BOOK REVIEW FATWA IN INDONESIA: AN ANALYSIS OF DOMINANT LEGAL IDEAS AND MORE OF THOUGHT OF FATWA-MAKING AGENCIES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS IN THE POST-NEW ORDER PERIOD

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BOOK REVIEW

FATWA IN INDONESIA:
AN ANALYSIS OF DOMINANT LEGAL IDEAS AND MODE OF THOUGHT OF FATWA-MAKING AGENCIES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS IN THE POST-NEW ORDER PERIOD

The book was written by Dr. Pradana Boy ZTF, a lecturer at Faculty of Islamic Studies Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, and a prominent scholar of Muhammadiyah derived from his dissertation at the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 2015. This book looks at fatwa in Indonesia during the fall of President Suharto (New Order) in 1998. It is about the exploration of three fatwa-making agencies—namely Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Council of Ulama), Lajnah Bahtsul Masail Nahdlatul Ulama (‘Bahtsul Masail’ means discussion of the problems), and Majelis Tarjih Muhammadiyah—(‘Majelis Tarjih’ means ‘Assessment Council’).

At this book, rather than look at all the fatwa that have emerged in the period, Pradana focuses on those that have substantial repercussions for intra-community relations and the development of Indonesian Muslims more generally, including fatwa about sectarianism, pluralism, secularism, and liberalism. The fatwa on Ahmadiyah and Syi’ah Group in Indonesia made by Majelis Ulama Indonesia are among the fatwas that Pradana seriously highlight at this book.

The fatwa is a ruling or interpretation on the point of Islamic law given by a qualified legal scholar (known as a mufti). Though considered authoritative, fatwas are generally not treated as binding judgments; a requester who finds a fatwa unconvincing is permitted to seek another opinion (Britannica.com). Pradana also claims that fatwa is non-binding Islamic legal opinion and differs markedly from the law in its essence. However, despite this fact, fatwā plays a very significant role in defining and dealing with many contemporary issues in Indonesian society.

The author reveals how fatwa is conditioned by the mode of thought of its agencies. Competing way of thinking within a specific organization (in this research are Majelis Ulama Indonesia, Nahdhatul Ulama, and Muhammadiyah) or movement may reflect the diversity of orientations of particular social groups within the agency and the interplay between them. Dominant, as opposed to marginal directions within a single agency, is also highlighted where necessary.

Pradana mentions that MUI, a quasi-state religious body representing all the major Islamic organizations in the country, is widely known for its traditionalistic/conservative religious orientation. Muhammadiyah, on the other hand, is popularly perceived as a modernist Islamic movement, while NU is generally viewed as an
example of an Islamic movement with traditionalist leanings.

Subsequently, Pradana asserts that political and social changes within the context of post-Suharto Indonesia (after the New Order) have conditioned both shifts and reinforced specific modes of religious thought of the selected fatwa-making agencies. In the case of MUI, it is argued that its fatwa relating to sectarianism, deviance, and pluralism issued by the Central Board and its provinces (for example the MUI of East Java which issued a fatwa that Syiah Group is deviant) reinforce distinct traits of Islamic traditionalism/conservatism as well as elements of utopian religious orientation.

On the other hand, the analysis of the fatwas of Bahtsul Masail of NU on ritual and non-ritual issues affirms that during rapid social change confronting Muslim society in the post-Suharto Indonesia, NU is maintaining its strong characteristic of traditionalism. However, while this mode of thinking is predominant in its fatwā, contemporary elements within NU also manifest competing ways of thought which challenge the dominant style of opinion within the movement.

Pradana also claims that The fatwā of Majelis Tarjih, which covers rituals and socio-economic issues, reveals mixed modes of religious thought and orientations within Muhammadiyah. It bears strong inclinations of revivalism as well as traditionalism.

Research conducted by Pradana reveals that while some fatwa issued by fatwa-making agencies do explain outcomes that are positive to society in some instances, the level of abstraction of problems and radius of vision cannot be said to be reformist. The MUI's fatwa relating to freedom of religion and belief as well as on liberalism, pluralism, and sectarianism (issued in 2005) mirror strong elements of conservatism and revivalism.

Furthermore, the author marks that the fatwa's plausible motive is also reinforced by the overt justifications it offers for all the fatwa, namely the protection and preservation of the unity of the umma. This selective sense of danger obscures reality while legitimizing its role as guardian of the faith.

Last but not least, Pradana concludes that the selected fatwas in the post-New Order period issued by these three prominent agencies are predominantly influenced by traditionalist, conservative, and revivalist modes of thought. While some reformist traits exist in fatwa and fatwa-making, this mode of thought remains marginal. These predominant modes of thought bear substantial implications for the extent of the role of fatwa in contributing to Indonesia’s development and well-being as the most predominantly Muslim country in the world and also provide challenges to Indonesia’s plural society and social change.