



## Ulama in Indonesian Politics: Analysis on the Attitudes of The Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) on the General Elections

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**Abstract:** *This article discusses the attitudes of Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) on Indonesian general elections. It will compare the attitudes of the MUI in the general elections in the New Order and post-New Order era. There are six elections that are to be examined in this article, from 1977 to 2009. This article is based on qualitative research by using a comparative approach, specifically when searching for the difference in the attitude of the MUI in the New Order era and the MUI post-New Order. The data of this research is taken from the official magazine of MUI, *Mimbar Ulama* from the time it was published in 1975 to 2009. This article argues that the MUI in post-New Order times tried to be a player in the political context while in the New Order era the MUI took a safer stance. Under the New Order regime, the MUI could be regarded as playing safely by supporting the government. This standing is different from the post-New Order period where the MUI attitudes in the general elections are determined by political developments. The MUI changed its attitude both by distancing itself from the government and it improvised its decisions in accordance with the political context.*

**Keywords:** *Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI, the general elections, fatwas, ulama*

### Introduction

The Indonesian Council of Ulama or *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI) is a religious body that was established by the Soeharto regime in 1975. Its first objective was mainly to support the government program within the society. This objective can be seen in the statute of the MUI which is said that the MUI aims to give advice and *fatwas* regarding religious problems in particular, and the nation's problems in general, to the government and society. In addition, the MUI is also expected to promote unity among Muslims, and to act as a mediator between the government and the *ulama*.<sup>1</sup>

The important role of such a situation resulted from the authority of *ulama* in issuing a *fatwa*. According to Wael Hallaq, *fatwas* played an important role in the growth and gradual change of Islamic substantive law.<sup>2</sup> In terms of religious authority, *fatwas* are also important

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<sup>1</sup> Majelis Ulama Indonesia, *15 Tahun Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (Jakarta: Sekretariat Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Wael B. Hallaq, "From *Fatwās* to *Furū*: Growth and Change in Islamic Substantive Law," *Islamic Law and Society* 1, no. 1 (1994): 29–65.

because through this media *ulama* can express their ideas and opinions concerning Islamic law.<sup>3</sup>

Beside issuing fatwa, the MUI has another product such as *Tausiyah*, *Tadzkirah*, *Amanah*, *Pernyataan Sikap* and others. These products are usually issued in expressing MUI's opinion on political matters. These attitudes can be seen in several statements and recommendations issued by the MUI in the elections during the New Order era. Most of them were in favour of Suharto to become the next Indonesian president or to support the New Order government.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that the MUI supported the government was probably caused by pressure from the government. We can see this from the objective of the government to establish the MUI. From the time it was established, the New Order regime wanted the MUI to be the interpreter, to bridge the gap between the government programmes and the Indonesian people. In order to keep this objective, Suharto, the President of Indonesia at the time, restricted MUI activities different from other Islamic organisations as well as forbade the MUI from getting involved in political matters.<sup>5</sup> For that reason it makes sense that the MUI was in favour of Suharto maintaining his presidency during the New Order era. This idea is supported by several scholars such as Atho Mudzhar,<sup>6</sup> M.B. Hooker,<sup>7</sup> Nur Ichwan<sup>8</sup> and Kees van Dijk,<sup>9</sup> who argue that the MUI was mostly under government control in the New Order era.

Moreover, after the fall of Suharto in 1998, it seemed that the MUI shifted its attitudes. It can be said that the MUI was no longer in support of the government. This is evident from the 1999 general elections, when the MUI began to distance itself from the government and speak out in the interests of Islamic parties. At that moment, the MUI issued three *taushiah* which clearly endorsed Islamic parties by stating that Muslims should vote for Muslim candidates.<sup>10</sup> Atho Mudzhar noted that in the post-New Order era "the MUI touched on political issues of high sensitivity and, therefore triggered controversies."<sup>11</sup> What stimulated this choice were probably the decrease of state pressure and the increased power of civil society. On the other hand, as the New Order regime ended, the MUI intended to revise its position and change the stigma of being a supporter of the New Order policies.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Nico J.G. Kaptein, "The Voice of the Ulama': Fatwas and Religious Authority in Indonesia," *Archives de Sciences Sociales Des Religions* 125, no. January-March (2004): 115–30.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, in 1982 after the MUI national Meeting, the MUI issued a statement which advised the members of the House of Representatives (DPR) to vote for Suharto in the presidential elections. See *Keputusan Rapat Kerja Nasional Majelis Ulama se-Indonesia, Mimbar Ulama*, no. 57, April 1982, pp. 25-31. This kind of statements was repeated each time Indonesia prepared for elections, such as in 1987 (*Seruan Bersama Berkenaan dengan Pemilu, Mimbar Ulama*, no. 115, Maret 1987), 1992 (*Keputusan Rapat Kerja Nasional Majelis Ulama Indonesia Tahun 1413/1992, Mimbar Ulama*, no. 178, December 1992) and 1997 (*Tausyiah Majelis Ulama Indonesia Hasil Rakernas Tahun 1997, Mimbar Ulama*, no. 224, April 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Majelis Ulama Indonesia, *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (Jakarta: Sekretariat Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 1976), 15–19.

