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Gender Politics in Indonesia - Recent Developments: An Interview with Yuniyanti Chuzaifah

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Yuniyanti Chuzaifah is one of the founders of 'Voice of Concerned Mothers' (Suara Ibu Peduli or SIP²) and later joined the 'Coalition of Indonesian Women' (Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia or KPI³). She studied at the Universities of Leiden and Amsterdam in the Netherlands, and later returned to Indonesia. Since March 2010 she has been the Director of the 'Indonesian National Commission on Violence against Women' (Komnas Perempuan⁴). This interview was conducted on 15 March 2010 at the organisation's premises in Jakarta.

RICARDA GERLACH: How did the work of *Komnas Perempuan* start and how did the organisation develop?

YUNIYANTI CHUZAIFAH: In the *Orde Baru*⁵ there were two different mainstream women's organisations: *wanita* organisations [established by the state]⁶ and *perempuan* organisations, which were founded by women close to the opposition. The definition of the concept *wanita* is that of the *Orde Baru*'s: a woman's status is based on that of her husband. The woman is a housewife who cares for the family and ideally engages in voluntary work. A woman's rank in the state-founded organisation *Dharma Wanita*

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2 *Suara Ibu Peduli* was founded in 1997 in order to protest Suharto's politics and the economic crisis. The organisation distributed food (especially milk for babies and children) to mothers, as those commodities were hardly available to poorer Indonesians at that time. Its members also joined demonstrations against the regime.

3 *Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia* is one of the biggest and most influential women's organisations in Indonesia.

4 *Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan Indonesia*.

5 New Order (*Orde Baru*) – the Suharto Era in Indonesia (1965 until 1998).

6 Additions in square brackets were later added by the author.



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is according to her husband's position in the administration.⁷

The *perempuan* organisation's basis is the progressive Muslim and it defined itself in opposition to the mainstream of the New Order and the *wanita* organisations. By that time we had learnt the lesson that we needed to develop a big organisation, not only a small foundation. We really had to think big to make any progress and to achieve change. I was one of the founders of *Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia* (KPI) and *Suara Ibu Peduli* (SIP) during the reformasi era. Our dream was to create a big, influential organisation. We referred to 'human rights' also in that period, but sometimes we had to be careful when talking about these with certain communities. For example when we worked in Aceh, we avoided using the terms 'human rights' or 'gender' and still do so. These concepts are considered political terms, so we had to be sensitive. It is a bit contradictory; on the one hand we feel it is a universal value and basic human rights principle, but on the other hand there is Islam or religion in general and cultural interpretations. If we avoid these terms we preserve the allergic culture concerning this vocabulary in some areas. If we have more time to discuss the issues in the communities we finally use the terms 'gender' or 'human rights' to further the understanding of these concepts. But if we do not, we avoid using these words.

GERLACH: What is your conception of 'gender'?

CHUZAIFAH: Gender is like a microscope – the strategy is always based on our experience. What happens about the violence or the discrimination in our daily lives? To explain the concept of gender in the communities we say: "Look it [injustice or violence] happens to your mother, your daughter, your sister." We do not use the word human rights or *ham*⁸, but talk about the concepts. After a while we introduce the words and tell them this is also called 'human rights' or 'gender'. But if you do not like these words or are not familiar with them, you do not have to use them. And gradually we can go further about the principles. You really have to be smart to use these words, especially in Aceh. But among the people who are more secular-oriented, it is quite common to use these terms nowadays.

⁷ *Dharma Wanita* was the state organisation for the wives of administrative staff during Suharto's New Order regime.

⁸ *Hak asasi manusia* (*ham*) is Indonesian for 'human rights'.

