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RELIGION AND ELECTION: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF TWO CALEG USTADZ

Ahmad Muhajir

Universitas Islam Negeri Antasari
 Jalan Ahmad Yani Km. 4.5 Banjarmasin, Kalimantan Selatan

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Abstract: In the literature, of many practices that have been analysed in relation to religion, vote buying has received little attention. The existing work tend to normatively analyse religious texts that the authors see fit to vote buying and come up with the expected verdict, namely, Islam prohibits the practice. But there is another important question of whether religious people actually follow the religious guidance on vote buying. This paper is part of a series of empirical studies on the behaviour of religious candidates in an election where vote buying was rampant. Through the case of two Islamic teachers who ran as legislative candidates (*caleg ustadz*), I show that religion does not necessarily inspire a clean politics. Nevertheless, their case also indicates that religion still functions as a prism to view the election results.

Abstrak: Di dalam literatur, dari sekian banyak praktik yang telah dianalisis dalam kaitannya dengan agama, praktik jual-beli suara dalam pemilu kurang mendapat perhatian. Karya-karya yang ada cenderung secara normatif menganalisis teks-teks agama yang dianggap penulisnya tepat untuk politik uang dan menghasilkan kesimpulan yang telah dapat ditebak sebelumnya, yaitu Islam melarang praktik tersebut. Namun ada pertanyaan penting lainnya, yakni apakah umat beragama benar-benar mengikuti tuntunan agama dalam urusan jual-beli suara dalam pemilu. Tulisan ini merupakan bagian dari rangkaian studi empiris tentang perilaku caleg religius di dalam konteks pemilu yang sarat politik uang. Melalui kasus dua ustadz yang maju sebagai calon legislatif (*caleg*), saya menunjukkan bahwa agama tidak serta merta menginspirasi politik yang bersih. Namun demikian, agama tampaknya masih berfungsi sebagai teropong untuk memahami hasil pemilu.



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Author's Correspondence: amuhaj82@gmail.com

A. Introduction

There is a long tradition to study religion and moral actions.¹ Such studies commonly identify particular behaviour that religion either encourages or discourages and analyse if people of that faith show the behaviour. In the literature, of many practices that have been analysed in relation to religion, vote buying has received little attention.² The existing work tend to normatively analyse religious texts that the authors see fit to vote buying and come up with the expected verdict, namely, Islam prohibits the practice.³ Such academic endeavor, while has valid basis, does not take us far enough, especially because Islamic scholars and organisations have already clarified the status of vote buying in Islam through various *fatwa*.⁴ Only when a *fatwa* recommends a rather unusual course of action does our understanding improves about the issue from a religious viewpoint.⁵ But more importantly, there is another crucial question of whether religious people actually follow the religious guidance on vote buying. This empirical question needs empirical answers. This paper is part of a series of empirical studies on the behaviour of religious candidates in an election where vote buying was rampant. Elsewhere, I have discussed how religion might have inspired a rejection of vote buying by a few religious candidates.⁶ Here,

¹Examples include G. W. Allport, and J. M. Ross, "Personal Religious Orientation and Prejudice," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 5 (1967), T. David Evans et al., "Religion and Crime Reexamined: The Impact of Religion, Secular Controls, and Social Ecology on Adult Criminality," *Criminology* 33, no. 2 (1995), Matthew R. Bennett, and Christopher J. Einolf, "Religion, Altruism, and Helping Strangers: A Multilevel Analysis of 126 Countries," *Journal for Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 2 (2017).

²A rare example is Gandung Ismanto, and Idris Thaha, "Banten: Islamic Parties, Networks and Patronage," in *Electoral Dynamics in Indonesia: Money Politics, Patronage and Clientelism at the Grassroots*, ed. Edward Aspinall and Mada Sukmajati (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016).

³M Hasbi Umar, "Hukum Menjual Hak Suara pada Pemilu pada dalam Perspektif *Fiqh Siyâsi*," *Al-'Adalah* XII, no. 2 (2014), Hepi Reza Zen, "Politik Uang dalam Pandangan Hukum Positif dan Syariah," *Al-'Adalah* XII, no. 3 (2015), Harun Al-Rasyid, *Fikih Korupsi: Analisis Politik Uang di Indonesia dalam Perspektif Maqâshid Al-Syarī'ah* (Indonesia: Kencana, 2016).

⁴Bilal Ramadhan, "MUI Fatwa Haram Politik Uang," *Republika* (Indonesia), 19 March, 2014, accessed 6 March 2016, <http://www.republika.co.id/berita/nasional/politik/14/03/19/n2olb8-mui-fatwa-haram-politik-uang>, Muhammadiyah, "Hukum Politik Uang Pilkada," [muhammadiyah.or.id](http://m.muhammadiyah.or.id) 26 June 2018, accessed 26 April, 2019, <http://m.muhammadiyah.or.id/id/news-14299-detail-hukum-politik-uang-pilkada.html>, P.B.N.U., *Hasil Keputusan Munas Alim Ulama dan Konbes N.U.: 14-17 September 2012*, ed. Khatibul Umam Wiranu and Ulil Abshar Hadrawy (Jakarta, Indonesia: LTN PBNU, 2012), 69-72.