<sup>6</sup> Mohammad Atho Mudzar, *Fatwa-Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia: Sebuah Studi Tentang Pemikiran Hukum Islam Di Indonesia, 1975-1988* (Jakarta: INIS, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Michael Barry Hooker, "Islam and Medical Science: Evidence from Malaysian and Indonesian Fatāwā, 1960-1995," *Studia Islamika* 4, no. 4 (1997): 1–33.

<sup>8</sup> Nur Ichwan, "Ulama, State and Politics: MUI after Suharto," *Islamic Law and Society* 12, no. 1 (2005): 45–72.

<sup>9</sup> Cees van Dijk, "Religious Authority, Politics, and Fatwas," in *Islamic Law in Contemporary Indonesia, Ideas and Institutions*, ed. R. Michael Feener and Mark E. Cammack (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 44–65.

<sup>10</sup> *Mimbar Ulama*, No. 250, June 1999, p. 27. See also Ichwan, "Ulama, State and Politics: MUI after Suharto."

<sup>11</sup> Mohammad Atho Mudzar, "The 'Ulama', the Government, and Society in Modern Indonesia: The Indonesian Council of 'Ulama' Revisited," in *Islam in the Era of Globalization: Muslim Attitudes towards Modernity and Identity*. Jakarta: INIS, ed. Johan Meuleman, 2001, 315–26.

<sup>12</sup> There were several actions of the MUI which represented this image such as the issuance of eleven *fatwas* in 2009, among others a *fatwa* regarding the Ahmadiyah sect in Indonesia and a *fatwa* forbidding pluralism, liberalism and secularism. See Piers Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam: Analysing the 2005 Council

There are several scholars who published their works on MUI such as Nadirsyah Hosen,<sup>13</sup> Atho Mudzhar,<sup>14</sup> Pier Gillespie,<sup>15</sup> dan Syafiq Hasyim.<sup>16</sup> However, none of these scholars discussed in particular the issue of MUI and the general elections. Only Nur Ichwan<sup>17</sup> touches upon this issue but limited only in the 1999 general elections. Therefore, this article will fill the gap and contribute to the discussion of MUI and its role in political sphere in Indonesia. In general, this article will elaborate the attitudes and influences of the MUI on the general elections in the New Order and two elections in post New Order Indonesia. It will compare the MUI attitudes in both of the regime and analyse the shift of its attitudes. Why the MUI suddenly change its attitudes, from supporting the government as it happened in the New Order era to be against the government in the post-New Order? Is it related to the decline of the government's pressure toward Islamic politics or is it related with the political ambition of the MUI? Regarding the structure of this article, it firstly discusses the MUI attitudes in the New Order era. Before explaining the MUI attitudes in the post New Order general elections, this article will discuss first the political position of the MUI and then sum it up in the conclusion section.

### MUI's Attitudes in the General Elections in the New Order Era

As stated above that the MUI was established in 1975. Therefore, the elections which will be analysed are the ones from 1977 to 1997. First to be analysed are the 1977 general elections. In these elections, the MUI brought out a statement (*pernyataan*) regarding its position in the general elections. It was published in *Mimbar Ulama* in April 1977, a month before the elections in May. The statement was entitled *Pernyataan Majelis Ulama Indonesia Menghadapi Pemilu* (the Statement of the Indonesian Council of *Ulama* concerning the General Elections).

Seeing the content, this statement can be regarded as general. It did not give any specific endorsement either to the government or to the parties and Golkar. It just gave a general preposition for Muslims as well as for the *ulama* to participate in the general elections for the country's development. The only political statement was the necessity for the *ulama* not to speak of politics during their preaching because it would endanger the coming elections.<sup>18</sup>

However, this statement was made after "pressure" coming from the government. The meaning of pressure here is the presence of the government in several MUI activities asking the MUI to participate in the general elections. The most conspicuous one was the speech of President Suharto in front of the *ulama* during the training of *ulama* on 13 December 1976 in Jakarta. The speech mainly covered the importance of the elections. It asserted that because of

of Indonesian Ulama Fatwa No. 7 Opposing Pluralism, Liberalism and Secularism," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18, no. 2 (2007): 202–40.

<sup>13</sup> Nadirsyah Hosen, "Behind the Scenes: Fatwas of Majelis Ulama Indonesia (1975-1998)," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 15, no. 2 (2004): 147–79.

<sup>14</sup> Mudzar, *Fatwa-Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia: Sebuah Studi Tentang Pemikiran Hukum Islam Di Indonesia, 1975-1988*; Mudzar, "The 'Ulama', the Government, and Society in Modern Indonesia."

<sup>15</sup> Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam: Analysing the 2005 Council of Indonesian Ulama Fatwa No. 7 Opposing Pluralism, Liberalism and Secularism."

<sup>16</sup> Syafiq Hasyim, "Majelis Ulama Indonesia and Pluralism in Indonesia," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 41, no. 4–5 (2015): 487–95.

