Civil Society, Women and Islamisation in Indonesia:

Reformasi and the Anti-Pornography Controversy

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On the 30th of October 2008, after more than 10 years of debate, the Indonesian House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, DPR) ratified a new far-reaching 'Anti-Pornography' Law, No. 44 of 2008, which many have seen as an attempt to introduce conservative interpretations of syariah by stealth. Was the so-called 'Anti-Pornography Law' indeed aimed against 'pornography', or was it really directed against women and the freedoms won through post-Soeharto democratization?

I argue that the Law is, in fact, based on a social construction of 'morality' and womanhood that masks as religion but which is, in fact, a potent combination of social conservatism and political opportunism. If enforced, the new Law will criminalise much sexuality, tightly censor the arts and media, prohibit much traditional cultural expression, and force women to cover up almost completely, thus largely excluding them from public space.

The debate and controversy surrounding the Pornography Law is, however, also a manifestation of democracy in action in Indonesia, and a sign that Indonesia’s newly revived civil society is, in fact, thriving, despite more than 30 years of repression and domination by the state. If Reformasi (the post-Soeharto reform movement) gave formerly-repressed Muslim groups the chance to come out of the woodwork, then so too it has for the women’s movement. Reformasi has, in fact, been witness to the resurrection of the women’s movement, and of women’s consciousness in general, whether or not they identify with the women’s movement. The Pornography Law has thus served to clarify the issues that matter to women activists and intellectuals, and has defined the battlefield between them and the forces of patriarchal religious conservatives more clearly.

To better contextualise the Pornography Law, my paper also looks at the phenomenon of creeping ‘syariah-ization’ (legal Islamisation) through Perda (Peraturan Daerah, Regional Regulations passed by dozens of local governments across Indonesia), the political background of Reformasi, and the drawing of the ideological battle grounds that will dominate the next decade in Indonesia, as well as the re-engagement in public life of both Islamic and women’s groups. Finally, it assesses what the debate about the Anti-Pornography Law – as opposed to the substance of Law itself – means for the future of the women’s movement and for democratization in Indonesia.