” a word that one seldom hears in a region in

which the majority of the population is Muslim. Despite this, approximately one-third of Malaysiakini's editorial staff is Muslim, and many are very devout. Close observation of pious Muslims working in a secular organization not only provides insight into understanding of the everyday relationship between journalism and Islam, but also suggests the challenges of maintaining a truly plural workforce in a culture in which one's ethnicity (Malay, Indian, Chinese) generally corresponds with a particular religious identity.

Malaysiakini was launched in November 1999, less than one year after the arrest of former deputy prime minister and leading opposition figure Anwar Ibrahim (Author, 2009, George, 2006). The news portal was the creation of Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran, two young journalists who got their start in print journalism at the Kuala Lumpur newspaper *The Sun*. Believing that political control had corrupted the values of good journalism in the mainstream media, they wanted to bring independent news and in-depth analysis to the Internet.

Since its founding, Malaysiakini's editorial desk has been consistently balanced between Malaysia's three ethnic groups. What makes Malaysiakini different from other news organizations is not this diversity per se, but rather the effort to deal directly with "sensitive" issues such as ethnicity, race, and religion within an environment of mutual respect. As editor-in-chief Steven Gan said,

I think it is very difficult for Malaysians to think outside their own ethnic identification. . . [It's apparent] when you fill out a form, in everything that you do. I know that people will argue that we shouldn't emphasize race in our reports, but if we try to report in a way that race doesn't matter, that is dishonest. Even when we hire people we think about how we are going to attain a balance. It's a conscious effort (interview, March 24, 2008).

Sometimes covering controversial topics such as the New Economic Policy (which gives economic privileges to ethnic Malays), or the issue of religious apostasy makes Muslims at Malaysiakini feel uncomfortable. For example Gan described a conversation he once had with a Malay reporter who preferred not to write about issues related to Islam. Gan recalls having told him, 'Look, you are a journalist. There is no way out. You have to do these stories.'

Nagata has called Malaysian Islam "unavoidably political" (2010: 27). Although the rights of different categories of citizens are enshrined in Article 3 of the Constitution, the official religion of Malaysia is Islam, and the state has the last word on matters of religion. Because Malays are Muslim by definition and thus required to adhere to Sharia, in practice freedom of religion for Malays is limited to choices within Islam.

This concentration of religious authority in the hands of state officials was the direct result of colonial rule. Emulating British administrative structures, the states created a system of Islamic courts and legal procedures, along with the bureaucracy that was necessary to run them (Roff, 1967: 72). Laws passed after independence reinforced this administrative machinery. State departments of religion were given responsibility for managing day-to-day administration of Islamic matters, and the "putative right to determine and convey what it meant to be a good and sufficient Muslim" (Roff, 2009: 103).

Whether or not most Malaysians are aware of this history, they are acutely aware of the states' power to regulate Muslim affairs and to determine who is and who is not a good Muslim. As Malaysiakini journalist Aidila Razak explained, "the reason why people say 'oh, I'm not an expert [on Islam]' goes back to the fact that there's one Islam and nothing else is accepted. So because of that it is sensitive, because you're so scared to say something

wrong” (interview, August 17, 2010). ShufiyanShukor, Malaysiakini’s senior video editor, agreed, saying that only the ulama are authorized to speak about religion. “So I cannot say something because I am not an ulama. You have to be approved. If you think you have gone through a religious education in the top university in India or Cairo, if you are not approved by this council of ulama and religious department, you cannot even teach religion” (interview, August 18, 2010).

As Kahn (2006: xii) has argued, at the time of independence, a single view of “Malayness” came to dominate Malaysia, and more cosmopolitan alternatives lost out. As I’ve noted elsewhere (Author, 2014), this politicizing of Islam has consequences even in a newsroom as avowedly pluralistic and secular as Malaysiakini, in which journalists of all faiths attempt to create a space of mutual respect and understanding.