<sup>17</sup> Nur Ichwan, "Ulama, State and Politics: MUI after Suharto," *Islamic Law and Society* 12, no. 1 (2005): 45–72; Nur Ichwan, "Toward A Puritanical Moderate Islam: The Majelis Ulama Indonesia and the Politics of Religious Orthodoxy," in *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the "Conservative Turn,"* ed. Martin Van Bruinessen (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013), 60–104.

<sup>18</sup> *Mimbar Ulama*, no. 09, April 1977, p. 70.

its importance, everyone had the obligation to try to achieve orderly, peaceful and secure elections. For that reason it was the duty of the *ulama* to contribute to successful elections.<sup>19</sup>

From this fact, it can be seen that the MUI statement regarding the general elections was a reaction to the government's demand of the *ulama* to support the 1977 general elections. The speech of President Suharto during the training of the *ulama* showed that Suharto tried to get the support of the *ulama* for his administration. His words emphasizing orderly, peaceful and secure elections can be interpreted in terms of the unwillingness of the government to accept any criticism from the opposition. Another indication was the *Mimbar Ulama* magazine published in May which also included Suharto's speech at the House of Representatives in August 1976. In that speech, he said he hoped that in the 1977 general elections there would be no clash of powers that would endanger the recent stability.<sup>20</sup>

In 1982, MUI's attitude in the general elections went further. At that time, the MUI board had a new chairman after the resignation of Hamka in 1981. His resignation was a reaction to the refusal of the government regarding the MUI *fatwa* that prohibited Muslims from participating in Christmas celebrations. The government had asked for its withdrawal, but Hamka refused to do so. Because of this conflict, Hamka decided to resign on 19 May 1981. Two months later, on 24 July 1981, Hamka died at the age of 75.<sup>21</sup>

Hamka was replaced by K.H Syukri Ghozali. Different from Hamka who affiliated with Muhammadiyah, K.H Syukri Ghozali belonged to Nahdlatul Ulama. In terms of the MUI policy concerning the general elections, the MUI under the leadership of Syukri Ghozali was very different from Hamka's time. As was explained, Hamka did not give a strong indication the MUI would support the government. It just issued a general statement urging Muslims to use their vote for the best candidate. In Syukri Ghozali's time, the MUI gave a direct endorsement of Suharto for the next period. The first endorsement can be seen in the statement of the MUI board after it held a board meeting on 20 August 1981, which was continued by the MUI national meeting on 21-22 August in Jakarta. These two meetings enacted several programmes and recommendations. One of the recommendations was to thank President Suharto and his state apparatus for the development of Indonesia and to express hope that the President would continue working and developing Indonesia. It was also to urge people to participate in the next year's elections.<sup>22</sup>

This recommendation was strengthened by another national meeting in March 1982, two months before the elections which were held in May 1982. Like the previous national meeting, this meeting passed several recommendations, one of them regarding the general elections. These recommendations were published in *Mimbar Ulama* as *Keputusan Rapat Kerja Nasional Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (the decision of the national meeting of the MUI). Regarding the elections, this decision had two items; the first regarding *kepemimpinan nasional* (national leadership) and the second concerning the 1982 general elections. In terms of its recommendation regarding the national leadership, MUI's opinion conspicuously supported Suharto as the next president.<sup>23</sup>

These two recommendations show clearly that the MUI under K.H Syukri Ghozali was really a supporter of the government. With many recommendations saying that re-election of Suharto as the next president would be good for the stability of national development, it

<sup>19</sup> *Mimbar Ulama*, "Sambutan Presiden Soeharto Kepada Para Peserta Pekan Orientasi Ulama/Khatib Seluruh Indonesia Tanggal 13 Desember 1976," April 1977.

<sup>20</sup> *Mimbar Ulama*, "Pidato Kenegaraan Presiden R.I Di Depan Sidang DPR Tanggal 16 Agustus 1976 Mengenai Pemilu," April 1977.

<sup>21</sup> Karel A. Steenbrink, "Hamka (1908-1981) and the Integration of the Islamic Ummah of Indonesia," *Studia Islamika* 1, no. 3 (1994): 121-47.

<sup>22</sup> *Hasil Rapat Pengurus Paripurna Lengkap dan Rapat Kerja Nasional Majelis Ulama Indonesia, Mimbar Ulama*, no. 51, April 1981, pp. 4-46.

<sup>23</sup> *Keputusan Rapat Kerja Nasional Majelis Ulama se-Indonesia, Mimbar Ulama*, no. 57, April 1982, pp. 25-31.

shows that MUI was in the shadow of the government. The term national development or *pembangunan nasional* itself was a really a term which was created by the government. Using this term means the MUI was driven by the interests of the regime.