⁵For example, Ustadz Abdul Somad (UAS), once a very popular preacher in Indonesia, recommends voters to take the money that political candidates offer them, although he does not stop there. For a discussion of his fatwa, see Ahmad Muhajir, "Baliho Tolak Politik Uang & Fatwa UAS," www.alif.id, 15 Juni 2021, accessed 18 September 2021, <https://alif.id/read/amr/baliho-tolak-politik-uang-fatwa-uas-b238398p/>.

⁶Ahmad Muhajir, "South Kalimantan: Islamic Party Candidates Who Refuse to Buy the Votes," in *Electoral Dynamics in Indonesia: Money Politics, Patronage and Clientelism at the Grassroots*, ed. Edward Aspinall and Mada Sukmajati (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016).

I elaborate the opposite practice, where candidates with strong religious backgrounds involved in vote buying. Nevertheless, religion still appeared in their behaviour beyond electioneering.

B. Research method and argument

This paper will focus on the case of two candidates-cum-Islamic teachers (*ustadz*) who had offered material inducement for individual voters and cheated on competitors. I have interviewed them in-depth during my field research in 2014 in South Kalimantan and East Java on a condition that I will conceal their true identities in my research report. Their cases show that religion does not necessarily inspire a clean politics, even among those who are traditionally seen as religious men. Moreover, the candidates let religious teachings guiding their minds in some other aspects related to election: one candidate thought that his spirituality had played an important role in his gaining of a parliamentary seat, while another turned to religious teachings to ease the pain of loss.

C. Discussion

The first candidate is a young *ustadz*, whom we will call Rafa, running for a nationalist party, Gerindra. An activist of an Islamic student organisation, Pergerakan Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia (PMII), he was recruited to Gerindra through its Islamic wing, Gerakan Muslim Indonesia Raya (Gemira). Prior to the April legislative election, he has taught for several years in a large Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) in Banjarbaru, South Kalimantan. He had both legitimate and illicit methods of campaigning and won the last seat contested in his constituency, which was in the neighbouring district of his *pesantren*. The following ethnography will show that while being spiritual and religiously obedient, Rafa still did a morally questionable tactic to win over his rivals. But first, I will discuss his educational background and how it influenced Rafa's own understanding on his electoral success.

Educational background

Rafa had an Islamic education for seven years in the same *pesantren* he later worked as a teacher. There, he learnt Arabic language and Islamic sciences, such as Islamic theology (*Tauhid*), Islamic law (*Fiqh*), Sufism (*Tasawwuf*), Qur'anic exegeses (*Tafsir*) and Hadith. The *pesantren* combined teaching and observance of Islamic basic tenets and thus, as part of the learning, Rafa must prayed five times a day in congregation and stayed in devotions between two evening prayers (*Magrib* and *Isya*). Rafa was also taught to observe, not only the compulsory fasting in

Ramadan, but also the recommended ones, for example, on the tenth of *Muharram* (the first month in Islamic calendar), the fifteenth of *Sya'ban* (the eighth month), and the ninth of *Dzulhijjah* (the twelfth month). Moreover, the *pesantren* teachers introduced plenty sets of holy sentences and prayers for students to recite daily, which the students called *wiridan* or *bacaan*. They told the students that gaining 'blessed' knowledge (*ilmu yang berkah*) was intimately associated with avoidance of sins, and therefore, not only did the students have to study seriously, they also needed to consistently clean their acts. The *wiridan* in particular, was believed to help cultivating a clean and calm heart that is worthy of receiving some of God's knowledge. This traditionalist Islamic school also encouraged students to regularly make pilgrimage to the grave of the founder, the students' own parents and grandparents, and to any holy or revered persons. The link between the living and dead, so Rafa was taught, is established through prayers. As we will see later, many of these lessons coloured Rafa's thinking in his attempt to win a parliamentary seat.

During his school time, Rafa was quite active in student extra-curricular activities and headed one student dormitory for about three years, longer than many of his peers. He showed confidence in social interactions, despite his stammer, and teased his friends a lot more than being an object of teasing. Some of his friends remember him as bold but in general Rafa was good at making friends. As an *ustadz*, Rafa was heavily involved in one important change for his *pesantren*, namely in the application of a new method of learning Arabic grammar. Because of this, his name is recognised by more senior teachers. Rafa also went to college to get his bachelor degree in Islamic education (*Tarbiyah*) a few years after he became an *ustadz*, during which period he got involved in PMII network. This helped develop his social skills into a political one. Soon, he became increasingly active in political events, both inside his *pesantren* and in student organisation. Whenever his *pesantren* held an election for the top head of school, he always took side and mobilised support for particular candidates. In the process, Rafa produced allies and foes among the teachers. Later, his office adversaries successfully forced the *pesantren* leadership to kick him out when he was busy campaigning for his legislative bid. Within student organisation, Rafa was once nominated to lead the provincial branch of PMII although failed. Rafa was thus, grew political and had previous experiences of electioneering before he ran as a *caleg* (candidate of MP).

