

# **Wearing Veil in Indonesia Public Schools: Religious awareness or Political Contest**

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**Abstract;** This article discusses the reason of wearing veil among Indonesian Students in public schools. It is found that that veil in public schools has three different elements. First of all, veil is identified as the religious awareness among the students. It symbolizes the religious commitment and the strength of local values. The proliferation of veiled women indicated the Islamic movement in Indonesia. Secondly, veil may be identified as the medium of maintaining political interest. The policy of making veil compulsory for students and as school uniform can ignore the pluralism in Indonesia. This policy also leads to make veil as a symbolic than substantive teaching. Finally, veil in public schools should be considered as the social control for the female students in the public sphere. It does not merely focus on the symbolic sphere but it extends to develop the achievement of students.

**Keywords;** Public Schools, Religious Awareness, Political Contest, Symbolic Sphere

## **Introduction**

The phenomena of wearing veil (in Arabic, *hijab*; in Indonesia, *jilbab*) is becoming trend among Muslim women community in Makassar, South Sulawesi. A population of women wearing veil increase more and more in the past ten years. Veil does not merely belong to Islamic university students or pious students in Islamic boarding school, but it extend to various elements in the Muslim women community, such as, civil servant, bank teller, politician, or waiting staffs in

shopping centers. Although in the popular Western imagination, veiling is often identified as traditionalist politics and anti-modernity, veil poses impression as a symbol of modernity in recent years, especially in my own area, Makassar, South Sulawesi.

This trend is getting hot issue in mass media when one region in Makassar called Sinjai regency which made veil compulsory as school uniform for girls. The uniform consists of the *jilbab*, a long skirt and the *baju kurung* or long sleeved tunic. This sort of policy attracts intense discussions among the intellectuals and the educators community. Some are the opinion that this kind of policy is a movement towards religious awareness among the students and will lead to have well-behaved students. However, others believed that this policy is merely a political contest. The policy makers are believed to treat religious symbols on behalf of political interests. It is thought that they are practicing religious teaching in running government to attract good image among society that further maintain their political power. For this reason, I will argue veil in public schools either a religious awareness or political contest. Initially, the writer will explore veil presented on the literature. Afterwards, I am going to discuss two different notions on veil.

### **Veil: A Glimpse at the Literature**

A number of literatures presented the meaning of veil. For example, as contended by Zainah (1987), *jilbab* is identified as a term which commonly used in Indonesia indicating the veil. This term derived from *Arabic word*. Although the term *jilbab* used in Indonesia but some people believe that it is not appropriate because based on the Koran, the term *hijab* or *bigab* is preferable. This term is also commonly used in the Middle

East as well as in Malaysia to refer to Islamic clothing. Other terms used in Indonesia describing veil are *pakaian muslim* or *busana muslimah* (Islamic clothing).<sup>1</sup> Brenner (1996) use the term “veil” which refers to the practice in which a women covers her head (usually also covering her hair and neck although rarely her face and all of her body except her hands. Thus, in accordance with Brenner (1996), the term veil is a convenient shorthand for “women’s Islamic clothing).<sup>2</sup>

Another term indicating veil is *chador*. As viewed by Smith-Heifner (2007), a small but striking number of women have adopted chador (in Indonesia: *cadar*). Chador is a full-length garb consisting of a long, drably colored, and shapeless robe complemented by socks and sometimes even gloves. This sort of veil is designed to cover not only the hair, ears, and neck but also the face, thus the only a women’s eyes are visible to the publics. It is thought that women wearing this kind of veil symbolizes the radical women and extremists in terms of religious thought. Smith-Heifner goes on to state that *kerudung* is another form of veil used in Indonesia. *Kerudung* is typically made from a soft, translucent fabric (chiffon, silk, or light cotton batik). It is draped over the hair or over a close-fitting hat, with the ends tied or casually draped over the shoulders. Part of women’s neck and hair may remain visible. This is generally popular for the middle aged women.<sup>3</sup>

In the context of Arab, El Gwindi (1999) noted that Arab dress can be distinguished in material terms on the basis of two usages. Firstly, dress which cover the head and the hair (such as *kbimar*), or wrap the body (such as *milayah*, *‘aba* or *izar*).

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<sup>1</sup>A . Zainah, *Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia: Dakwah Among the Students* (Malaysia: Petaling Jaya, 1987).

<sup>2</sup>S. Brenner, “Reconstructing Self and Society: Javanese Muslim Women and The Veil, *American Ethnologist*. 23. 4. (11) 1987.: 673-687.

<sup>3</sup>NJ Smith Heifner, “Javanese Women and The Veil in Post Suharto Indonesia”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 66. 2 (5) 2007: 389-420.

