

The Emergence of Female Politicians in Local Politics in Post-Suharto Indonesia¹

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This study analyses factors behind the rise and successes of female political leaders in local-government politics since the introduction of direct elections in 2005. From 2005 to 2008, under Law 32 of 2004, there were 466 direct elections held: 355 outside Java and 111 within Java.

The percentage of political pairs elected (local-government head and vice-head), of which one is a woman, is greater in Java than for such pairs outside Java: 9.91 per cent and 4.22 per cent respectively. The percentage of those political pairs elected (that is, local-government head and vice-head), of which one is a woman, is higher in Java (9.91 per cent) than outside Java (4.22 per cent). All the women elected are Muslims.³ These are significantly higher figures compared to the number of female leaders ever elected by the members of the regional People's Representative Council (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah*) under the previous electoral system prescribed by Law 22 of 1999. The increasing number of female Muslim leaders elected since 2005 under the new direct-election system has developed along with the growing engagement of Muslims who have adhered to Islamic principles and norms in the democratic atmosphere after 1998. In this context, this study investigates the role of Islam and gender in the political rise of Indonesian Muslim women, particularly Javanese women, since the introduction of direct elections in 2005. This study seeks to answer a number of questions: how have the social and family backgrounds of these women contributed to their political advance? How have they used Islam, their gender and networks to their advantage? How have their policies embraced women's perspectives in local development?

In contrast to the recent spate of field research on Indonesian local politics that has explored the views and experiences of male politicians, this study primarily uses, relies on, and explores the rarely studied experiences of female politicians in their quest for power in direct elections. There has been little attention given to the importance of gender in the analysis of local political elections in Indonesia: this study is based on the socio-political phenomenon of the rise of female political leaders in local politics and incorporates the influence and effects of gender in its political analysis. Although scholars have been concerned about the absence of gender analysis in studies of Southeast Asian politics since the 1990s, this neglect continues to persist. Thus, this study is in line with scholars' efforts to incorporate gender analysis with political analysis. This has enabled me to understand the contribution of gender and Islam to the changing role Muslim women in Indonesian politics and, as well, to see how far Indonesian women are able to shape the growth and direction of Indonesian democratisation, especially in local politics.

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3 Derived from data published by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Republic of Indonesia, 'Daftar Kepala Daerah dan Wakil Kepala Daerah Yang Telah Diterbitkan Keputusannya Presiden Republik Indonesia Hasil Pemilihan Kepala Daerah Secara Langsung Tahun 2005, 2006, 2007 dan 2008.'

This study uses primary data from in-depth interviews with the three successful Javanese Muslim women political leaders: Rustriningsih, Regent of Kebumen from 2000 to 2008 and Vice-Governor of Central Java from 2008 to 2013; Siti Qomariyah, Regent of Pekalongan from 2006 to 2011; and Ratna Ani Lestari, Regent of Banyuwangi from 2005 to 2010. In addition, this study uses primary data from interviews that were made during a series of three field trips between June 2009 and August 2010 with more than 100 relevant correspondents in Kebumen, Semarang, Pekalongan, Banyuwangi and Jakarta. It also analyses documents and written material related to the election of the three female Muslim politicians. In specifically examining the profiles, important factors and political strategies of these Javanese women that lead to their prominence and success in local-government politics, this thesis's analysis assesses in particular four aspects: the role of religion (Islam), networks, gender and piety, and familial connections.

This study reveals that there are common elements underlying each woman's political rise and success and these are apparent from the strategies they applied. Although their personal backgrounds varied; two being nominal Muslims (*abangan*) and the third a Nahdlatul Ulama *santri*, they all strategically approached prominent Islamic religious leaders (Nahdlatul Ulama *kyai*), because Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is the dominant religious orientation in Java including in Kebumen, Pekalongan and Banyuwangi).^{4,5} It was initially assumed that it would be difficult for women to gain political positions in devout Islamic regions, where discourse on women's empowerment, let alone leadership, is considered sensitive. Surprisingly, observation of local NUs' standpoint revealed religious support for female leadership because the NU found no religious grounds on which to oppose women's leadership as regents (*bupati*) or governors (*gubernur*) because neither position is the highest in the state. Local branches of the NU held positions on women's leadership that were consistent with those of the NU Central Board, which has supported women's leadership aspirations since the late 1990s (*Bahtsul masail maudu'iyah*), during an NU national meeting of *ulama* in Lombok in 1997 that produced a *fatwa* titled 'The thoughts of *Alim Ulama* on a female president' (No. 004/MN-NU/11/1997). Siti Qomariyah, who has a strong NU background, had no difficulties gaining religious permission, and Rustriningsih and Ratna Ani Lestari, who have nationalist backgrounds, faced only minor religious opposition from some *kyai*, opposition that was largely based on political interests. In general, the three women were able to make the most of local NU religious support for women's leadership in local politics as an important base from which to generate further support. This finding suggests that Islam provides a strong religious foundation, and religious traditions, such as those of the NU, have made a crucial contributions to the rise of female Muslim leaders in local politics, especially in Java.