I became director of *Komnas Perempuan* recently. We focus on certain complicated issues which are not dealt with by other organisations, like political and strategic issues. For example we do not handle cases of domestic violence case by case, one by one. Here we refer these cases to other organisations. We use our own strategy of documenting cases of violence in Indonesia for government institutions and offering shelter. And we collect and provide reports on KDRT [*kekerasan di rumah tangga*; 'domestic violence']. We handle cases which meet certain criteria. When the state is involved in violence, e.g. police officers, then we focus on that. Our task is to defend human rights: when they are violated, we want to guarantee prevalence in the public debate.

GERLACH: Can you give an example, please?

CHUZAIFAH: Of course. Recently, we had a case in the academic sphere: a professor at the University of Indonesia had abused students and we wanted to have the perspective of the victims. This abuse happened many times with different students. We chose this case to amplify and improve our mechanism, so it can be more systematic in the future. We sent a letter to the director of the university and built an alliance with the fact-finding team. We urged the university leaders to establish a system to protect the students and to implement precautions for the future. And furthermore, we gave advice on how to establish an example of good practice – how to deal with such cases in general – so that, as a result, the victims' rights are respected. We work on improving the police's management of such cases, so that stigmatisation of the victim does not occur, and we enforce documentation and ensure that the curriculum is based on our suggestions.

GERLACH: What do you think about the progress? Does the mechanism work? Was it difficult to establish it or was there any resistance?

CHUZAIFAH: Previously we have had a lot of cases related to one police officer. We developed a conceptual strategy and out of this case we tried to develop a national

strategy. We co-operate with *Lemhannas*⁹, the Department to educate the bureaucrats and high-level administrators. Through this we want to ensure that the curriculum of *Lemhannas* includes our expertise and uses it and spreads it.

Gerlach: How is your co-operation with the Ministry of Women's Empowerment [MOWE]? Do they accept your recommendations and implement them?

CHUZAIFAH: I think there is some progress. *Komnas Perempuan* is a national state body, but at the same time the staff here has a strong background as political activists. That creates a different dynamic. We had a *perpres* [*peraturan presiden*: 'presidential decree'] based on the fact that we still have enough flexibility to create our own organisation. We still have the possibility to hire staff from NGOs; we don't have to take the civil servants like *Komnas Ham* for instance. This is based on the law, so they have to employ civil servants – this circumstance influences the atmosphere there. Here, in *Komnas Perempuan* we employ around seventy former political activists. The co-operation with MOWE and the government is very changeable. The thinking of the New Order is still prevalent in some people's minds in MOWE. Sometimes our co-operation is a bit sensitive: We need to work with them, but at the same time we have to criticise them – it is sometimes an uneasy position. We have to be independent on human rights – this is our obligation. On the one hand our task concerning the government is to control it and to observe human rights violations. On the other hand we depend financially on the government and for our status as well. This dependency is still there and concerns the extension of our staff's contracts, so this is sometimes a bit critical. Our mandate is to ensure the government's policy about a debate and discourse on human rights and to publish human rights violations. This is only possible if we are independent. We have to give input to the policy-making process, so we need to criticise *and* co-operate. We really have to be smart in the way we operate. We do a lot of documentation, which is based on data and on evidence. Usually we use the diplomatic and polite way and we try to establish a mutual respect with the government, so that they appreciate our input. But sometimes we also use the critical approach, for example via the press. If there are hundreds of cases and

⁹ *Lembaga Ketahanan Nasional* (National Resilience Institute of the Republic of Indonesia).

there is a national debate about it, yes, we do interviews with the press to express our point of view. We express explicitly, that we are disappointed and name the points which are not being fulfilled or which are violated.

GERLACH: Can you please specify that?

CHUZAIFAH: Our strategy at *Komnas Perempuan* is to act as a bridge between society and the government. We provide data from society to the government: for instance migrant workers' cases and human and women's rights violations. Our main demand is that the government provides shelter and defines what an appropriate shelter is. Furthermore the government should improve its relationships with embassy staff and government members of the receiving countries who have a good gender perspective. The embassy's staff should help the migrant workers to handle administrative issues and support them. SBY [Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono] did not react to this demand, but we also have documentation about discriminatory by-laws, and we have demanded that SBY revise these.

