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Muslim Women in Past and Present Governmental Leadership: Case of Rulers of the Sultanate of Aceh and the Fifth President of the Republic of Indonesia

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Abstract

A Muslim woman is a woman who believes in Islam. In its historical path, Indonesia has been led by Muslim women along with the development of Islam in the Archipelago in the 17th century. A case example among others is the Sultanate of Aceh during the colonial period. During the independence period, Indonesia was also led by a Muslim woman as the fifth President of the Republic of Indonesia around the early 21st century. In these case examples of Muslim women as rulers, they received criticism during their reigns from men who viewed the matter from the perspective of Islam. This made an impact on the ongoing governance and the people. The article discusses how Muslim women leaders faced these criticisms from men who viewed the matter from the point of view of Islam and how it affected their governmental administration. Therefore, the article is expected to be able to reconstruct how Muslim women leaders face criticism from men who viewed the matter from the perspective of Islam. Research in this paper is conducted through historical method actions, preceded by source collection, selection and interpretation along with the reconstruction of the intended events, which is referred to as historiography. The study is also based on local sources, documents, and writings of related critics on the issue.

Keywords: *woman, Muslim, Sultanate, Aceh, Indonesia*

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Introduction

The term “*perempuan*” (woman), according to Prof. Moh. Yamin, is derived from the word ‘*empu*’ or ‘*pu*’ and the suffix ‘*an*’. The word “*perempuan*” means those that are placed first, honored and respected. Another word for *perempuan* is *wanita*. It is derived from the Sanskrit verb root of “*wan*” = honor/respect. It then becomes the word “*wanita*” after adding the suffix “*hita/ita*” which has a meaning of good, noble, and peace, onto the verb root “*wan*”. The term “woman” will be used throughout this article.

A Muslim woman is a woman who believes in Islam. In its historical path, Indonesia has been led by Muslim women, when Islam was developing in the Archipelago in the 17th Century. A case example among others is the Sultanate of Aceh during the colonial period. During the independence period, one case example among others is during the reformation era of Indonesia which was led by Megawati Soekarnoputri, a Muslim woman, as the fifth President of the Republic of Indonesia, in the early 21st century.

In Islam, women are highly honored. The Qur’an and Sunnah reflect great interest and respect for a woman’s position either as a child, wife, mother, sister, or in other roles. It is a truly important matter that Allah SWT revealed a surah in the Quran to Prophet Muhammad SAW, which is Surah An-Nisa. The Surah mostly discusses issues related to the role, position, and legal protection of women’s rights. In a hadith, for example, Prophet Muhammad SAW once said: “One of the characteristics of an honored man is the one gentlest to his wife” (Hadith narrated by Ahmad bin Hambal). Additionally, in another hadith, as spoken by Prophet Muhammad: “Paradise lies under the feet of the mother” (Hadith narrated by Ahmad bin Hambal, An Nasa’i, Ibnu Majah, Al Hakim). M. Qurais Shihab also stated that Islamic teachings give women great attention and noble positions. For example, in the Quran, from the perspective of dedication/service, Islam does not make any differences between men and women. The only difference used as a measuring tool to exalt or debase human being is the value of their devotion and piety to Allah SWT (Surah Al Hujarat: verse 13).¹

The Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam (Sultanate of Aceh) reached its height of power under the command of Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-1636), which at the time was confronted by the VOC which was aiming to monopolize the pepper trade in Aceh (colonial period). The Sultan was prominent in the field of politics, economy-trade, international relations, and was known for strengthening his forces, developing the cultural sector, and strengthening the Islamic religious life. After Sultan Iskandar’s leadership, the Sultanate of Aceh was led by several women who were influential in the governmental sector; among them are Laksamana Keumalahayati, Sultanah Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah, Sultanah Nurul Alam Naqiatuddin Syah, Sultanah Zakiatuddin Inayat Syah, and Sultanah Zinatuddin Kamalat Syah.²

The Republic of Indonesia gained its independence in 1945 and underwent a period of development and a reformation period. The reformation period was a post-new order reform led by B.J. Habibie (the third President of the Republic of Indonesia (1998-1999)), after the fall of President Soeharto. B.J. Habibie was soon replaced by Abdurrahman Wahid as the fourth president, with Megawati as Vice President in 1999-2001. Megawati became the fifth president of the Republic of Indonesia who governed from 23 July 2001-24 October 2004. She became Indonesia’s first female president and Indonesia’s first daughter of a former president to follow the steps of her father. On 20 September 2004, she lost to Bambang Susilo Yudhoyono in the second round of the 2004 presidential elections.