The second commonality is these women's ability to harness and to use networks, though the kind of networks they used differed. Rustriningsih and Ratna Ani Lestari used predominantly male networks, but Siti Qomariyah used women's networks. Rustriningsih mainly used the male networks that were available to her through the nationalist party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), in Kebumen and Central Java, though she also used exploited women's networks such as Muslimat NU to increase her political acceptability, particularly in the 2008 Central Java gubernatorial election. She was also assisted by networks of *nyai* (wives of *kyai*) connected to the wife of KH Nashiruddin. KH Nashiruddin was not only her vice-regent but also an important hub in Rustriningsih's networks. Similarly, Ratna Ani Lestari, who did not have a strong Islamic background and yet had to work with the significant NU base in Banyuwangi, deliberately adjusted her strategy. She mainly used the male networks of the PDIP and of the Hindu diaspora, though she initially used women's networks, mainly through her aunt's connection to the wife of *Kyai* Achmad Hisyam Syafaat in Blok Agung. In Ratna's network, there were three important hubs: *Kyai* Achmad

4 A 'Nahdlatul Ulama *santri*' is an Islamic scholar who follows the traditions of the Nahdlatul Ulama or the Association of Islamic Scholars.

5 *Kyai* is a title for a respected scholar or teacher of Islam.

Hisyam Syafaat in Blok Agung who had solid links to NU *kyai*; her vice-regent Gus Yus; and her husband, Winasa, who had valuable connections to nationalists and Hindus in Banyuwangi. Meanwhile, Siti Qomariyah was mainly assisted by the women's networks associated with the NU, as shown by the role of Farida Aviv, the leader of Muslimat NU in Pekalongan, and Hindun, the chief of Fatayat NU in Pekalongan. Farida and Hindun were both essential hubs in Siti's networks. Although the kinds of networks they used were different, what each of these women had in common was that, at some point, each gained advantages from women's networks. Here, the agency of Muslimat NU is apparent in enabling, controlling, ensuring and broadening the political loyalty of their surrounding neighbourhoods (men and women) to support female Javanese Muslim politicians, especially in the case of Siti Qomariyah.

It is difficult to see clearly whether the networks used by female politicians are different from those of males because so far there have been no detailed studies of the networks used by males. However, some research suggests that networks used by female leaders are slightly different from male leaders. Although male leaders also use religious and personal networks, it seems that male candidates pretty much rely on networks of bureaucrats. Here we can see that, to some extent, the networks employed by the female Javanese Muslim leaders are quite similar to those of males. This marks an important development in Indonesian local politics: today Javanese Muslim women, though secure in their limited, yet solid, same-sex networks, exemplified by Siti Qomariyah (and her Muslimat NU network), or even with no same-sex networks, as exemplified by Ratna Ani Lestari (because she mainly used male nationalist networks), are gradually able to make the same moves and employ nearly the same strategies as male politicians and subsequently seize the space and power formerly occupied by men only.

This study also discovered that the three women embraced, played with or manipulated the idea of Islamic piety; for example, by wearing the veil to create a distinct political identity and to increase their acceptability to Muslim voters. For instance, Rustriningsih, originally *abangan*, gradually conformed to the norm of Islamic piety. In 2004, Rustriningsih went on the pilgrimage (*hajj*), adopted the *kudung* (veil or headscarf) and married. In Java, a *wanita sejati* (true, genuine woman) is one who can serve well in the home as a mother and wife, in the kitchen or in bed, and for this to happen she must be married. Therefore, Rustriningsih's marriage in 2004 and her becoming a mother had a positive effect on her political image as a mature Javanese Muslim woman. By embracing Islam (making the pilgrimage, wearing the *kudung*) and fulfilling religio-cultural expectations (being married), Rustriningsih gained political confidence because she was able to meet the normative expectation in society of the ideal Javanese Muslim woman. She then gradually increased her contact with NU *kyai* and embraced NU traditions as part of her effort since 2004 to be seen as a 'reformist, trusted, pious, nationalist female leader'. The use of the *kudung* was pertinent to signify her political identity in the 2008 gubernatorial direct election in Central Java. It was evident, for instance, in the *Coblos kerudunge!*⁶ campaign where Rustriningsih cleverly promoted herself as the only female Javanese Muslim candidate, and one who adhered to the concept of *kodrat*⁷ (God's will), and this promotion was further advanced in the *Milih wonge dhewek, milih biyunge dhewek!* campaign, which was to attract voters regardless of their sex, because the position of *biyung* (mother) is universally respected by men and by women. The case of Siti Qomariyah, Regent of Pekalongan, who has a strong NU *santri* background, is also interesting. In the initial stages of her political career, Siti often went with her husband to political meetings of the Regional Board of Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (National Awakening Party) in Pekalongan to show that, although she was running for political office, she still respected her husband and would not disrupt their primary relationship, his authority and the harmony in her family. She wanted to gain public support and sympathy as a smart, modern, pious NU woman. In her political campaign, she strategically