Secondly, dress used to cover the face partially or completely (such as *burqu'*, *qina* or *litma*). These types of dress are commonly used by women from different level.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from different forms of veil or Islamic clothing, I argue that veil is one way to cover *aurat* among the Moslem women. The term *aurat* itself has a number of different meanings. For instance, *aurat* is defined as the genital area of the body that must be covered, women's bodies, women's voices and generally parts of the body that are shameful and must be concealed. In the Indonesian context, as Smith-Heifner (2007) view that most women merely cover their body when doing prayer, but day to day dress, women do not committed to cover their *aurat*. However, a number of Indonesian women who strictly understand their religion, wear socks closed shoes and, occasionally, even gloves. The last phenomena is frequently found in many State Universities in Makassar but it rarely happened in Islamic State Universities.<sup>5</sup>

### The Islamic Movement in Indonesia

Brenner (1996) pointed out that veiling movement should be understood within the social and political context of contemporary Indonesian Muslim. Although Indonesia is not Islamic state, but a vast majority of population is Moslem (Luken-Bull, 2001). According to the Indonesian Central Statistics Bureau 2000, a number of Moslem in Indonesia

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<sup>4</sup>A. El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*, (New York: Oxford, 1999).

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*,

account for 88.2 % of the population. From this point, Moslem community has more opportunities to enhance their practical in Islam including wearing veil. Although the state does not officially promote Islam over other religions, it has accommodated Islamic interests by supporting a wide variety of Islamic institutions.<sup>6</sup>

Since the Indonesia New order collapsed in 1996, the political context in Indonesia at the same time has changed. If the new order tend to restrict the freedom of practical religious teaching including banning on veiling in public schools which was eventually overturned after much protest, reformation era (called for after New order) then accommodate more Islamic practical, for example, building Islamic association in university, and wearing veil with different forms.

Islamic movement has been closely linked to concept of democracy that occurred in Indonesia. It has provided students and other a language for articulating a variety of aspirations which is frequently found in the New Order. As acknowledged by Brenner (1996), Islamic movement presented more opportunities to the society to learn about contemporary Islam through reading books and magazines, and through participating in prayer meetings, retreats, and discussion groups. It is because of the direct contact between Islamic movement in Indonesia and similar movement in Muslim world, such as Iran. Indonesia can see themselves as part of vast extended community and powerful international movement through television, and print media. Anderson (1991) address that Islamic movement in Indonesia offers its followers an alternative modernity instead of encouraging a retreat to older Indonesian lifestyles, which few people see as a realistic in the present era. He describes Moslem community in Indonesia as “imagined community”.

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<sup>6</sup>R.W. Hefner, “Islam, State, and Civil Society: ICMI and The Struggle for the Indonesian Middle Class,” *Indonesia*, 5 (6) 1993. 1-35.

Getting more freedom to wear veil in Indonesia is another sort of Islamic movement. As presented by Hefner (1993), in 1990, the government at that time ban on wearing veil in public schools which lead to protest among the students. This policy still influence in some occasions for this present. A number of schools reject photograph with veil, such as identity card.

Based on explanation above, I believe that Islamic movement in Indonesia has been spread in different part of Indonesia, including Eastern part Indonesia, such as Makassar, South Sulawesi. In this sense, phenomena of wearing veil in public schools is one example of Islamic movement is resulted in a long history of Indonesia. The problem then emerge is not about banning veil in schools but veil is becoming a compulsory uniform in some certain public schools in Makassar. From this point of view, I will further explore the function of veil whether a religious awareness or political contest.

### **Veil: Religious Awareness**

Although veil is identified as anti-government in the New order, the willing of women to wear veil is growing more and more (Smith-Heifner, 2007). It indicated on Smith-Heifner's research on Java how students wearing veil in Gajah Mada University increase in terms of the numbers. Veil is seen as the commitment to religious practice and as result of a deepening religious understanding which lead to becoming aware of their religious responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> As contended by Lyn (2006), veil, in general, is seen as public statement and symbol of the wearer's devotion to Islam. Students gradually believe that covering their *aurat* is one principal in Islamic teaching. Lyn

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<sup>7</sup>See R.W. Hefner, *loc. cit.*,

(2006) noted that many students decide to wear veil because veil on them has a disciplining function to be well-behaved. This is because the veil restricts neck mobility and head movement, it constantly makes the wearer aware of her own body. Wearing veil encourages students to be good, to be more careful, more polite and respectful. It is thought that veil imposes discipline in different occasions. Wearing veil is an expression of their individual, interior faith, devotion and submission to Islam.<sup>8</sup>

Proliferation of veiled women also indicated as an attempt to against concept of materialism which colored human life. Materialism is believed as the factor bothering and ignoring human being from religious values. Those who are loyal to culture and religious values assume that materialism lead to change the way of life among their children into hedonistic and being a member of permissive society. Moreover, the negative influence of Western media and inadequate religious commitment on one hand and undesirable practices such as wearing tight clothing and showing one's *aurat*, free sex, drug abuse and criminal behavior are two important factors regarding moral of students. For this reason, a number of parents are worry about their children and thus bring them into religious values, for example, bringing into the Islamic Boarding School or in the school based on religion which is deliberately spread in Indonesia. This solution is aimed at strengthening religious commitment and building a moral fortress against negative incursions of the West (Lyn, 2006). This sort of awareness is another reason of deciding to wear veil on women in my own country.