This journal discusses how Muslim women leaders faced criticism from men who viewed the matter from the perspective of Islam and how this influenced their government. The research was done through historical method actions, preceded by source collecting, source selection and interpretation along with the reconstruction of the intended events, which is referred to as the historiography of history. Research is based on local sources, documents, and writings of related critics to the issue.

¹ library.usu.ac.id/download/fh/perdata-utarymaharany.pdf.

² Marwati Djoened Poesponegoro, Nugraho Notosusanto, *Sejarah Nasional Indonesia III*, Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1984, page 31.

Muslim Women in Past and Present Governmental Leadership: Cases of the Ruler of the Sultanate of Aceh and the Fifth President of the Republic of Indonesia (R.I)

A Case of the Ruler of the Sultanate of Aceh

According to historical sources, it is stated that during the Islamic period in the 16th Century, the Sultanate of Aceh started to develop as a result of the Portuguese control over Malacca in 1511 AD. Aceh did not neglect this as they wanted drive the Portugese away from their area. To support the country's trade and defense sector, the Sultan of Aceh reinforced and expanded his marine fleet. One of the commanders of the Aceh fleet was a woman with a rank of admiral, known as Keumalahayati. Admiral Keumalahayati achieved, among others, victory in defeating two Dutch ships led by Corneli and Frederik de Houtman in 1599. Admiral Keumalahayati was also appointed to greet the envoy of the British Queen, Sir James Lancaster who came to Banda Aceh in 1602.³ Through these historical events, it can be clearly seen how a woman's diplomatic skill was not questionable.

During the 17th century, Islam was well developed in its civilization in the Sultanate of Aceh (Darussalam). The ruler of the Sultanate of Aceh is commonly known as a Sultan, but if a woman is in command, she is commonly known as a Sultanah. Through many historical facts, there is much evidence that women in the past were actively involved in numerous fields, including politics, economy, socio-culture, and military. During the 17th century, the Sultanate was ruled by a Sultanah. The first Sultanah to rule was Sultanah Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah (1641-1675), daughter of Sultan Iskandar Muda. She was fond of science and literature. She also focused her governance on education, economy, navy, and social affairs, especially in the expansion of Islam among her people. The Sultanah's efforts in expanding Islam were supported by Syeikh Nuruddin Al Raniri and Syeikh Abdul Rauf Singkel. During this period, the Sultanate encountered many attacks from the Dutch (VOC) which were confronted by the Sultanah with the assistance of hersubordinates. Many of her subordinate areas were liberated during that time. The third Sultanah to lead the Sultanate of Aceh was Sultanah Zakiatuddin Inayat Syah (1678-1688). Throughout the period, a Dutch named William Dampier reported "*the country was ruled by a Queen with 12 wealthy men or officials as hersubordinates. They ruled in many areas according to each of their own authority.*" The last Sultanah to rule was Zinatuddin Kamalat Syah (1688-1699). During the reign of the last Sultanah, the economic and political condition experienced a downfall which caused dissatisfaction among the people of Aceh, and together with the fatwa from a mufti in Mecca which forbade a woman to rule a country, Sultanah Zinatuddin finally stepped down from her throne and was replaced by her husband Sultan Badrul Alam Syarif Hasyim Jamalulail. Every Sultanah who ruled the Sultanate disbursed an amount of gold coins known as *deureuham* (dirham).⁴

Criticism and Impact on the Government of the Sultanate with Four Muslim Women Leaders