Interestingly, this recommendation was not the only one that was composed by *ulama* regarding the re-election of Suharto. Another one came from Nahdlatul Ulama. However, this recommendation was the complete opposite of MUI's recommendation. It was issued at the national conference of Nahdlatul Ulama in 1981, stating that Nahdlatul Ulama refused to endorse Suharto and did not support him becoming president for a third time. This conference also disapproved of giving Suharto the title of *Bapak Pembangunan* (Father of Development).<sup>24</sup>

In the 1987 general elections, MUI's attitude was different from 1977 and 1982. What made it different was that the recommendation concerning the elections was not issued by the MUI only, but also by other religious organisations such as *Persekutuan Gereja-Gereja di Indonesia* or the Fellowship of Christian Churches in Indonesia (PGI), *Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia* or the Bishop's Conference in Indonesia (KWI), *Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia* or the Hindu Council of Religious Affairs (PHDI), and the Trusteeship of Indonesian Buddhists (WALUBI). All of these organisations signed a statement entitled *Seruan Bersama Berkenaan Dengan Pemilu* (Joint Statement Regarding the General Elections). This statement was made in March 1987, a month before the elections which were held in April 1987.<sup>25</sup>

This joint statement from different religious organisations can be interpreted as the victory of the state over religions in Indonesia. It means that at the end of this time, from the 1970s when the New Order regime tried to establish a strong state vis-à-vis political parties whether they be Islamic, Christian and Catholic or nationalist, until the 1980s when this system worked, the regime was successful in planting its system. Liddle argues that in this year the New Order regime was at the height of its power. There was no more opposition of the parties as there was in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the NU faction of the PPP opposed several policies of the regime. In addition, the return of NU to *Khittah* 1926, which forced them to withdraw from any and all political activities, created instability within the PPP. Its number of votes decreased remarkably from 27.8% in 1982 to 16.0% in 1987.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, there was a *fatwa* from K.H Ahmad Siddiq, the *Rais Aam* of the Nahdlatul Ulama at the time, stating that members of NU were not obliged to vote for the PPP and it was not forbidden to vote either for Golkar or PDI. This *fatwa* surely affected the results of the elections.<sup>27</sup> This can be seen in the election results: Golkar saw a significant raise, from 64.3% of the votes in 1982 to 73.2% in 1987, whereas the PDI increased by 3%, from 7.9% in 1982 to 10.9% in 1987.

In 1992, the MUI statement regarding the general elections was started in East Java. In this province, the MUI initiated an agreement between the *ulama* and the government of East Java (*Kesepakatan ulama dan Umara se-Jawa Timur*). The agreement was not only made by the *ulama* within the MUI board, but also by the leaders of Islamic organisations and the leaders of a traditional Islamic boarding school (*Pondok Pesantren*) in East Java. On that occasion, the agreement was attended by the Governor of East Java, the chairman of the East Java House of Representatives, and also the chairmen of several political parties and Golkar.

<sup>24</sup> Sidney Jones, "The Contraction and Expansion of the 'Umat' and the Role of the Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia," *Indonesia*, no. 38 (1984): 1–20.

<sup>25</sup> *Seruan Bersama Berkenaan dengan Pemilu*, *Mimbar Ulama*, no. 115, Maret 1987, pp. 55–56.

<sup>26</sup> R. William Liddle, "Indonesia in 1987: The New Order at the Height of Its Power," *Asian Survey* 28, no. 2 (1988): 180–91.

<sup>27</sup> Syamsuddin Haris, "PPP and Politics under the New Order," *Prisma - The Indonesian Indicator* 49, no. 31 (1990): 31–51.

It comprised of several points but only two items were related to the general elections.<sup>28</sup> The agreement itself was released in January 1992, four months before the elections which were held in June 1992.

In addition to the agreement, the national board of the MUI also announced a decision after a national meeting in Jakarta. Different from the agreement which was issued before the elections, the decision of the national board was issued in December 1992, five months after the elections and two months before the presidential elections in March 1993. It looks like this decision was issued particularly to endorse Suharto as the president for another term. It is particularly stated that Muhammad Suharto was the exact figure to be the next leader for this nation.<sup>29</sup>

Both agreements are undisputable signs of real support of the MUI for the government, first by the MUI in East Java and second from its national board. This unanimous support of the MUI to some extent can be related to the condition of political Islam in this decade, as can be seen from the analyses of several scholars. William Liddle, for example, argues that in the 1990s Suharto's policy toward political Islam had changed, and he uses ICMI as the example of the shift,<sup>30</sup> while Hefner called the situation in the 1990s 'the shifting opportunism of the presidents' religious policies'; he does so because Suharto used Islamic issues, especially through the establishment of the ICMI for his own interests.<sup>31</sup>

Surely this change affected the political position of the MUI. It can be said that its support for the government was getting stronger. This situation can be analysed to show that the concern of President Suharto regarding Muslim politics had changed. If in the 1970s up to the 1980s Muslims were under control, in the 1990s Muslims in politics were vindicated, referring to the ICMI establishment. Even though Muslim politics were acquitted, this did not give much influence to the PPP as a representative of Islam. Golkar still won the general elections with 68.1% of the votes, second was the PPP with 17.0% and third PDI with 14.9%.