Candidacy and electoral campaign

Rafa's entrance to Gerindra was facilitated by his involvement in establishing district branches of Gemira in South Kalimantan as the party prepared for the 2014 election. It was no less than the general chairperson of Gemira, Habib Mahdy Alatas, himself who contacted him for this task. 'My PMII friends in Jakarta suggested Habib Mahdi to see me to mobilise my network and setup branches of Gemira in (districts of) South Kalimantan, about half a year before the election', said Rafa explaining the background story.⁷ Having successfully done the task, Rafa was appointed the provincial secretary of this organisation, and later on, Gerindra took him and some other Gemira officials as candidates for district DPRD. Moreover, Gerindra presented a quicker way to get into party candidate lists. United Development Party (PPP), which is a natural party choice for PMII activists in South Kalimantan, was not desirable for Rafa primarily because a senior politician who had prevented him from heading PMII of South Kalimantan was there. By gaining a parliamentary seat through Gerindra, Rafa proves that a PMII activist of the province *can* have a political career outside the channels provided by that political patron.

Gerindra assigned Rafa to compete in one constituency that covered four sub-districts (*kecamatan*). This constituency did not particularly offer advantages for him. It is neither his place of birth where he has familial network, nor it is his *pesantren* area from which he could expect to gain some easy votes. Moreover, while the village of his parents in law is part of his constituency, there was a rival, an incumbent candidate living there as well who aimed at dominating the support of the villagers. In the end, however, Rafa managed to slice enough share of votes and gained a seat in his first attempt after a two- month intensive campaign.

In the early stage of his campaign, Rafa informally promoted his candidacy by visiting the voters in their homes at nights. He introduced himself as a teacher in a *pesantren* (an *ustadz*) and showed that he was able financially. 'I drove my car every time I paid the visits so people will think that I have money'.⁸ In rural areas of his constituency (and perhaps also in many places in Indonesia), a private car is still a symbol of the rich, and Rafa's is a new one. According to him, poor candidates will easily be ignored by the voters and it is very irritating when a candidate faces such an underestimating look. In his explanation, this was because a lot of voters expected material inducement, just like the ones whom he approached. He often got a question like: 'will

⁷Confidential interview, 11 August 2014 in Martapura.

⁸Confidential interview, 11 August 2014 in Banjarbaru.

there be something for us (in return for our vote), ustadz?'.⁹ In response, Rafa usually said '*insya Allah*', which is a recommended utterance in Islam when Muslims promise something, and hoped that by looking at his car, voters will take his words seriously. Rafa himself was not sure, at this stage, how he would accommodate such a request but he did not dare to categorically reject it.

Rafa later upgraded his campaign scale. He conducted some festive fundraising or *Safrah Amal*, according to a candidate who ran in the same constituency.¹⁰ The core of this program is an auction (locally called *balelang*) in which a talkative and usually funny auctioneer will skilfully persuade the audience to spend some money to buy cakes prepared by the community or in this case, by a sponsor. The funds raised will be used to help the renovation of prayer houses or local community schools. *Safrah Amal* is considered as both solidarity showing event and an entertainment by the villagers: 'rural people love it', said Sukarli.¹¹ Village residents crowd this event to enjoy the atmosphere, to laugh at the jokes offered by the auctioneer, to cheer those who buy the cakes, and sometimes, to provoke the pride of the riches. Rafa told that he had four *safrah amal* in different spots within his prioritised sub-district. This is a better program to socialise his candidacy than the evening community visits because it will reach a lot more audiences at once. There was a banner informing Rafa's candidacy on the stage where the auctioneer stood and greeted the attendants. Sometimes, Rafa gave a little speech before the auctions began and every time, he "would buy one cake and let it be shared by the crowd".¹² Rafa said that a local bank, whose director was someone he knew, sponsored the program using corporate social responsibility funds. On top of the money from auctioned cakes, this main sponsor also handed in social funds to the committee of school or prayer house for whose benefit the *safrah amal* were held.

Patronage Plus Mystical Element

Rafa saw himself financially weaker than other leading candidates. His ready electoral fund was only about a hundred million rupiah, whereas others can triple or quadruple that sum. As a consequence, he could not match the strength of rivals with deeper pockets. For instance, in

⁹Confidential interview, 11 August 2014 in Banjarbaru.

¹⁰Interview with Sukarli, a candidate competing in the same electoral constituency as Rafa, 19 May 2014 in Banjarmasin.

¹¹Interview with Sukarli, a candidate competing in the same electoral constituency as Rafa, 19 May 2014 in Banjarmasin.