Sultanah Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah was the first woman to have been appointed as Sultanah in the Sultanate of Aceh. Her designation caused a socio-political and cultural upheaval due to the fact that men were not ready to accept being led by a woman. Political crisis also took place at the time. The reason behind this is because Sultan Iskandar Muda who governed in 1607-1636 as the Sultan of Aceh was relatively successful in leading the Sultanate of Aceh with the force of the naval army as a Maritime Sultanate and succeeded in monopolizing the pepper trade from their competitors, the Dutch and Portuguese. Sultan Iskandar Muda did not have any son, and thus the throne was taken by his son-in-law the King of Pahang, Sultan Iskandar Tsani, in 1636. Sultan Iskandar Tsani reigned until 1642 and he was replaced by his wife named Sultanah Tajul Alam Safiatuddin. She was the only daughter of Sultan Iskandar Muda and reigned in 1641-1676 AD.⁵

Political upheaval rose due to a clash of ideology between clergymen. Several clergymen stated that women were prohibited to rule, while others stated women were allowed to become leaders. Those who stated that women were allowed to lead argued that women were only prohibited to become imam in leading the daily prayers, while in being a leader in terms of worldly matters such as becoming

³ H.M. Atho Mudzhar, ed, *Wanita dalam Masyarakat Indonesia: Akses, Pemberdayaan dan Kesempatan*, Yogyakarta: Sunan Kalijaga Press, 2001, page 287-288

⁴ Hj. Pocut Haslinda Syahrul, MD. binti H. Teuku Abdul Hamid Azwar, *Perempuan Aceh Dalam Lintas Sejarah Abad VIII-XXI*, Jakarta: Pelita Hidup Insani, 2008, page 75-100.

⁵ H.M. Zainuddin, *Tarich Atjeh dan Nusantara*, 1st Edition. Medan : Pustaka Iskandar Muda, 1961, page 404-406

a Sultanah was not prohibited. Moreover, in that period, the only person to have the right to inherit the throne was Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah since Sultan Iskandar Muda only had a daughter.⁶ In addition, according to the Dutch (Nicolaus de Graaf) who once visited Aceh during that time, the succession crisis in the Sultanate made wealthy and affluent men⁷ compete for the highest position, which included becoming the Sultan of Aceh, since they all competed in becoming the ruler (sultan) of Aceh.⁸ War between elite groups has in fact persisted throughout the history of Aceh. The decade, between 1579 and 1589, for example, was known by historians as the period of political chaos, when every governing Sultan was killed, and it is inextricably related to the entrance of the Orang Kaya (the Affluent/Wealthy Men) into the political scene. They are a group of people known for their wealth and strength, and this led them to the tendency and ambition of gaining control of the country.

Their position was so strong that for a decade they were capable of toppling the leader (sultan) and replacing them with others, even though it had to be accomplished through assassination.⁹ During the inauguration of Iskandar Thani's widow named Puteri Sri Alam Permaisuri became the ruler (Sultanah) with the title of Taj al-Alam Safiyya al-Din (ruling in 1641-1675), an agreement between the two parties was made.¹⁰

The tradition of appointing women as leaders of Aceh continued after the first Sultanah died in 1675. She was replaced by Sultanah Nur Alam Naqiyyatuddin Syah who ruled in 1675-1678. According to the existing data, the designation of a second female leader, which was due to the absence of a male heir of the throne, was well accepted by the people. The governance of Sultanah Nur Alam Naqiyyatuddin Syah was marked by two important events. The first highlight was the emergence of new political strongholds in inland areas which became a threat for the government of Banda Aceh. The new political power was known as Sagi, which divided Aceh into 3 autonomous regions: Sagi consisting of 22 *mukims* (similar to a parish, with a mosque at its center), 26 *mukims*, and 25 *mukims*. The second highlight during her term of leadership was when Mosque Bayt al-Rahman and the royal palace completely destroyed by a fire.¹¹