In 1997, the MUI once again gave a statement regarding to the general elections. This statement was different from previous statements. In 1997, a new title was used; *taushiah*, an Arabic word which means recommendation. This was the first time for the MUI to use the name *taushiah* for its opinion regarding the general elections. In content, the *taushiah* concluded and urged Muslims to be good citizens, stating that they have a moral responsibility for the success of national development under the New Order regime. Therefore, they should participate and use their votes in the general elections. The *taushiah* also emphasized the importance of the 1997 general elections and the plenary session of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) in 1998.<sup>32</sup>

The endorsement of the MUI only emerged a year later after the results of the general elections were known and Golkar had won the election. This statement was issued after a national meeting in Jakarta. In general, the statement was a reaction to the economic crisis in 1997. The MUI assumed that Suharto's experience was needed to solve the crisis.<sup>33</sup> Another indication was the participation of the general chairman of the MUI at that time, K.H Hasan

<sup>28</sup> *Kesepakatan Ulama dan Umara se-Jawa Timur, Mimbar Ulama*, no. 171, April 1992, pp. 55-56.

<sup>29</sup> *Keputusan Rapat Kerja Nasional Majelis Ulama Indonesia Tahun 1413/1992, Mimbar Ulama*, no. 178, December 1992, pp. 16-21.

<sup>30</sup> William Liddle, "The Islamic Turn in Indonesia: A Political Explanation," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 3 (1996): 613-34.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000); Robert Hefner, "Islam, State, and Civil Society: ICMI and the Struggle for the Indonesian Middle Class," *Indonesia* 56, no. October (1993).

<sup>32</sup> *Tausyiah Majelis Ulama Indonesia Hasil Rakernas Tahun 1997, Mimbar Ulama*, no. 224, April 1997, pp. 49-53.

<sup>33</sup> *Keputusan Rapat Kerja Nasional Majelis Ulama Indonesia, Mimbar Ulama*, no. 234, February 1998, pp. 25-26.

Basri, as the candidate for the House of Representatives (DPR) who campaigned for Golkar. This situation was clearly understood as the favour of the MUI for the New Order regime.

All those indications above give us a clear idea of the position of the MUI in the general elections during the New Order era. The MUI was established in 1976. Thus, the involvement of the MUI in the general elections started in 1977, and continued in 1982, 1987, 1992, and 1997. Overall there were five general elections, and in each round of elections the MUI issued a statement, decision or *taushiah*/recommendation. Analysing those five statements reveals that only in 1977 the MUI did not give any conspicuous support. All other times, from 1982 to 1997, the MUI gave real support the government. Three of the issued statements (1982, 1992 and 1997) mentioned the name of Suharto and the fact that MUI endorsed him to continue his position of President of Indonesia, whereas in 1987, they did not mention Suharto but they did mention the need to continue the New Order government and that Muslims were obliged to participate to make the election succeed.

### MUI's Attitude in the Post-Suharto Era

The position of Islam in general and the MUI in particular in the post-Suharto era was determined by the political shift in the Reformation era in 1998. As we know, on 21 May 1998 there were massive student demonstrations which forced Suharto to step down from his presidency and appointed his vice president, B.J Habibie, as the next Indonesian president. In order to make Indonesia more democratic, Habibie made major political shifts, such as the use of a multi-party system, the withdrawal of *Pancasila* as its sole foundation, the removal of the restriction of the freedom of expression, and so on.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, Habibie's decision to implement a multi-party system stimulated the founding of many new parties, including Islamic parties. There were 48 parties eligible to participate in the 1999 general elections. The rebirth of Islamic parties can be interpreted as the opening of Pandora's box. The last time real Islamic parties were allowed to act freely was during Sukarno's time in office. The 1955 general elections were evidence of the emergence of Islamic parties. The elections itself were won by a secular party, PNI, with 22.3% of the votes, followed by Masyumi in the second place with 20.9%, the NU party in the third place with 18.4%, and the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) with 16.4% in the fourth place.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, in 1973, Soeharto amalgamate all Islamic parties into one party (United Development Party /PPP). From this standpoint it becomes clear that Islamic political activism (Islamic parties) was not allowed to exist during the New Order period. This political situation ultimately changed after Habibie decided to apply a multi-party system in the 1999 general elections. Many parties emerged, fourteen were considered to be Islamic. Among them were *Partai Bulan Bintang* (PBB, Crescent Moon and Star Party), a party which was claimed to be the descendant of *Masyumi* from 1955, *Partai Keadilan* (PK, Justice Party), *Partai Kebangkitan Umat* (PKU, Community Awakening Party) and PPP (which changed its foundation from *Pancasila* to Islam).<sup>36</sup>

Besides that, there were two parties which were officially based on *Pancasila* but had a very strong association with the Muslim community: *Partai Amanat Nasional* (National Mandate Party) led by Amien Rais, the former chairman of Muhammadiyah, and *Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa* (National Awakening Party) led by Abdurrahman Wahid, the former chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama. They declared themselves 'open parties' and did not engage

<sup>34</sup> Dewi Fortuna Anwar, "The Habibie Presidency," in *Post Suharto?, Renewal or Chaos* (Singapore: KITLV and ISEAS, 1999).