GERLACH: That sounds interesting. Do you also refer to the CEDAW¹⁰ in your argumentation concerning the discriminatory by-laws?

CHUZAIFAH: Yes, of course, and to pluralism and to Shari'a, too. In fact SBY reacted only in relation to the administrative approaches. We criticised that publicly. Not all our demands became his priority. But at the same time in his yearly speech he quoted our data – it became national data then. Take the case of PKI [*Partai Komunis Indonesia*; 'Indonesian Communist Party'] for example. The president accepted the demand that there should be compensation for the victims. Historically we have to revise the stigmatisation. Sometimes he reacts positively, but he wants these issues to be dealt with by his departments.

GERLACH: For which policies does Linda Gumelar, the recent minister for women's affairs, stand for?

¹⁰ CEDAW is the 'Convention on the Elimination of All Discrimination Against Women', which Indonesia ratified in 1984.

CHUZAIFAH: Compared to others she is very skilled in Public Relations. She is less bureaucratic. When we want to meet her it is easy – that is good for our co-operation. I think at certain important moments, she came and delivered her speech, recognised some criticisms, and benefited from the expertise of NGOs. We co-operate and have some similar policies. But we have also different approaches. When they want to implement gender mainstreaming they discuss the implementation of the CEDAW report, for example, and then they invite us as well for discussion. We are independent and both make our own report but refer to the data of the other as well.

GERLACH: How do you assess the gender mainstreaming process? Are there any obstacles?

CHUZAIFAH: The government wanted to draft a bill about implementing gender mainstreaming in different departments. It is very tiring, because if there is a change, e.g. a different officer or director, then they have to start again from the beginning. Many people in the administration are not very gender-sensitive or aware of gender mainstreaming processes.

I have a background in the women's movement. After *reformasi* I was working on women's empowerment and that means I was focusing on the secular approach which is not sufficient. We have a guarantee in our national bill that women and men have the same rights to be leader or head of the country. But in fact the most important influence is via the mosque or in the church: when the preacher says it is not allowed by religion, and then many people will believe it. And all the secular approaches automatically land in the bin. At the same time, we notice that we have to start at the basis of Islam; we start to embrace Islamic NGOs but not only women's NGOs. We start from really apolitical issues, for example reproductive rights. Then we invite important *ulama* [preachers] to talk about these issues. It sounds apolitical, but it means we start from the body politics, gradually talking about other issues like democracy, politics, everything about women and politics. We work with Islamic women's organisations concerning various issues as well. So it becomes more important for us in general to study women's issues and religious interpretations. And then there is a debate on women's politics and Islam.

GERLACH: How do you assess the situation in Indonesia? Would you say that the Islamic influence has increased? Do more people follow religious rules now?

CHUZAIFAH: Yes, I think so. Actually during the New Order, according to Islamist groups, they tried to get back their supremacy. During the Suharto era they discriminated against Islamic hardliners so there were a lot of victims and political prisoners out of these groups and furthermore there was no supremacy of the *ulama*. Their strategy in the beginning was, because the political oppression was very strong, to start the publication of books from Iran and the Middle East. If you go to a bookshop now you will see that these books are there, much more in numbers than the progressive books. So we decided to write a book about women and Islam to compete with these books. The book should be spread from Aceh to Papua and easy access should be given to all people: it should be simple and cheap and it should be possible to be acquired everywhere. We train a lot of people on topics like the foregoing, but we need more money. The radical Islamist groups do not need a lot of money: For example when they hold an Islamic gathering, an *ulama* is speaking, and it is very effective and cheap. Everybody will follow. Their strategy is completely different. Theirs is effective, easy, and massive, and we have only a couple of people, we need money. So we have to review our strategy.

GERLACH: Why do people follow the *ulama* so easily?