Following the death of Sultanah Nur Alam Naqiyyatuddin Syah, another female leader known as Sultanah Zakiatuddin Inayat Syah (ruling in 1678-1688) became the third Sultanah. During this period, no male successions were available as heir to the throne and, again, it caused some confusion. This led the *Lembaga Panglima Sagi* (Association of the Commanders of Sagi), which was previously formed, to hold a consensus and appoint the third Sultanah as ruler of the Sultanate of Aceh, with the title Sultanah Zakiatuddin Inayat Syah. The inauguration was supported by all Aceh people through their representatives in the *Lembaga Panglima Sagi*. According to T.J. Veltmen, one of the influential Sagi was Panglima Polem who was still a descendant of Sultan Iskandar Muda.¹²

During her leadership, Sultanah Zakiatuddin Inayat Syah was consistent to the application of the law and constitution formerly administered by her predecessors; *Majelis Orang Kaya* (Assembly of the Affluent) and *Panglima Tiga Sagi* (Three Sagi Commanders) functioned in accordance with the *Adat Meukota Alam* law; Differing from the members of the *Lembaga Panglima Sagi* which consisted of three (3) people, members of the *Majelis Orang Kaya* consisted of 12 members. The function of the association was similar to ministries in the modern governments of country which was to assist the Sultanah and apply her policies made by.¹³

The Sultanah received an honorary visit from a representative from Mecca. Initially, the representative's visit was not for to meet e Sultanah but to help Sjech Abdul Rauf, a well-known

⁶ Hj. Pocut Haslinda Syahrul, MD. binti H. Teuku Abdul Hamid Azwar, *Perempuan Aceh Dalam Lintas Sejarah Abad VIII-XXI*, Jakarta: Pelita Hidup Insani, 2008, page 75.

⁷ The group was known as "aristocrats" who are generally traders. Throughout history, they are very powerful and influential in terms of economy and politic.

⁸ Prof. Dr. Amirul Hasdi, M.A. *Aceh Sejarah, Budaya dan Tradisi*. Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2010, page 127

⁹ *Ibid.* page 127-128.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* page 128.

¹¹ *Ibid.* page 128-129.

¹² Hj. Pocut Haslinda Syahrul, MD. binti H. Teuku Abdul Hamid Azwar, *Perempuan Aceh Dalam Lintas Sejarah Abad VIII-XXI*, Jakarta: Pelita Hidup Insani, 2008, page 91.

¹³ *Ibid.* page 92.

clergyman (who supported the Sultanah), but persistently challenged by other clergyman and aristocrats who wanted to take over the power from women leaders.¹⁴

Inayah Syah died in 1688 and was replaced by another Sultanah namely Kamalat Syah who ruled in 1688-1699. Similar to her predecessors, the origins of Kamalat Syah is still a mystery. However, unlike her other predecessors who received approval from the people, the appointment of Kamalat Syah as ruler received severe opposition especially from *Kelompok Orang Kaya*. They demanded that leadership of the Sultanate be returned to men, a demand which was finally fulfilled in 1699. An interesting point to analyze is the fact that the queen/Sultanah's resignation in that year was not due to the pressure from the opposition, but rather because of the "fatwa" from Mecca which stressed that woman as leaders was not in accordance with the Islamic teaching. This incident marked the end of the Sultanah governance which lasted 59 years. The government of Aceh was then held by the Arabic descendants, namely Sultan Badr al-Alam Sharif Hashim Jamal al-Din (ruled in 1699-1702). From this point forward, the Sultanate of Aceh experienced a decline.¹⁵

Case of the Fifth President of the Republic of Indonesia

The presidency of the Fifth President of the Republic of Indonesia took place during the reformation era¹⁶, which is the post-New Order era. The New Order is the period governed by Soeharto, as the President of the Republic of Indonesia, which experienced political, socioeconomic, and cultural crisis along with security and defense crisis. The fifth president of the Republic of Indonesia was a Muslim woman, named Megawati Soekarnoputri or commonly known as Mega (born in Jogjakarta, 23 January 1947), who was president from 23 July 2001 to 20 October 2004. She is the first female president of Indonesia and the first daughter of the Indonesian president to have followed her father steps. She was appointed as president after the People's Consultative Assembly held a Special Session of the People's Consultative Assembly in 2001. The Special Session of the People's Consultative Assembly was called in response to President Abdurrahman Wahid's (Gus Dur) action who ordered the parliament to be frozen over both the People's Consultative Assembly and the House of People's Representative, along with the Golkar Party. Megawati was inaugurated in 23 July 2001 after previously being appointed as the vice president to Gus Dur from 1999-2001. She also became the Chairman of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) since its separation from the Indonesian Democratic Party in 1999.

