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"Majelis Syura Muslimin Indonesia (MASYUMI)"

Summary

The Masyumi party (1945-1960) was the main political group in Indonesia and apparently also the largest Muslim party in the world. Comprising almost all the country's Islamic organizations, Masyumi defined and defended the ideal of a Muslim democracy. A fervent supporter of parliamentary democracy, Masyumi was one of the rare parties to steadfastly oppose, from 1957 onwards, the 'Guided Democracy' of President Soekarno, an authoritarian regime founded on a social consensus of Javanese-inspired values of mutual aid. This led to Masyumi's being banned in August 1960 and its leaders thrown in jail.

Key words : Political Islam, Indonesia, Muslim Democracy, Islamic Party

The Masyumi party (1945-1960) was the main political group in Indonesia and apparently also the largest Muslim party in the world. Created in November 1945 and comprising almost all the country's Islamic organizations, Masyumi defined and defended the ideal of a Muslim democracy, looking to go beyond simply demanding an Islamic state but seeking rather to achieve its aim by engaging in a political and parliamentary process. The party adopted the name and the network of an organization founded in 1943 by Japanese authorities to unite the Muslim community : the Consultative Council of Muslims of Indonesia (Majelis Syuro Muslimin Indonesia, Masyumi). The party's ideal of a Muslim democracy was defined at the end of the 1940s when a group of young leaders, the descendants of the Islamic reformist movement, took over the leadership of Masyumi and with it that of the political Islamic community. Led by Mohammad Natsir (1908-1993), its members, amongst whom figured future prime ministers and ministers, were the products of the educational system set up in the first decades of the century as part of the the colonial government's "ethical policy" .

When the Cold War spilled over into Indonesian politics from 1948 onwards, this democratic-Muslim current within political Islam gained extra impetus. Hitherto Masyumi had willingly aligned itself with a revolutionary identity, side by side with Marxist groups, but as the influence of the Communist Party grew, its secularist doctrine and increasingly obvious alignment with the Eastern block worried the Muslim party. The gap widened further and communism came to be identified as the principal enemy of Indonesian Islam. Western democracies, on the other hand, came to be seen as reliable allies, and Masyumi moved to seal this alliance both through diplomatic channels and through the clarification of the party's ideology, namely its attachment to the political model of Western-style parliamentary democracy. The emergence at the margins of the party of a radical Islamic movement that refused to postpone the proclamation of an Islamic state paradoxically tempered its reformist current and shifted Masyumi further towards a parliamentary system. Between 1949 and 1963, armed movements operating under the name of Darul Islam (House of Islam) in various regions attempted to impose an Islamic State of Indonesia (Negara Islam Indonesia) by force. For Masyumi's political adversaries, Darul Islam became the symbol of a retrograde and violent Islam, incapable of constructive political engagement. To dampen these criticisms, the Muslim party distanced itself from the radical solutions advocated by the rebels and slowly abandoned simplistic slogans based on calls for the establishment of sharia law and an Islamic state. Masyumi was the main government party between the end of the 1940s and the second half of the 1950s, with figures like Soekiman Wirjosandjojo (1898-1974), Syafruddin Prawiranegara (1911-1989) and Mohammad Roem (1908-1983), and it adopted a moderate and pro-West policy devoid of any religious sectarianism. During this period, its principal political allies were the Christian parties (Protestant and Catholic) and its policy proposals, developed over the course of successive congresses, displayed a progressive move towards secularization. Calls for an immediate application of Islamic law gave way gradually to a minimalist application of Islamic law, organized within a parliamentary framework.

Leaders of the party applied themselves to expunging any proposals that could be interpreted as symbolizing a retrograde form of Islam: equality between men and women in all areas was recognized and corporal punishment was explicitly rejected.

Masyumi's influence was weakened considerably after the unexpected failure of the Muslim party in the 1955 elections. The rupture with the traditionalists of Nahdlatul Ulama, who had broken away from Masyumi three years previously in 1952 dealt a fatal blow to its monopoly of political Islam. Winning only 20.9 per cent of the votes, Masyumi arrived in second position behind its nationalist rival PNI, which obtained 22.3 per cent, while Nahdlatul Ulama garnered 18.4 per cent of the votes, depriving Masyumi of a resounding electoral victory.

A fervent supporter of parliamentary democracy, Masyumi was, from 1957 onwards, one of the rare parties — along with the small Indonesian Socialist Party (Partai Sosialis Indonesia, PSI) — to steadfastly oppose the 'Guided Democracy' of President Soekarno, an authoritarian regime founded on a social consensus of Javanese-inspired values of mutual aid. This opposition and their subsequent support of a regional rebellion known as Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia (Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia, PRRI) led to Masyumi's being banned in August 1960 and its leaders thrown in jail.

Masyumi's legacy is ambivalent: while its liberal approach inspired a new generation of Muslim leaders at the same time the Indonesia Islamic Propagation Council, (Dewan Dakwah Islamiya Indonesia, DDII) an organization created in 1967 by ex-Masyumi leaders became one of the main protagonists of the neo-fundamentalist revival which permeated Indonesian Islam from the beginning of the 1980's.

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