CHUZAIFAH: In Islamic culture, we have the saying that the *ulama* are the continuation of the prophet. Because the prophet has already died, it means that these people who continue his legacy are very powerful, very much respected, and authorised to interpret the Qur'an and the Hadith. So the *ulama*'s heuristics combined with feudalism – and in Indonesian culture feudalism is very prevalent – sometimes leads to interpretations which do not conform to our understanding of human rights.

GERLACH: So you think people want to follow a strong leader?

CHUZAIFAH: Yes, that is why we have to work and communicate with Islamic and Islamist groups. Prior, I was the gender advisor of the Islamic University in Jakarta

(UIN)¹¹; we tried to be creative, we trained the preachers, we discussed with them, and we also tried to revise the curriculum in the university and in the *pesantren* [Islamic boarding school] based on human rights, gender, and environmental issues.

GERLACH: What was the response?

CHUZAIFAH: It was quite positive. Just a few of the *pesantren* are led by hardliners. In the media, its [Islamic radicalism's] presence is massive and overrated. People who have never been to Indonesia think it is a huge movement, but in fact it is not. I graduated from a *pesantren* boarding school. The director of that *pesantren* was very progressive. He preached pluralism, he was good friends with priests from other religions – like Christian preachers, Hindu and Buddhist priests – and we invited them and discussed religion and pluralism. Most of the *pesantren* are like that. Unfortunately the media prefers to cover the sensational, dramatic things. In fact, there are a lot of progressive *pesantren* out there.

GERLACH: So probably, at the centre of the issue, is the discussion about a pluralist or autocratic conception of Islam?

CHUZAIFAH: *Nahdlatul Ulama*¹² (NU) was liberal and now some of them have become radical traditionalists. *Muhammadiyah* in the beginning was progressive, and although modernist on women's issues, lately has become more progressive on women's issues than NU.

GERLACH: Is it possible to state that women's rights can be promoted within a religious/Islamic frame? Does it just depend on the interpretation? What is *Komnas Perempuan*'s strategy on dealing with religion?

CHUZAIFAH: Yes, of course. In Islam you have a thousand colours. You can find a range of very liberal, progressive people, and you can find fundamentalists. They have different policies, totally different perspectives about Islam and its interpretation.

11 Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN).

12 *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), a traditionalist Muslim Organisation promoting the existence of a 'Javanese' Islam.

You can have hardliners in theology who do not care about politics, and there are religious hardliners who strictly oppose violence.

There are also different meanings about the interpretation of the word *jihad*. It is a misleading term. My father – he was an *ulama* – interpreted *jihad* as struggle. According to him *jihad* is the struggle to make the society better. Just lately it started to hold the connotation of violence. There are a lot of interpretations of *jihad*. My father was a very devout *ulama*, but once he said, “I did not want to go on a pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia, Mecca, on the *hajj*, before my daughter and my son graduated from university.” He meant to say that welfare of the family is more important than religious duties.

So, I have an Islamic background but I am working with a secular women’s organisation. Sometimes this is an advantage. I can talk even with the hardliner community – using their symbols and language, like Arabic terms, makes them feel comfortable. For example, when I translate gender into Arabic, it means *musawah*. That can be translated as equality. When I use that word they feel comfortable. If you use Arabic words, they are associated with having an Islamic perspective and even an Islamic experience. So this is important for communicating and to not be excluded by them immediately. I try to talk with them even about human rights as universal phenomena, a universal principle.