In the 1999 legislative election, Mega's Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) revised its name into PDI Perjuangan and succeeded in winning the election. Although it wasn't an absolute victory, the party still managed to win 30% of the votes. Supporters demanded Mega to be the president. If Mega was not appointed as president, they threatened that a revolution would take place. However, the result that the consensus reached through the Special Session in 1999 was unlike the ultimatum: KH Abdurrahman Wahid was appointed as president. Megawati lost the presidential election by a small number: 313 to 373. With Gus Dur's victory as president and Megawati's unsuccessful attempt in running for president in 1999, the process of presidential election was then altered from being appointed and chosen by the People's Consultative Assembly to be chosen directly by the people. Other than to support democracy, this mechanism of presidential election was implemented in order for the president to have a powerful stand as a result of the people's own choice¹⁷.

Following her appointment as president through the Special Session of the People's Consultative Assembly in 2001, Megawati constituted a cabinet known as *Kabinet Gotong Royong* (Mutual Cooperation Cabinet) for her presidency. Megawati's political actions were among others:

1. Maintaining the stability of the Nation. Attempts were made by improving harmony between the people and by improving economic stabilization. These attempts faced huge challenges due to the Bali Bombing case in 12 October 2002.

¹⁴ H.M. Zainuddin, *Tarich Atjeh dan Nusantara*, Cetakan I. Medan: Pustaka Iskandar Muda, 1961, page 109.

¹⁵ Prof. Dr. Amirul Hasdi, M.A. *Aceh Sejarah, Budaya dan Tradisi*. Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2010, page 129-130.

¹⁶ Reformation is a movement for improvement through structural and processual changes in every aspect of life as a nation apart from its ideology/basic philosophy. Prof. Dr. Juwono Sudarsono, M.A. and Dr. Ir. Wahyudi Ruwiyanto. *Reformasi Sosial Budaya dalam Era Globalisasi*, Jakarta: PT. Wacha Widia Perdana, 1999, page 5.

¹⁷ Prof. Dr. Kacung Marijan, *Sistem Politik Indonesia: Konsolidasi Demokrasi Pasca-Orde Baru*. Jakarta: Kencana, 2011, page 106.

2. Maintaining the Nation's unity. This was done by taking decisive actions in areas showing any signs of separation such as the case of Papua, Maluku, Poso and other areas.
3. Constituting a new political order. This was carried out by establishing new regulations, which include: Constitution Regulation Number 12 Year 2003 regarding the election; Constitution Regulation Number 22 Year 2003 regarding the structure and position of the People's Consultative Assembly and the House of People's Representative; Constitution Regulation Number 23 Year 2003 regarding presidential, both president and vice president, election. In addition, Megawati also gave assistance in terms of funding, human resources and other resources in order to support enforcement of these regulations. In other fields, civil servants and the Indonesia National Army were required to be politically neutral.
4. Continuing the amendment of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia. In an attempt to accommodate development at the time and the dynamics of the people, amendments of the 1945 Constitution were being done. Amendments were achieved through four stages. The first and second Amendments were authorized in the preceding government, while the third and fourth Amendments were authorized during Megawati's presidency.
5. Continuing the implementation of regional autonomy.