⁶ "Please vote for she who wears the veil!"

⁷ *Kodrat* is ability to do a particular thing such as give birth and breastfeeding for women, appropriateness and boundary.

promoted her piety further, including her strong *kyai* family and her consistency in wearing the *kudung*. Thus, she confidently asked voters to elect her, the *wadon bae* (the ideal woman, that is, Siti Qomariyah). Similarly, Ratna Ani Lestari also changed her style of dress by adopting the *kudung* in the lead up to the 2005 direct election in Banyuwangi, though she did not wear it when she travelled outside Banyuwangi. Despite promoting an image in her campaign as a Banyuwangi female leader (*wanita Banyuwangi*) who cared about women's problems (women in traditional markets, health and education), by wearing the *kudung*, Ratna Ani Lestari clearly wanted to increase her political acceptability to NU voters. An interesting note on Ratna Ani Lestari's story was that her sex was not the primary point used by her opponents to counter her nomination but her private life, which attracted major opposition; such matters as her decision to marry Winasa, a Hindu, and her decision to convert to Hinduism (according to some informants) and then revert to Islam for the sake of her political career.

Behind the story of the three female Muslim politicians, there is a clear indication after 1998 of the effect of the increasing engagement of Indonesian Muslims with Islamic principles and standards. We can see clearly that some aspects of private life and intimate relations, which are highly shaped by Islamic norms and are an issue of concern for most of the Muslim community, are deliberately brought into the public sphere to attract political sympathy, or are made the centre of attention by those who oppose an individual's political nomination. For example, Rustriningsih's private decisions to embark on a haj pilgrimage, to meet her prospective husband and then marry him, and to change her style of dress by wearing the veil; all were brought into the public sphere and gained the wider public's interest, which in turn contributed to her political success. Similarly, Siti Qomariyah's relationship with her husband and the way she managed it properly according to Islamic norms were also brought to public notice to attract political support. More interesting is Ratna Ani Lestari's story, where her private life and her decision to marry Winasa and to change her religion were publicised by her opponents, mostly members of Muslim communities, to oppose her political candidature. Here we can see that many aspects of private life, of intimate relations and of faith were brought into the public or political sphere.

Even more interesting, the three female Javanese Muslim leaders adapted to the norm of wearing the veil, which became a popular practice after 1998 for most Indonesian Muslim women. Although it is difficult to know their real motive for wearing the veil, we can see that ideas of Islamic piety, evidenced by wearing the veil, were circulated and used to advantage by these three women in their political contests and in the public sphere. The decision to wear the *kudung* as an indisputable Islamic identification is a very personal matter. Yet there were different dimensions of meaning in the way the three women showed their Islamic piety. Their experiences in embracing the idea and norms of Islamic piety, especially in their quest for political success, leads to another proposition of piety in praxis politics. Perhaps, in the realm of politics, it does not matter whether they truly embrace Islamic piety (meaning an inner personal experience of the transformative path to a divine life), or they just use it, or they exploit it. Certainly, their actions have transformed the concept of Islamic piety from a personal act of worshipping God to a public demonstration of piety in which the ideas and norms of Islamic piety become instrumental in politics in what I call the 'common rule of conduct' for showing modesty as an ideal female Muslim political leader in an increasingly Islamised electorate in contemporary Indonesian politics. Overall, my study found that the concept and practice of Islamic piety, in combination with gender (as an ideal Javanese Muslim woman) enabled these women to expand their political bases and expectations because it gave them considerably more opportunities, and it also enabled them to increase their popularity and acceptability among the Muslim voters in the direct election of local heads of government. Here I need to emphasise that the above explanation clearly demonstrates the strategic role and use of gender behind the rise and victory of the female leaders. This study presents a new perspective of the strategic role of gender in local politics, which is in contradiction to previous scholarly findings.