But if you talk with real hardliners, do not talk about the differences, just talk about the common ground. The most extreme situation I experienced was after the riot of May 1998. It was a discussion about the rape of Chinese women. I was talking with some Muslim hardliners and they said that the women’s movement ruins Islamic values. And I replied, “I am Muslim and proud of it.” At the time I wore a scarf for that meeting and I was part of the women’s movement. We talked about our concerns, and about the victims. I said: “Whoever they are, Chinese, Japanese, Muslim, even you, from the hardliners, if you are one of the victims of that human rights violation by the state or whoever, we need to protect you. Do not see the background – victims have to be protected.” I confronted them with that. After a while they agreed. At the beginning they said they wanted to catch certain women activists who publicly said that the rapists should be prosecuted and punish them. But in the discussion it turned out that the problem with secular activists is that they are sometimes busy with the term itself and not strategic enough. Of course, people can be trained to

discuss with hardliners. The contradiction should not get stronger because of the way of communicating and the advocacy of certain values.

GERLACH: So it is probably important to speak the language of the group you are addressing?

CHUZAIFAH: It is very important and also the sign language. The real benefit I get from the secular and Islamic women's organisation is that there are different kinds of people in the communities with whom you have to speak in different ways. We have to be very careful about which words we use. We use local language and if you talk to the government it is again very different. We really have to know who we are talking to.

Lately we were invited to a juridical review at the Constitutional Court about the issue of not discriminating on the basis of religion. I suggested case studies about the *Ahmadiyah* based on our data and from our experience and the experience of other victims of the discriminated beliefs. And some members of the Islamist groups were attending, sitting on the balconies and shouting: "You are PKI! You are PKI!"¹³ But I did not mind. Later I said to the leader of the group: "Okay, we can have another strategy and different views on this matter. But we can communicate and we should. We can talk in a polite way with each other." Some of our friends were very afraid to face this group, but I said it is okay. Usually there is the reflex that you want to avoid discussions or meetings with them and they treat women sometimes quite disrespectfully, like they use certain names of parts of the female body in a very rude way to silence women speakers. But I think they are afraid. We really have to be ready to face this problem. In *Komnas Perempuan* usually human rights are always an issue which is discussed as well in Europe, the US, and Asia-Pacific. But in the Middle East, there is a different perspective and it is not discussed over there. I think we should discuss with the activists from the Middle East at least about the migrant workers – because there are many Indonesian women who work there. We should talk about human rights with them. I consider Indonesia to have a strategic position. We consider ourselves as a bridge: We are not hardliners like in the Middle East,

¹³ They meant to say: "You are a Communist!"

but we have a network with Western societies as well. We have a lot of experience in human rights and we are the biggest Muslim country in the world. So we can legitimately talk about Islam. We should develop this. We have the knowledge, so why do we not talk together? Even if we have a lot of problems in Indonesia, we can talk about general and global issues. If you talk about the global terrorists there are two different worlds: Islam and the West. Indonesia is in between. We constitute transnational meetings with other human rights organisations in other countries like Pakistan, Switzerland, India, Bangladesh, and Iran. But Saudi Arabia is limited; it is very difficult to enter into the scene there.

GERLACH: That is very interesting. What do you think then – which reforms are due in Indonesia?

CHUZAIFAH: The general gender role model is that the wife should obey and follow the husband and serve him. The culture is still very patriarchal and many people are very critical of the concept of gender equality. For them gender is linked to feminism. They say it is a product of Western countries, which does not belong to the Indonesian culture. It is considered as *haram* [forbidden] by religious Muslims. Also the recent enactment of the Anti-Pornography Law is a setback for women's rights as the law is designed to target women rather than men and criminalises the female body. The problem is that the terms are not defined sufficiently and that people are allowed to act arbitrarily to punish possible violators. Yet, a 'real' law should be implemented because on the streets and on the internet porn is available easily. Also children can consume it.

There need to be reforms concerning the marital rape for example. A new draft was recently rejected in Parliament. But a successful reform was the implementation of the Marriage Law 2003-2004. Domestic violence was considered as a violation of the law.

A general lack in Indonesia is that there are rights and laws, but they are not upheld in public and by the police. Then you do not need any laws, if no one is following them. This is a challenge for the future.

GERLACH: Thank you very much for your time!