¹²Confidential interview, 11 August 2014 in Banjarbaru.

the village of his parents in law, the incumbent candidate from Democrat Party launched three rounds of cash and gift distribution to individual voters. This candidate won two fifth of the votes (666 votes) from this village's ten polling stations. In contrast, Rafa gained only 69 votes. This result did not surprise Rafa because he was just 'a stranger candidate who lacked money' (*caleg pendatang tak berduit*) and depending much on people's sympathy to his parents-in-law.

However, Rafa was not altogether 'patronage free' candidate. He realised that he 'had to offer something' to voters and eventually decided to distribute about one thousand sarongs, albeit only the cheap ones: 'It is 25,000 rupiah each'.¹³ He also admitted to reach a deal with a community of Javanese in one sub-district from whom he gained more than 200 votes. 'They want batik and I gave them that'.¹⁴ In total, Rafa secured 1.085 votes. At the same time, he believed that his spending cannot explain all votes he gained. The effectiveness of his electioneering was supported by a metaphysical help. He said that he invited the spirits of his ancestors (*datu-datu*) to be present in polling stations, mainly to manipulate people's minds and put sympathy in voters' hearts to him. He claimed that he really saw a shining figure with Islamic attires in particular polling booths, which served as evidence for himself that his ancestors had positively responded to his calls. As absurd as it may sound, Rafa seems to wholeheartedly accept that people from the unseen world had come to his help.

Newly Embraced Spirituality And Its Good Effects

Rafa started to embrace this particular mystical belief only recently. He shared that during his campaign period he got acquainted with a distant grandpa who then offered him some spiritual teachings. While part of the teachings was for political purposes, the main part was actually concerning one Sufistic cosmology called *ilmu Nur Muhammad* (literally, knowledge on the light of Muhammad). Briefly, in this cosmology, the light of Muhammad was God's first creation from whom He created the universe and everything in it. God loves this first creation the most and thus, if believers want to get closer to Him, they should learn to get soluble (*larut*) in it, by seeing themselves and the world they are in as basically, the light of Muhammad. Also, the believers should always remember that their wealth, health and good names are God's grace to them and they should be ready if someday He takes them away. Rafa remarked that it is inappropriate if

¹³Confidential interview, 11 August 2014 in Banjarbaru.

¹⁴Confidential interview, 11 August 2014 in Banjarbaru.

one 'claims [wealth, health and good names] as theirs'.¹⁵ This mental exercise is to complement the outward observance, like *salat* (prayers) and *dzikir* (remembrance of Allah and uttering some of His names or holy sentences). It teaches a person to be humble, and to feel powerless before the Almighty.

Rafa's newly met grandpa added one element to this by teaching him a prayer to be recited in a specific way, involving a breathing technique and a parallel activity of tongue and heart. According to him, many people who learned about the light of Muhammad had not successfully embodied it or at least, they had not applied it consistently. As a result, they could not reach the mental state expected from doing this exercise: they are not fully purified from arrogance, anger and self-proclaiming. In some cases, they died with impure spirits and faced grave tortures (*siksa kubur*). The prayer will help complete the purification for the reciters themselves or for other people the reciters wish to help. Furthermore, Rafa said that he will be spiritually connected to people whom he recites prayer for, both the living and dead. This prayer, in his explanation, connected him to his ancestors whom he had called to support his electoral struggle. The grandpa told Rafa that this spiritual knowledge can be traced back to his ancestor, a revered Islamic teacher of his time.

Rafa is grateful of this encounter with his distant grandpa and says that his teachings have changed his spiritual life. The old man became a spiritual adviser during his campaign period. Beyond electioneering, Rafa now practices Islamic observance with a new perspective taught by his grandpa and as a result, he has unusual spiritual experiences. He told that in days where he intensively undertook a regime of devotional acts (*banyak bewirid*), the unseen world was opened, enabling him to see supernatural creatures (*jin*) or spirits of the deceased. Some came to him asking to be purified and he happily recited the prayer taught by his old relative. He was detailed in describing what he saw, for example: a creature with the shape of 'a bull with red eyes who stays in a neighbour's house' or the spirit of a known Islamic teacher.¹⁶ Rafa said that he did not get such a spiritual experience during his *pesantren* years. Nonetheless, the *pesantren* had taught him a theology that was agreeable to such mystical encounters.

Moreover, Rafa thinks that this spiritual exercise improves his political career. He said that the provincial chairman of Gerindra grew fond of him personally, despite his initial dislike to the success of Gemira sourced candidates at the expense of his preferred people. "H. Abidin

¹⁵Confidential interview, 11 August 2014 in Banjarbaru; personal communication, 25 August 2014.

¹⁶Confidential interview, 11 August 2014 in Martapura.