Furthermore, as noted by Brenner (1996), the movement to wear veil is a shift paradigm on the women. They

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<sup>8</sup>Lyn Parker, "Islamic Veiling: Religious Devotio and Sexual Morality among Minangkabau Adolescent Girls in Sumater", *Nias Nytt*, 7,2 (7) 2006; 7

believed that wearing veil can strengthen Islamic ideology which in turn to create self conscious and move toward personal and social change. Awareness, as viewed by Brenner (1996), is a central motive of veiled women and of the Islamic movement broadly. Awareness is not simply the attainment of religious values. But it extend to the responsibilities for their own actions in which they are fully accountable in this world and thereby recognizes the necessity of choosing her own path in life. In other words, women believe that they will then directly responsible to the God questions in hereafter. In addition, as presented by Lyn (2006), some women consider to wear veil is based on sexuality and gender relations. Through wearing veil, women can protect themselves from the male gaze, unwanted male advances and from sexual harassment.

Based on the illustration above, it is apparently presented that religious awareness is mainly reason to wear veil among the women in Indonesia. Veiled women are not limited to middle aged women but it extend to different element of women, including students in public schools. The awareness does not merely come from students themselves but also derived from their parents. Parents are thought that may influence social behavior of the students in more complex society. As shown above, most students explicitly linked the decline in morals to the negative influence of the West and globalization and pose causal link between lack of parental attention. From this point of view, parental attention and self-conscious are two main elements in the awareness in terms of wearing veil.

### **Veil: A Political Contest**

It is widely believed that wearing veil is a good indicator for strengthening and building religious commitment among Moslem women. However, the policy of one regency in



Makassar called Sinjai to make veil compulsory and as school uniform in public schools attract controversy among the intellectuals and the educators. Some people view that wearing veil is a personal matter that cannot be intervened by government. This sort of critique is relevant with Fatima (1991) who argue that being Moslem for this present does not merely refer to the individual choice or personal option. Being Muslim is defined as belonging to theocratic state. It relates to a civil matter, a national identity, a passport, and a family code of public rights. Fatima (1991) said that this is a confusion between Islam as a belief and as a personal choice.<sup>9</sup>

Veil is not a national identity which symbolizes every citizen in Indonesia. It is merely a personal choice which owned by certain religion. For this reason, some assume that the policy is not appropriately acceptable in Indonesia. They argue that this sort of policy is aimed at maintaining political power on certain government. In other word, it is strongly associated with the political interests.

In relation to the government system in Indonesia where the leader directly elected from grassroots, this policy may create good image for the government who maintain religious values and local values in order to re-elected in the coming election. It is a good strategy for government due to the culture of Makassaries society concerned on religious issues. As a result, religion in this sense is regarded as the weapon to reach the political interests. This is irrelevant to the notion of Bryan (1983) who argue that religion should be deliberately considered as the social control and a primary institution.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite; A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Right in Islam*. (Newyork: Addison-Wesley Public Company, 1991).

<sup>10</sup>B. R. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1983).

The spread of implementing syariah bill in some regencies in Makassar generate debate on the mass media. The issue covers the intervention of government into religious matters as well as the separation between state and religion is also drawn on this issue. Veil in public schools is a personal choice and resulted in ignoring pluralism, especially for non-Moslem students. They have less opportunity to enter public schools due to this policy. Consequently, public schools and private schools which in turn dissociate in terms of exchange program. Interestingly, most achieved students coming from private school rather than public schools.

As contended by Qodary (2003), the policy of making veil as a compulsory in public schools is more generated from the political elite. It does not represented a whole population. That's why, not everyone agree with the implementing this bill. Some are of the opinion that the government should emphasize on the important things of education, for example, the reform of curriculum, the upgraded of facilities, and qualification of teachers rather than pay more attention to the veil as merely the symbol of religious practical.<sup>11</sup>

Another point that might be considered is the policy of implementing *syariah* bill, such as the compulsory of wearing veil in public schools, wearing Islamic clothes for the civil servant on Friday working hour, or reciting Koran for thirty minutes before starting to work, is more symbolic than substantive. It is frequently happened in many areas in Indonesia which implementing *syariah* bill.

## Conclusion

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<sup>11</sup>M Qodary, "Dibutuhkan Syariat Islam Non Kosmetik", *JCRP Fokus*, 2007.

Based on the explanation above, I come to conclude that veil in public schools has three different elements. First of all, veil is identified as the religious awareness among the students. It symbolizes the religious commitment and the strength of local values. The proliferation of veiled women indicated the Islamic movement in Indonesia. Students gradually realize the importance of wearing veil, especially in public sphere and view that covering *aurat* is such a compulsory on religious teaching. They believe that wearing veil can protect them from the male gaze and from sexual harassment.

Secondly, veil may be identified as the medium of maintaining political interest. The policy of making veil compulsory for students and as school uniform can ignore the pluralism in Indonesia. This policy also leads to make veil as a symbolic than substantive teaching.

Finally, veil in public schools should be considered as the social control for the female students in the public sphere. It does not merely focus on the symbolic sphere but it extends to develop the achievement of students. This is the basic aim of religion which can preserve social cohesion. Through implementing veil as a compulsory eventually can color Islam as a peaceful religion and appreciate the pluralism.

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