On familial ties, this study found that all three women generally had strong individual capital derived from their being members of prominent families; nationalist in the cases of Rustriningsih and Ratna Ani Lestari, and religious (NU *santri*) in the case of Siti Qomariyah. However, if we examine familial ties, which suggest that a female political leader's rise is because of the influence and political connections of her father or husband who are or were prominent political figures, I discovered that, although present, familial ties were not the most common or prominent factor. Familial ties were present in the cases of Rustriningsih and Ratna Ani Lestari, but not for Siti Qomariyah, because neither her father nor her husband was active in politics. Contrary to the common understanding in Asia, the familial ties are not the explanation for the success of these women's political careers, even though such ties are quite often considered to be one of the necessary attributes for women to assume political leadership in this region.

Beyond the above three commonalities in the strategies used by these women, I discovered similarities in the relations between them and their husbands. None of the women faced any obstacles from old-fashioned normative expectations of Javanese women as *konco wingking* (the friend in the back), or the rigid sexual division of labour between husband and wife. Rustriningsih, for instance, in an interview said that her husband was very supportive, tolerant and was not reluctant to discuss anything including the management of the household, and allowed close relatives and a baby sitter to help take care of the children. Siti Qomariyah and her husband do not have a strict division of labour in the family, rather it is understood to be the responsibility of both, though Siti positions her husband as the head of the family, she believes that the old-fashioned term *konco wingking* is no longer valid to describe the situation of Javanese women today. Similarly, Ratna stated that she found no hurdles from the old-fashioned perspective of Javanese women as *konco wingking*. In fact, Ratna's husband enabled her to perform her duties as a mother by asking for help from her mother's relatives to take care of the children while Ratna travelled frequently between Banyuwangi and Jember. In all, regardless of their public roles, all three women respected and positioned their husbands as the head of their family. Perhaps this was part of their strategy in accordance with the Javanese norm of *empan papan* (knowing one's place and situation).

Last but not least, this study shows that these female politician's policy stances on women's issues were influenced by a number of factors, such as their personal experiences, including their engagement with women's groups during their quest for power, their leadership characteristics and their personal commitment. When female leaders come from or have intense interaction with particular women's groups in their quest for power, they welcome and show more empathy with women's interests, though it does not guarantee the incorporation of women's needs in their policies, as in the case of Siti Qomariyah. In contrast, when female leaders do not have intense interaction with women's groups in their quest for power, there is a smaller chance that the female leader will understand and take action to work hand-in-hand with local women's groups addressing local women's problems, as in the cases of Rustriningsih and Ratna Ani Lestari. Generally, this study found that the three Javanese Muslim leaders did not incorporate women's perspectives in their policies.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that, in local politics, gender is not a significant element of to be used as a primary point to attack or hinder Muslim women from being nominated as candidates. This is because the Islamic belief on female leadership at the local level, exemplified by NU as the dominant religious organisation in Java, provides a strong religious foundation for Javanese Muslim women to be local political leaders. This study further concludes that their ability to use their gender in combination with the concepts and practices of Islamic piety, and to use religio-political support and networks, is decisive to their political rise and success. This study concludes that familial ties alone do not to explain the emergence and victory of Javanese Muslim women in local politics since 2005.

This study also concludes that having a female leader does not guarantee that they will promote women's perspectives in their policies.

In revealing Javanese Muslim women's thoughts and actions in politics, this study discovers their agency, that is, their ability to engage with the dominant cultural version of gender in their quest for power without disrupting the primary relations in their Javanese families, yet at the same time using it to gain greater political space and expand the boundary of their identity in contemporary Java. In doing so, today Javanese Muslim women are actively producing new images of Muslim women who are modern, fulfil their *kodrat*, take on political leadership roles, actively adapt to the Islamic concept of piety and bring it into politics, and are giving a new dimension to the public sphere.

IMPLICATIONS

Empirically, this study indicates that we will see more Muslim women in Indonesia continuing to take advantage of their gender and of Islam to craft leadership roles in local politics, even in national politics, in the near future. This reveals the interesting contribution that Indonesian Islam in post-Suharto Indonesia has made to enable greater roles for women in local politics. The finding of this study clearly contributes to changing perspectives and bringing a new dimension to the discourse on Islam in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia, that sees Islam as supportive of women's roles and leadership, especially in local politics. In addition, by exploring the actual experience of female leaders in local politics, this study promotes the expansion of perspectives in viewing local politics. I suggest, local politics in post-Suharto Indonesia, becomes what I call 'a critical enabler site' where Muslim women can manoeuvre comfortably within their gender, religion, and individual capital to secure leadership roles without as much opposition as they would receive in national politics. Today, local politics is an important locus for Indonesian women to intervene and colour the public sphere, a domain once dominated by males.