[the chairman] often asked about me if I do not come to visit him for a while, missing me”.¹⁷ According to Rafa, he often recited the purifying prayer for the spirit of the big boss and that must have calmed his feelings. In addition, this metaphysical teaching also offers spiritual protection. Rafa explained that those who embodies the light of Muhammad will be kept away from unlawful proceeds. “The people [soluble in the light] are pure; the dirty [money] would not come close to them”.¹⁸

Contradictive Behaviour

However, Rafa also exhibited some questionable behaviour. To begin with, he still deposited anger at his *ex-pesantren* colleague who was responsible for his dismissal even though he clearly did not need the teaching job anymore. He furiously stated, ‘I could gaol him if I want it to’.¹⁹ Looking from the light of Muhammad perspective, he was not completely purified from inner illnesses (*penyakit batin*). Moreover, he intended to behave like the other rent-seeking parliamentarians. He said that he had studied techniques of pressuring the executive officials during budget deliberations so they will concede some material benefits and kickbacks. He enthusiastically planned to undergo a full material extraction from his interactions with the branches of local government: ‘I will lift as much money as I could out of my position-the whole sacks full’.²⁰ This does not fit at all with his explanation about keeping away from unlawful sources of income.

Previously, during the campaign period, he manipulated a fellow Gerindra candidate. He persuaded the person to distribute cash to individual voters in the same area whose people had just received similar handouts from other party candidate. This is to divide voters’ attention, producing a dilemma among the money recipients. For safety reason, he discouraged this person from attaching name cards together with the money. The task of explaining the sender of money whom the recipients must vote for was to be designated to field operators who carry out this vote buying operation. By doing this, the person will easily deny any connection with field operators should any of them get caught, argued Rafa. While this made sense, the effectiveness was decreased because voters could easily forget oral explanation. Nonetheless, the person innocently

¹⁷Confidential interview, 11 August 2014 in Martapura.

¹⁸Confidential interview, 11 August 2014 in Martapura.

¹⁹Confidential interview, 11 August 2014 in Banjarbaru.

²⁰Confidential interview, 11 August 2014 in Banjarbaru.

accepted this advice. Rafa then took advantage of this weakness: not long after the operation, he distributed his name cards and brochures saying, ‘this is *the* candidate to vote for’.²¹ Rafa had played an even crazier game in this regard with a financially stronger rival. He smuggled a field operator into the rival’s team who switched the candidate’s name cards in some cash-filled-envelopes with Rafa’s. Thus, the recipients of the envelopes will think that Rafa *was* their buyer. Rafa contended that if a candidate falls short of fund, he must rely on his brain. He said: ‘with a tight pocket, you have to be cunning’.²²

Rafa’s case shows a mixture of actions where religion influenced some but not the other. It is clear that Rafa’s background as an ustadz did not stop him from involving in the mainstream culture of money politics, by giving sarong and batik to the voters just days prior to the vote. This practice is considered a form of bribery condemned by God and His Messenger, according to the Indonesian *ulama* council (MUI). He also tricked and even stole from other candidates who distributed cash to voters per head. His embrace of the teachings of the light of Muhammad did not translate into religiously inspired working plans as a member of district DPRD. Instead, his entrance to the district parliament may well be, in his own words, ‘adding another corrupt politician’.²³ In short, he did not strikingly differ from other candidates with ‘average’ religious background. At the same time, religion featured prominently in other parts of Rafa’s electoral behaviour. He introduced himself as an Islamic teacher. He chose to raise funds for community Islamic schools in his constituency, instead of say giving a purely entertainment night to attract voters. He targeted mosque congregations for the distribution of his name cards and campaign brochures. He focused on praying in the last three days before the vote, applying his theology of submission to God after making serious efforts to achieve a goal. Even in the type of handout for the voters, he chose sarong, which is primarily used by local Muslims for praying. Above all, he believed that spiritual exercises had positively contributed to his political career. So, what do we make of him?

This case can be explained as raw spirituality: one that has not yet cultivated a better self-control. Rafa genuinely believes in the mystical teachings of the light of Muhammad and this has added another layer to his life. He prayed for the spirits of others more than ever before. The spiritual exercise he had done brought him to encounters with mystical world. His success in

²¹Confidential interview, 11 August 2014 in Banjarbaru.

²²Confidential interview, 11 August 2014 in Banjarbaru.

²³Confidential interview, 11 August 2014 in Banjarbaru.

gaining a parliamentary seat strengthened his conviction. But such a spirituality had not long entrenched in his conscience to bear more substantive fruits that would elevate his political approach to a higher standard, for instance by bravely refusing corrupt politics. Rafa was stuck with *realpolitik* that encouraged him to behave in inconsistent ways with the spiritual and religious values. He ran as a candidate when money politics was rampant and the parliament, in his knowledge, could offer plenty of rent seeking opportunities. He felt compelled to give what many of his voters wanted, namely concrete and immediate prestations, and having won a parliamentary seat, he was eager to replenish his drained savings from his position. Rafa's subscription to the spiritual teachings of the light of Muhammad was admittedly recent. More importantly, his emphasis was more on the recitation of 'the purifying prayer' than the continuing mental exercise of remembering God and His first creation. It is not surprising that this spirituality had not introduced much change to the political character he (and many of his contemporaries) showed.