<sup>35</sup> Justus M. Van der Kroef, "Indonesia's First National Election: A Sociological Analysis," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 16, no. 3 (April 1957): 237-49.

<sup>36</sup> See among others Charles U. Zenzie, "Indonesia's New Political Spectrum," *Asian Survey* 39, no. 2 (1999): 243-64; R. William Liddle, "Indonesia in 1999: Democracy Restored," *Asian Survey* 40, no. 1 (2000): 32-42.

exclusively with the Muslim community. In reality, they were strongly connected to and had their roots in Muhammadiyah (PAN) and Nahdlatul Ulama (PKB). To some extent the 1999 general elections were similar to the 1955 general elections in terms of the participation of the Islamic parties. Several scholars concluded that *politik aliran* had re-emerged and determined the voting behaviour in the 1999 general elections. This situation was certainly the same as the political landscape in the 1955 general elections when *politik aliran* was obvious.<sup>37</sup>

The emergence of Islamic parties in this period brought up the idea of Indonesia as Islamic state again, which had been hampered during the independence period and in the Constitutional Assembly in 1955. This idea had never come out throughout the New Order era as a result of Suharto's policy to restrict any movement related to Islamic political activism. This revival movement of inserting the Jakarta Charter in the Indonesian constitution was proposed by the PPP and PBB. However, with the limited number of seats they had in the parliament, and also without support from the two biggest Islamic organisations in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, they failed to pass the idea of the Islamic state.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to the above events, the post-New Order period was also noted as the revival of Islamic radicalism.<sup>39</sup> Groups like *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI - Islamic Defenders Front)<sup>40</sup> Laskar Jihad<sup>41</sup> were considered to be radicals. Both of them were notorious because of their paramilitary actions such as sweeping bars, discotheques and cafes during *Ramadan*. According to Van Bruinessen, the emergence of these radical groups in the post-New Order cannot be separated from the Habibie's effort in gathering Islamic support during his presidency.<sup>42</sup> The creation of such radical groups was part of Habibie's strategy to guard his government against attacks from those who disagreed with the presidency. There was even information reporting that high-ranking military officers, most notably General Wiranto, were behind the establishment of the FPI.<sup>43</sup>

Assuredly, the change of Indonesian Islam influenced the attitude of the MUI in the post-New Order period. In the following paragraphs, I propose two different arguments for the changes within the MUI after Suharto resigned from his presidency. The first one is that the attitude of the MUI in the post-New Order period was more inclined to the Islam-based movements, either for the interest of the Islamic community or for Islamic radical groups. We can see this shift in the 1999 general elections when the MUI supported Islamic parties by issuing a *taushiah* advising Muslims in Indonesia to vote for Muslim candidates. This position

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<sup>37</sup> Marcus Mietzner, "Comparing Indonesia's Party Systems of the 1950s and the Post-Suharto Era: From Centrifugal to Centripetal Inter-Party Competition," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39, no. 3 (2008): 431–53.

<sup>38</sup> Nadirsyah Hosen, "Religion and the Indonesian Constitution: A Recent Debate," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 3 (2005): 419–40.

<sup>39</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen, "Genealogies of Islamic Radicalism in Post-Suharto Indonesia. Southeast Asian Research," *Southeast Asian Research* 10, no. 2 (2002): 117–54; Greg Fealy, "Islamic Radicalism in Indonesia: The Faltering Revival?," *Southeast Asian Affairs* January, no. 1 (2004): 104–21.

<sup>40</sup> Jajang Jahroni, *Defending the Majesty, Indonesia's Front Pembela Islam, 1998-2003* (Chiang Mai: Asian Muslim Action Network, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, "Faith and Politics: The Rise of the Laskar Jihad in the Era of Transition in Indonesia," *Indonesia* April, no. 73 (2002): 145–69; Noorhaidi Hasan, *Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militancy, and the Quest for Identity in Post-New Order Indonesia* (Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen, "Genealogies of Islamic Radicalism in Post-Suharto Indonesia. Southeast Asian Research," *Southeast Asian Research* 10, no. 2 (2002): 117–54

<sup>43</sup> Robert W. Hefner, "Muslims Democrats and Islamist Violence in Post-Soeharto Indonesia" in Robert W. Hefner (Ed.), *Remaking Muslims Politics; Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization* (Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 285.



was different from MUI's position in the New Order era when most of its statements were geared towards endorsing the government.