Megawati's presidency was marked with a reinforcement of democracy consolidation in Indonesia. Governmental administration was immediately carried out and was generally considered as one milestones of success in the democratic process in Indonesia. Megawati lost (40%-60%) in the presidential election of 2004 and had to hand over the presidency to Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who was the former Minister Coordinator during Megawati's term.¹⁸

Criticism and Impact on the Government of the Fifth President of the Republic of Indonesia

Megawati's past experience filled with various political escapades has made her tough in facing the political opposition. As the president of the Republic of Indonesia, Megawati faced a lot of criticism due to her leadership style which was remaining quiet, always avoiding the press, and she also did not talk much in formal forums.¹⁹

Megawati Soekarnoputri's term of office from 2001 was marked with little achievement. Megawati did not inherit her father's charisma, and was not quite competent in terms of administration matters and leadership, and in terms of her passive and introvert character, it was similar to Soeharto's style.²⁰

One of the highlights of Megawati's term was the rising numbers of privatization of state-owned enterprises (SOE). SOE privatization policy generally states that the ownership of SOE by the state is erased or at least, minimized because ownership or management is given to private institutions. Public ownership shifts into private ownership. This is basically a form of deviation since SOE is one of the forms of income for the state which must be taken into account specifically. Such deviations are reflected, for instance, in the privatization policy of PT. Semen Gresik and PT. Indosat. Privatizations were also deeply opposed as they were considered to have caused loss for the country worth trillions of rupiah with such a low selling price. The government's decision to sell PT. Semen Gresik and PT. Indosat and considering it as a way to gain direct and fresh funding to cover deficit of the state funding did not reflect any future strategic steps as part of the government's goal in terms of the development planning, especially in the industrial sector. The privatization was also elitist in its nature and did not involve any participation of the general public in shareholding.²¹

Many people considered Megawati's governance as a disappointment, although Megawati stated that she was merely continuing Abdurrahman Wahid's term of governance, resulting in outcomes that are not optimal. Disappointments of the people were reflected through many actions and demonstrations held by scholars who criticized Megawati's term of office. The protests were related to corruption, collusion and nepotism which increased in its practice, along with intensive privatization of

¹⁸ "Biografi Presiden Megawati Soekarno Putri," biografi.web.id/presiden-megawati-soekarnoputri.

¹⁹ Khoirudin. 2004. *Kilas Balik Pemilihan Presiden 2004*. Jakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, page 124-125.

²⁰ M.C. Ricklefs. 2009. *Sejarah Indonesia Modern 1200-2008*. Jakarta: Serambi, page 718.

²¹ <http://www.averroes.or.id/uncategorized/kebijakan-privatisasi-bumn-relasi-state-market-dan-civil-society.html>.

SOE and the rise of prices of goods.²² This was also due to the government's policy in increasing the price of fuel which was followed by an increase in the price of goods and phones, causing a more difficult life for those in the lower class. It can also be concluded that the disappointment was reflected in the loss of votes for PDI-P in the 2004 election and thus Megawati lost in race for presidency in the following period. It indicated the decline in the people's trust after observing the previous government administration.²³

Conclusions

This paper has discussed Muslim women's leaderships which occurred during political crisis but in different eras (periods). Woman leadership in the Sultanate of Aceh occurred during its resistance towards the VOC (Dutch East India Trade Company) which tried to monopolize the pepper trade in the Sultanate of Aceh around the 17th Century. On the other hand, women leadership in the Republic of Indonesia took place at the end of the 20th and early 21st century during the reformation era, when transformation was sought due to political, economic, social, and cultural crisis along with security and defense crisis.

The first women to rule in the Sultanate of Aceh was the daughter of a powerful leader, Sultan Iskandar Muda, while the first female President of the Republic of Indonesia was the daughter of the first president of the Republic of Indonesia, President Soekarno.

From the religious perspective, the role of women leaders received support from the clergymen in Indonesia. A note of difference between the two governance is how the reign of the Sultanah of the Sultanate of Aceh ended due to a prohibition declared by a mufti from Mecca which prohibited women to become leaders (Sultanah), while the presidency of Megawati came at the end of her term of office as president (as regulated in the amended 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia).

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²²Tjipta Lesmana. 2009. *Dari Soekarno Sampai SBY Intrik dan Lobi Politik Para Penguasa*. Jakarta: Gramedia, page 267-268.

²³*Ibid.* page 274.

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