The second candidate, Harun (pseudonym), has a profile that contrasts with Rafa. Harun is an old man and has run for legislative election four times. He had his moments as a provincial and a national parliamentarian, respectively during the period of 1999-2004 and 2005-2009. He also had experienced failures to gain a seat firstly in 2009, and then, another one in 2014, both for the national legislature. Harun is, thus, a man with more experience than Rafa who practically, is learning to navigate in the political realm. He understood both the bright and dark sides of being in the parliament that Rafa could only imagine (at the time I met him). His politics however, was not markedly different from Rafa's: Harun was not apologising about his vote buying and enjoyed illicit proceeds from his position as an MP. After discussing his background and electoral experiences, I will have a special emphasis on how religious teachings helped Harun cope with his unsuccessful bids.

From NU To Party Politics

Harun is a Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) originated politician. Coming from a rural family, he received Islamic education in the *pesantren* of Lirboyo, Kediri and obtained a bachelor degree from State Islamic Institute (IAIN) of Sunan Ampel, Surabaya. During his college days, Harun was an activist of PMII, an NU associated student organisation. Shortly after graduating, his father urged him to go back to his village to 'work in family lands', a request that was so

unsettling him as a college graduate.²⁴ *Pesantren* taught him to make his parents happy; that attending to parents' will is part of being obedient (*berbakti*) to them. Eventually, he stayed in the city with a good reason: Harun said to his father that his *Kiai* (Islamic teacher) had asked him to do some work for NU. His father accepted this and was actually proud of the fact that his son could be useful for this organisation. Harun served NU until reaching a strategic position at the provincial level.

Serving NU facilitated Harun's entrance to parliament. He sat in a very important position in East Java branch of NU for almost a decade during the 1990s. In the 1999 general election, Harun was nominated by Nation Awakening Party (PKB) for the provincial DPRD and gained a seat, which was a result that had been anticipated. As an NU official in the early days of PKB, Harun worked to prepare the party for the election and hence, his name easily entered PKB candidate lists (and presumably in a promising ranking). More importantly, he ran in *the* stronghold of PKB, namely the province of East Java, and thus, gaining a provincial parliamentary seat was practically scripted. In the 2004 election, PKB nominated Harun again but for the national parliament and the party placed him in a non-promising position: number four in the candidate list in an eight member constituency. The competitive election meant that it was highly difficult if not impossible for any party to get four national seats from a constituency. Moreover, the partially open list system used at that time still emphasised the order of candidates listed in a given constituency for seat allocation. As it turned out, PKB votes were enough to send only three candidates to Senayan, a location of the national representative assembly, and Harun was not one of them. But Harun was destined to be a DPR member: just about a year after the election, he replaced one sitting member of PKB fraction who died in a tragic transport accident. In total, Harun sat as a member of parliament for 9 years: 5 years in East Java DPRD and 4 years in DPR.

The next two electoral participation left Harun with losses. In the 2009 election, PKB had him running on its behalf in a different constituency, although still in East Java, number six in the candidate list. The order of candidates did no longer matter this time, as the fully open list system allocates the seats based on personal vote. But the numbering suggested that PKB did not regard Harun as a favourite candidate. Moreover, PKB was riven by internal conflict since the last three years prior to the election and became so unpopular. In the end, only the candidate listed at the top who managed to win in this constituency. In the 2014 election, Harun switched party to PPP, a traditional competitor of his former party. PPP was more serious about his

²⁴Confidential interview, 25 August 2014, in Sidoarjo.

nomination: it conferred him number two in the candidate list and the party chairperson provided him with a generous campaign fund. But his nomination did not improve PPP's vote, as the party only achieved the third smallest vote among all participants and hence, did not secure any of nine seats contested in this constituency. Harun's personal vote came second among PPP candidates. He failed in another attempt to re-entry the DPR even after combining religion and money as the attracting factors.

Obedience To Kiai And Money Politics

Harun had a Kiai whom he listened to, named Idris Marzuki. Kiai Idris was an influential figure among traditionalist Muslims in East Java and led a big pesantren in Lirboyo, Kediri. Harun told that visiting the Kiai was a routine for him, as part of a continuing teacher-pupil relation. One particular happening indicates Harun's obedience to this Kiai. Once, Kiai Idris ordered him to withdraw from an election for a district head just one day before the vote in DPRD. The Kiai had Harun handwriting and signing a letter of withdrawal from nomination straight in front of him. Harun obeyed this despite a huge disappointment he felt; he was ready to compete and had access to political funds. Then, Harun realised that his Kiai had done him a favour by preventing him from running into a failure. As an observer, his Kiai had a clearer head in reading his chance of winning, which was actually small but somehow, Harun thought otherwise. In retrospect, Harun's judgement was clouded by his own expectation of victory and by lauding comments from some people. He was not cool-headed in seeing political developments inside the parliament that turned against his projection. He would have spent political funds for nothing, had his Kiai not stopped his miscalculated move. Harun is grateful of his Kiai's intervention.