Another indication are several occasions such as in the aftermath of the US military invasion of Afghanistan. The MUI, along with several Islamic organisations, called for a boycott on all American products and for *jihad*. This movement was mainly voiced by the Secretary General of the MUI at the time, Din Syamsuddin.<sup>44</sup> This demonstration was given extra emphasis by a statement (*Pernyataan Sikap*) of the MUI and several other Islamic organisations concerning the US invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to the call for *jihad* related to the foreign issue, the MUI also issued a statement concerning *jihad* in a local context, particularly regarding the conflict in the Moluccas between the Muslims and the Christians. The statement of the MUI was issued when the Indonesian army attacked the medical clinic of *Laskar Jihad* in Kebun Cengkeh, a place where the *Laskar Jihad* fighters concentrated, on 24 June 2001. The attack killed twenty-four *Laskar Jihad* fighters and wounded thirty-four others.<sup>46</sup> Based on this incident, the MUI issued a statement the commander of the *Komando Daerah (Kodam, Regional Military Command) Pattimura, I Made Yasa* to be brought in front of a military court. The MUI further used this statement to threaten the government that if the government did not react to the statement, then the MUI would proclaim I Made Yasa the slaughterer of the Islamic community.<sup>47</sup> All the information above provides us with a clear picture of the shift in the attitude of the MUI in the post-New Order period. The "new" MUI was now strongly inclined towards the interests of the Muslim community, particularly on the political agenda of militant Islam.

The second change of the MUI is that after the New Order era the MUI started to distance itself from the government. There were several *taushiah* and *fatwas* of the MUI which showed this shift. Among others was the MUI *taushiah* which focused on the position of the MUI regarding the existence of communist/Marxist thought in Indonesia which was issued in March 2000. This *taushiah* was issued after the Indonesian president at the time, Abdurrahman Wahid, suggested that the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) would annul the decision of the MPR from 1966 which banned Marxism in Indonesia. This suggestion was reacted to by the MUI saying that communism was against *Pancasila* and its followers had threatened the Muslim community. Based on this notion, the MUI issued a *taushiah* which mainly advised the House of Representatives (DPR) to reject any proposal that would threaten Indonesia as a nation. This statement refers to the idea of Communism which was assumed by the MUI to endanger Indonesia.<sup>48</sup> The opinion of the MUI on this issue can be seen in the *Mimbar Ulama*, April edition, which dedicated a lot of its space to the discussion of the threat of Communism to Indonesian society. In fact, we can know this opinion before we read the whole article, because it was written on the front page with bold letters that the Islamic society refuses Communism (*Umat Islam Menolak Komunisme*).

Other evidence is the MUI *fatwa* about the issue of monosodium glutamate (MSG), a popular seasoning product manufactured by a Japanese company, Ajinomoto. In this *fatwa*, the MUI claimed that after the examination made by the LPPOM MUI (*Institute of Food*,

<sup>44</sup> Kees van Dijk, "Labelling Indonesian and Malaysian Islam," in *Indonesia - the Presence of The Past, a Festschrift in Honour of Ingrid Wessel*, ed. Eva Strifeneder and ntje Missbach (Berlin: Regiospectra, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> *Pernyataan Sikap Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) dan Organisasi Islam di Indonesia, Mimbar Ulama*, no. 278, October 2001, pp. 28-29.

<sup>46</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, *Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militancy, and the Quest for Identity in Post-New Order Indonesia* (Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2006), p. 203.

<sup>47</sup> *Pernyataan Sikap Pimpinan Organisasi/Lembaga Islam Tingkat Pusat, Mimbar Ulama*, no. 274, June 2001, pp. 24-25.

<sup>48</sup> *Sikap Majelis Ulama Indonesian Tentang Keberadaan Ajaran Komunisme/Marxisme-Leninisme di Wilayah Negara Republik Indonesia, Mimbar Ulama*, no. 260, April 2000, pp. 28-29.

*Medication and Cosmetics Research*), it was found that from June 1999 up to November 2000 Ajinomoto had used *bacto soytone*, which has a pig enzyme, in its product (MSG). Based on this assessment, the MUI decided that the seasoning products of Ajinomoto are *haram* (forbidden) to consume.<sup>49</sup> However, this *fatwa* was opposed by the Indonesian President of that time, Abdurrahman Wahid. The objection of President Wahid did not change MUI's view about annulling the *fatwa*, because after this statement the MUI made a press conference and persisted that its *fatwa* was based on a correct assessment and that the MUI had issued a correct decision.

The most conspicuous indication that the MUI had distanced itself from the government happened during the national conference in Jakarta on 25-29 July 2000. At that conference it was decided that the MUI would change several of its statutes. The first one was related to its foundation; the MUI changed it from *Pancasila* to Islam. The second was concerned the function of the MUI, it emphasized the independence of the MUI by saying that the MUI is a religious, social and independent organisation. This means the MUI is not part of the government or any other organisation. Another essential change was related to the structural board of the MUI. From the time the MUI was established, there was a board called *Dewan Pelindung* (Protectors Council). One of the tasks of the *Dewan Pelindung* was to give protection and guidance to the MUI. It was stated that the *Dewan Pelindung* of the MUI central board was the president, the *Dewan Pelindung* of the MUI provincial board was the governor and the *Dewan Pelindung* on the district level was the *Bupati* (regency governor) or *Walikota* (mayor). The conference then decided that the Protectors Council was no longer needed. The second change was about the *Dewan Pertimbangan* (Consideration Council). Before, this position was chaired ex officio by the Minister of Religious Affairs. This council was also eliminated. As a change from these two councils, the congress decided to make a new board named *Dewan Penasihat* (Advisory Council). The difference between the new boards and the old one is the absence of government representatives. The advisory council would be made up of independent people or *ulama*.<sup>50</sup>

The above evidence provides us with the understanding that the MUI has shifted its attitudes from supporting the governmental programmes in the New Order era to a more distant and independent stance. This information presents us with the important understanding that the MUI attitudes in the post-New Order era were quite distant from the government, instead leaning towards the Muslim hardliners in Indonesia.

