Drifting toward an Islamized Public Space

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About midday a short conversation took place between a young girl (say Rini) and Cholilah, a fashion seller in Tanah Abang Market, Jakarta. "Mom, can I have jilbab (veil) Khumairoh as worn on TV miniseries Munajah Cinta (The Prayer of Love)?" Rini asked. "Yes, I have it for you, but the price is so expensive... I guarantee, though, that the model is wearing exactly what Rianty Cartwright wears on Munajah Cinta," Cholilah replied (Koran Tempo, Sept. 19, 2008).

Khumairoh is one of the characters in the popular Islamic miniseries Munajah Cinta (The Prayer of Love). She is played by Rianty Cartwright. Other characters are Baim Wong and Zaskia Adya Mecca. It can be seen on RCTI station during the weekdays.

Soon after the release of this show in the middle of this year, the veil Khumairoh wears became very popular. People call it jilbab Khumairoh (Veil of Khumairoh model).

Jilbab Khumairoh is only one among many increasingly popular Muslim fashions in Indonesia. There are many others which enjoy the same popularity, including the so-called mukenah Krisdayanti, Tamara Blezinsky Muslim fashion, jilbab Zaskia Adya Mecca and jilbab Inneke Koesherawaty.

What strikes me is that all the rising Muslim fashion designs have been associated with celebrities -- and these are celebrities from Indonesian TV shows.

Celebrities have mediated religion and culture, and even economy. And the TV shows have become increasingly significant for this mediation processes. In a wider context, they have recently become an unchallengeable vector for transmitting ideas, expressions and practices in Indonesia, as well as in other parts of the world.

People are now gradually more aware of the significance of shows in particular for producing public images. In politics, they have become an important instrument for marketing political parties and their leaders. Likewise, they have become an unconditionally significant means for marketing economic products.

The largest population group in Indonesia is Muslim. For this reason, Muslims not only have a highly political significance, but are also a potentially lucrative market for business or economic activities. It is in this context that the interplay between Islam and politics, Islam and economy, and Islam and popular culture appears strong.

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The increasingly popular consumption of cultural products seems to be higher especially at a time when the political landscape has not yet seen its promised changes. In this situation, the products of popular culture have become increasingly fashionable. Fashion is a realm of culture and people view it as an important means for self-portrayal in public spaces.

The popularity of the so-called celebrity veils in particular and the increasing popular consumption of Muslim fashions in general results also from the painstaking attempts to Islamize the wider public space. From print to nonprint products of popular culture, this so-called "Islamization of public space" has been rigorously undertaken.

Almost every single kind of media has been used. The production of so-called religious movies, such as Ayat Ayat Cinta (Verses of Love), Sang Murabbi (The Mentor) and Laskar Pelangi (Rainbow Warrior) is an obvious example of the nonprint products of popular culture. Many print kinds of popular culture have also been produced. Some of these print publications are adapted for movies, and others are not.

The question is how does Islamization through print publication take place and how does it help Muslim fashions in particular flourish?

An understanding can be drawn from such a rising trend of popular production and consumption of Muslim fashion -- a recent development in Indonesia is the thorough Islamization of public space.

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