Harun talked to Kiai Idris again when he was committed to run on behalf of PPP in 2014 to get his blessing and support. According to Harun, Kiai Idris in a written statement obliged the students and alumni of Lirboyo pesantren to vote for Harun. He also gained similar support from the Kiai of Ploso pesantren, Zainuddin Jazuli. In addition to this, Kiai Idris gave Harun advice: he could use whatever means to gain votes or spend to the utmost but in doing so, *he must not sell his estates*. Selling house and land, which are two primary possessions of a family, to finance a political ambition shows one's ungratefulness [to God], said Kiai Idris. Harun elaborated this point: 'if I let go the properties that God has bestowed upon me and chase a supposedly bigger catch [i.e. money and benefits from being an MP], which is uncertain, that is a blunt

unthankfulness'.²⁵ In Islam, being grateful to Him is crucial for a good Muslim and Al-Qur'an (14:7) warns that 'severe punishment' awaits those ungrateful. This advice is very relevant where there is a strong tendency among the candidates to gamble with their existing wealth to fulfil the expectations of a large portion of the electorate to get material inducements. Harun said that he took this advice and thus, the electoral loss did not cost him family estates.

Like many other candidates, Harun was involved in vote buying. He contended that the voters 'will laugh at candidates' who offered nothing more than 'talks'.²⁶ He also said that even donating cash for a community would not automatically tie the support in its entirety; that individual voters needed to be given handout if a candidate wanted to get a real deal. In addition, he shared that the letters signed by Kiai Idris and Kiai Jazuli were of little help for his electioneering because many younger Kiais defied the 'political *fatwa*' after smear campaigns from Harun's competitors. Although was not specific about his vote buying, Harun reported that "in the areas where I dispatched money, I gained a large number of votes".²⁷

Harun views that consumptive culture is to blame for the massive practice of money politics. Based on personal observation, he proposed an explanation:

Members of parliaments cannot bear living in modesty (*kesederhanaan*). Soon after they get elected, offers to buy new cars and houses by credit come. The salespersons are also aggressive in their persuasion. They know that the MPs have a stable income and that banks accept as collateral the official documents stating their parliamentary memberships [in car or house financing]. Unsurprisingly, some MPs change cars after two months in the parliament or buy new houses. The voters see this sudden change with suspicions and perhaps, envy. They too aspire for a better life and more possessions, having watched TV and newspapers advertisements. Thus, when MPs come to visit the electorate, their money will be drained (*diperas habis-habisan*).²⁸

He added that the public treats new candidates in the same way, reasoning that they will do the same thing, namely enriching themselves, after sitting in the parliament. So, the new candidates also have to give away some cash and gifts to potential voters. In Harun's reflection, consumptive culture where people are encouraged to buy more and own more is the root of this messy political situation. In his reflection, being grateful of what one already has and self-controlling one's zest for consumption are the keys to fix this, at the personal level. That what he has personally done to cope with his electoral failure.

²⁵Confidential interview, 25 August 2014, in Sidoarjo.

²⁶Confidential interview, 25 August 2014, in Sidoarjo.

²⁷Confidential interview, 25 August 2014, in Sidoarjo.

²⁸Confidential interview, 25 August 2014, in Sidoarjo.

Returning to Religion

Harun coped with his loss relatively quickly. Soon after his election team members gathered all the results, showing clearly that his party gained no seat, he began to accept the reality. According to him, the opportunities to manipulate the electoral results existed and the temptations to buy the election authorities after the vote were ‘far stronger than temptations to buy votes’ prior to it.²⁹ But the operation will need a large amount of money, as the vote gap that needed to be ‘bridged’ was huge and then, if this was successful, he will potentially have to face the costly electoral dispute sessions in the court and whose verdict was uncertain. Harun decided not to go too far, choosing to release his political ambition and turning to religion in the process.

Sufism gives Harun some peace of mind. During his *pesantren* time, Harun used to study *al-Hikam*, a renowned work in the form of Sufi aphorism authored by Ibnu Athaillah from the 13th century. He still remembers some pieces from it and bears them in mind from time to time after the election. One quote of aphorism reads ‘deprivation becomes the same as giving’, and the second one, ‘the arrival of sustenance is in accordance with receptivity’.³⁰ To be able to understand the first piece, we need to have the full aphorism: ‘Sometimes He gives while depriving you, and sometimes He deprives you in giving. When he opens up your understanding of deprivation, deprivation becomes the same as giving’ (verse 83-84).³¹ Harun explained to me that the piece got him rethinking whether he really missed out a lot because of his electoral failures or actually, gained something more important than a parliamentary seat. He said that he may be ‘deprived’ of the political position, but he was given peace and salvation. He pointed to an increasing number of politicians who were caught by the Anti-Graft Commission and found guilty of corruption. Had he been elected, he may have to face a similar fate, for he knows that politics is full of corruption and he may not be able to turn down illicit money offers, just like what happened in the past. He shared one personal experience:

‘[When I was in the DPR], my colleagues and I had a visit to Sumatera to review the continuance of a permit for forest use proposed by a Chinese businessperson. Having viewed the forest area concerned using helicopters, my colleague [on our behalf] informed the businessperson that he could not get the permit continued [presumably, for unsatisfied forest management and rule violations]. Of course, it was just

²⁹He suggested that he himself was a victim of electoral fraud, pointing to the big gap between the number of votes reported by his team and that in the official documents. Confidential interview, 25 August 2014, in Sidoarjo.

