After jihad: A biographical approach to passionate politics in Indonesia

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Summary

This dissertation studies the biographies of non-local jihad actors who participated in the religious communal conflict that took place in eastern Indonesia, namely in Ambon-Maluku and Poso-Central Sulawesi, during the early stages of Indonesia’s democratic transition. Jihad mobilization during that period successfully recruited several thousand Muslims from many areas of the archipelago, as well as from various Islamic activism networks, to take part in the conflict, which they viewed as a ‘religious war’. This study, in contrast to most studies that have focused exclusively on conflict situations and mobilization processes, dedicates its attention to the situation and networks in the post jihad period by observing the life trajectory of the actors. Unlike many studies that have centered on one single group or movement network, it examines and compares three types of Islamic activism, namely pious, jihadi, and political.

Through extensive fieldwork in various places in Indonesia, from the (post) conflict areas of Ambon and Poso to the hometowns of the informants in East and Central Java, and also correctional institutions in Jakarta where some post-jihadists are imprisoned, this study has selected ten life history informants for discussion: four ex Laskar Jihad activists represent the pious ideological stream; three Jama’ah Islamiyah activists represent the jihadi stream; whilst three FPI, PKS and PBB activist informants represent the political stream. Applying an interpretive biographical method, this study analyzes
the life story narratives of the informants in three different stages of jihad participation: before, during, and after. Informed by the ‘passionate politics’ approach of social movement theory, it discusses three sets of research questions, namely: How did they become jihadists? What did the jihad experience mean to the actors? How did the jihad experience influence the life trajectories of the actors?

Through discussing the life story narratives of the post-jihadist informants, the dissertation has developed three main arguments as follows. First, it is argued that the informants became jihadists after experiencing ‘radical reasoning’, a set of micro-sociological decision-making processes to join jihad, involving both cognition and emotion through either ‘cognitive opening’ or ‘moral shocks’ or both. It is also argued that the decision to join jihad can be seen as an act of identity because it takes place in the context of, or as a response to, identity crisis experienced by the informants. So, jihad as an act of identity is a way of resolving the identity crisis experienced by its actors through ‘radical reasoning’, which ruptures the ‘normal life’ of the actor and marks a new phase in the actor’s life.

It is interesting, however, to notice that these three types of Islamic activism produce different narratives of becoming a jihadist. For pious activists, fatwas by leading Salafi clerics are a crucial part of their narratives, while, conversely, such discourse is almost absent in jihadi and political narratives. While ‘moral shocks’ are experienced by many informants, it is particularly strongly narrated by political activists. For jihadi activists, who joined jihad firstly abroad and later in their home country, ‘moral shocks’ and ‘cognitive opening’ are firstly experienced in a ‘package’ through a recruitment training, while their later engagement with jihad actions are merely a continuation of their involvement with jihadi activism.

Second, it is argued that jihad experience was interpreted as a ‘radical experience’ bringing about a ‘pivotal meaning structure’ to the jihad actor that restructuring the other activities in the actor’s life. It is furthermore argued that the jihad experience was a ‘radical experience’ for the actor because it consisted of two key elements, first, ‘high-risk’ activism, that by its nature involves high levels of
participation ‘costs’ and ‘risks’ that bear powerful meanings for the actor through triggering a high level of emotions; and second, religious symbols and meanings, as reflected in the use of the term jihad, which have a powerful effect on the actor. These two elements combine to produce ‘a pivotal meaning structure’ as reflected in the use of the marker jihadist to refer to those who participate in the movement, which eventually marks the life phase of the actor by symbolically distinguishing between before and after the jihad.

It is interesting, however, to note that the different types of jihad activists narrated the jihad experience in different ways. Fighting and combat narratives are the constant main themes of jihadi activists, while pious and political activists narrate a variety of themes reflecting various roles during jihad: from combat to da’wa, from public relations to children’s education. It is argued that jihad experience is interpreted through a particular ideological framework from a certain Islamic activism network as: action and expression of piety for pious activists; action and expression of jihadism for jihadi activists; action and expression of political Islamism for political activists. Thus, jihad participation brings about different kinds of actor in its aftermath: the creation of pious actors for pious activism, jihadi actors for jihadi activism and political actors for political activism.

Third, it is argued that the jihad experience is ‘a pivotal event’ that informs the subsequent life trajectory of the actor in combination with two main factors, namely biographical traits and social networks. Through an analytical framework of three kinds of social networks, namely, the core-network, tactical-network and extended-network, it is argued that the dynamic engagement of informants with different social networks influence the choice of life-trajectory in the post-jihad period. Core-network is defined as a social network through which the actor joins the jihad; tactical-network as a social network of jihadist networks which occur temporarily during the jihad period; and extended-network as an extension of the social networks, which develop in the aftermath of jihad participation. It is contended that the narratives indicate a sort of pattern of ‘after
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jihad’ life trajectory for the jihadists from the three types of Islamic activism: pious activists tend to become involved in a ‘enclave community’ or ‘holy kampong’; jihadi activists tend to continue carrying out terrorism actions and are eventually subject to a prison sentence; political activists tend to become further involved and to take a bigger role in local politics.

Such life trajectory patterns appear to be related to the membership affiliation patterns which characterize each particular type of Islamic activism: pious and jihadi activists usually follow exclusive-affiliation, meaning they usually affiliate only with their own activism network, whereas political activists usually follow multiple-affiliation, meaning they usually affiliate with more than one activism network. Thus this study suggests that the more extensive the extended-network of the political activist the more likely it is the actor will play a larger role within the core-network, whereas conversely the more extensive the extended-networks of the pious or jihadi activist the more likely the actor will experience trouble within the core-network.

The study contributes a theoretical shaping to a new approach in social movement research: the so-called ‘passionate politics’ approach. Empirically, this dissertation enriches academic study in the intersection of communal violence and Islamic movements in four ways: by focusing on non-local actors; by comparing different networks of non-local actors; by following the trajectory of actors in the post-jihad period; and by emphasizing and giving voice to the ‘foot soldier’ actors.