Hazlan Zakaria, a thoughtful writer and journalist in his early 30s notes that Muslims in Malaysia have been encouraged by the government to fear non-Muslims, and vice-versa. “Here, there is this feeling that the government is trying to orchestrate Muslims against non-Muslims and Malays against non-Malays, which is creating this kind of so-called invisible backlash” (interview, August 18, 2010).

A year ago, Hazlan left Malaysiakini to join a weekly publication called The Ant. He remains firm in his convictions that Muslim journalists who work for so-called secular media can be mindful of their religious obligations. “We are taught that every job we do is a form of ibadah, a form of worship,” he concluded. “That is why we begin everything we do in God’s name, and try to do it the best we can” (interview, June 23, 2012).

Discussion: Journalism, Islam, Democracy

Exactly what is the relationship between journalism and Islam? By now it should be clear that there is no agreement. Whereas Sabili called itself “Islamic” and Harakah is the voice of an Islamic party, there are also journalists at Tempo and Malaysiakini who are strict in their adherence to Islamic ritual and view their work as journalists within an Islamic context. So who gets to define which media and approaches to journalism are “Islamic”?

In some ways, these issues are the most clear-cut at Republika, which aims to serve ALL of Indonesia’s Muslims. This, in the words of Republika’s managing editor Elba Damhuri, poses a “dilemma,” as nobody agrees on what Islam should be. Even a simple question such as when does the fasting month of Ramadan end can be problematic, as Indonesia’s two largest religious organizations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), frequently celebrate Eid on different days. As another Republika editor explained, one definition of tolerance is “how to live peacefully, not only between religions but also between NU and Muhammadiyah.”

Assistant managing editor Heri Ruslan, who is also the former editor of Republika Online (ROL) likewise explains that there are many different mazhab or schools in Indonesian Islam, and that each one thinks it is right. “So no matter what ROL includes, someone is angry,” he said. “They complain via Twitter and Facebook, and urge others to stop subscribing” (interview, December 28, 2012).

As the 2010 Arab Spring witnessed numerous Muslim nations struggling to throw off the chains of authoritarianism, many commentators noted that Indonesia has much to teach the world about Islam and democracy, and perhaps one of the most important of these lessons is that the state should not be involved in enforcing matters of faith. Since its founding, devout Muslims at Tempo magazine have argued that support for Islamic

values should not equal blind allegiance to particular groups of Muslims.

Some months ago, an Indonesian editor friend wrote and asked what I thought of Tempo, which had “gone after the head of the PKS party [for taking a bribe] so hard that a lot of chat groups are calling it ‘un-Islamic.’” In response, I quoted something that had once been explained to me by Syu’bah Asa, a long-time journalist at Tempo who had also been an editor of the Islamic magazine Panji Masyarakat. As Syu’bah put it, there is a difference between defending Islamic organizations and Islamic values.

“For me, Islamic organizations are not as important as Islamic values,” he said. “Under Soeharto, Muslims had been treated unjustly. But if Muslims treat others unjustly, we criticize them, too” (interview, August 2, 2000).

As this paper has shown, there are many “Islamic” approaches to journalism in Indonesia and Malaysia, ranging from the conspiratorial and market-driven to the political, inclusive, and even so-called secular. Some of the most interesting expressions of the relationship between the values of journalism and the teachings of Islam originate with journalists who work at news organizations that are not generally considered to be Islamic. Although religious conservatives may not define these publications as “Islamic,” many of the Muslim journalists who work there are highly conscious of the significance of their work as part of their everyday worship -- and quietly do it as a means of being *rahmat-e-alam*, or “a blessing to all mankind” (interview, Elik Susanto, April 23, 2013.)

Despite the popular misconceptions about journalism and Islam – even within majority Muslim countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia – Muslim journalists take a variety of approaches to their work. Factors such as history, market niche, and the role of government authorities are important, but so are the different ways in which Muslim journalists themselves understand the meaning of their work within a context of Islam. The idea that Islam has to equal restrictions on press freedom – or worse – is simply inaccurate, and the world would do well to take note of the varieties of independent journalism that exist in the majority Muslim countries of Indonesia and Malaysia.

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