³⁰Confidential interview, 25 August 2014, in Sidoarjo.

³¹ I follow the English translation provided by <http://themathesontrust.org/library/al-hikam-aphorisms> (accessed on 26 November 2014)

bluffing, because when the businessperson begged for the permit, the group speaker said: 'let's get this done at the hotel'. Later on, cash was delivered to the hotel where we stayed, and when my share was presented to me, I bagged it [without hesitation]'.³²

Here the second aphorism comes in: 'the arrival of sustenance is in accordance with receptivity'. Harun posited that he may not be ready to take the position of MP for corrupt temptations will be just as strong as in the past. Harun implied that he may very well be repeating the same practice should he won a seat in this election. He stated that it does not matter 'whether one is from PMII or HMI', he or she will behave the same way as the others' after entering the DPR.³³

Contemplation on life achievements gave Harun further emotional strength. He said that God has given him more than what he has ever dreamt before. He did not plan to get a position in Nahdlatul Ulama that made his father very proud of him. He became a parliamentarian twice without so much of an individual struggle, given the electoral system. He has accumulated wealth that is more than enough for a decent life. As an old man in his retirement, he is also happy to see the schools he has founded running well. Perhaps, more importantly, Harun does not end up in jail after serving in the DPR, saying: 'I finish [my period] with a happy ending'.³⁴ In short, he has every reason to be grateful to God and cherish his life. Harun turns his attention to his Islamic schools in Sidoarjo, East Java. He told that the electoral loss gave him a good reason to fully concentrate on serving the Islamic community through education. 'At the moment, we have primary and junior high schools. We want to start a senior high school in the near future', explained Harun. Now, in a small and dusty office with no air conditioner next to a humble student prayer room and far from the country's boisterous House of Representative, Harun sits as the founding leader of the schools, slowly leaving his political ambition behind while taking the positive sides of his electoral experiences. Religious teachings guide this mental and emotional processes along the way.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to show limits of Islam's influence on the electoral behaviour of some candidates with strong religious background. The cases of Rafa and Harun show that religion strongly featured in their identities and way of seeing the results of the elections. Both

³²Confidential interview, 25 August 2014, in Sidoarjo.

³³Confidential interview, 25 August 2014, in Sidoarjo. Himpunan Mahasiswa Indonesia is another Muslim student organisation with a closer association with modernist Islam.

³⁴Confidential interview, 25 August 2014, in Sidoarjo.

candidates were *ustadzs*, attracting particular Muslim voters, and when they gave meanings to their respective success and failure, they do so from a religious perspective. Rafa thought that his efforts needed to be supplemented by submission to God and metaphysical help from his ancestors, whereas Harun sought wisdom from Sufism to accept his electoral losses. On the other hand, their way of gaining votes did not accord with the opinion offered by three major Islamic organisations in Indonesia. The *ulama* council of the country (MUI), Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama had decreed that money politics is forbidden. Both argue that giving money or gifts to individual voters so they agree to vote for the givers is the same as bribing them. It has been suggested, furthermore, that people cannot expect to get good representatives and leaders out of bribe dominating process. Rafa and Harun were involved in the very subject of the legal ruling, although their electoral fates differed. Rafa, who won a parliamentary seat, had openly expressed that he will accumulate money from his position that will enable him to stay in politics, regardless of the sources and ways of making it. Harun, who was defeated, thought that he would fall into similar corrupt tendencies had he gained a seat.

In a sense, Rafa and Harun were realist. When they imitated the strategy of money politics, they simply followed a common approach. They operated in an age where the context provided enough reasons to transact with the voters based on short term deals. In their observations, many voters expected immediate prestations and their competitors were ready to make concessions. The fact that the practice was massive, as reported by the candidates and many other informants, suggested that it is culturally acceptable. Many candidates like Rafa and Harun felt to have no choice but to play by ‘this rule’ or otherwise, losing the chance of winning. But it is exactly at this point, religious influence did not work. Even *ustadzs*, such as Harun and Rafa who had *pesantren* education and lived their lives in religious track, failed to show a significant difference in politics. They suppressed religious impulses and let *realpolitik* took the lead. Just like others, they did not dare to take the path of their ‘idealist’ counterparts who resisted the temptation to buy votes. This may very well show a low point of religion in politics, during which such factor as material inducement defines much of the terms and conditions.

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