### **The MUI in the Post New Order General Elections.**

This section will analyse MUI's position in two general elections: the 2004 and 2009 general elections. With regard to the MUI's stance in the 1999 general election, it has been discussed by Nur Ichwan,<sup>51</sup> therefore, this section will not discuss on that issue.

On the 2004 general election, the MUI issued a *taushiah* in March 2004. Its title is *Taushiah Forum Ukhuwah Islamiyah MUI, Pemilu; Mewujudkan Baldatul Thoyyibatun wa Rabbun Ghafur* (Recommendation of the MUI forum of Islamic brotherhood, General Elections; establishing a prosperous and fair country receiving mercy from God). The *taushiah* had six points. The first emphasised that the 2004 general elections were the implementation of the people's sovereignty. The second asserted that Indonesian people, especially Muslims, should use their votes in order to be good and responsible citizens. The

<sup>49</sup> *Keputusan Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia Tentang Produk Penyedap Rasa Monosodium Glutamate (MSG) dari PT. Ajinomoto Indonesia yang Menggunakan Bacto Soytone, Mimbar Ulama*, no. 269, Januari 2001, pp. 18-19.

<sup>50</sup> *Mimbar Ulama*, no. 264, Agustus 2000, pp. 6-8.

<sup>51</sup> Nur Ichwan, "Ulama State and Politics: MUI after Suharto", *Islamic Law and Society*, 12.1 (2005), 45-72.

third suggested that Indonesian people should cast their votes based on their conscience and preferences, by choosing candidates for the legislative branch (House of Representatives (DPR) and the Regional Representative Council (*DPD*)), and candidates for President and vice President who have good faith and behaviour, are reliable and have a strong national commitment. The fourth advised that every party participating in the elections and also the people who have the right to vote, should show good conduct by maintaining Indonesian unity and preventing any chaos and conflict. The fifth recommended to the political parties and all the candidates, both the candidates for the legislative body and the presidential candidates, to preserve good political ethics and morality and to avoid bad attitudes such as bribery. The last invited all Indonesian people, especially Muslims, to pray together for the success of the general elections.<sup>52</sup>

As we read above, this *taushiah* was general in the sense that it did not give any endorsement to any party or the government. Assuredly we can differentiate this *taushiah* from the statements or *taushiah* of the MUI regarding the general elections in the New Order era, which mostly endorsed Suharto for the presidency. It was also different from the MUI *taushiah* in the 1999 general elections, which specifically endorsed Islamic parties by suggesting that Indonesian Muslims not vote for non-Muslim candidates. Reasonably, as stated above, the decision of the MUI to issue a general *taushiah* was influenced by two political conditions at the time. The first was that the Islamic parties no longer used Islamic issues in their campaigns, and the second was the candidacy of Muslim figures in the presidential election.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, the MUI determined to be neutral and only gave the general remark that Muslims should vote based on their conscience and preferences.

However, this neutrality did not mean the MUI suggested that Muslims vote for secular parties, because in above statement we can see that the MUI recommended that Muslims vote for candidates who are a faithful and display good behaviour (*beriman* and *berakhlakul karimah*). It means that the MUI still suggests that the people vote for Islamic parties because they have the same faith. Nonetheless, this statement can be regarded as better than the 1999 *taushiah* on general elections which clearly recommended that Muslims should not vote for non-Muslims. The general tone of this *taushiah* is comparable to the MUI statement regarding the general elections in 1977, which did not give a specific endorsement.

In the 2009 general election, we can find a *fatwa* of the MUI which forbade vote abstention. It is interesting to see how this *fatwa* was issued. This *fatwa* came after a conference of the *fatwa* commission of the MUI (*Musyawaharah ijtima' fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia*), which was held in Padang, West Sumatra on 25 January 2009. It was unknown whether this conference was an official activity of the MUI. Plausibly, the conference was a program of the *fatwa* commission in particular, not the MUI in general.

The *fatwa* consisted of five points. First, general elections in Islam can be regarded as an effort to vote for a leader and his deputy who fulfil the ideal requirements for materializing common goals in accordance with the aspirations of Muslims as well as the interests of the nation. Second, electing a leader in Islam is obligatory for upholding the leadership and government in our everyday life. Third, leadership and government in Islam mean fulfilling all requirements compatible with the religious terms for the benefit of the people. Fourth, voting for a faithful, honest, trustworthy, active and aspiring leader, eligible as well as struggling for Islamic interests is compulsory. Fifth, voting for a leader who is not eligible as mentioned in point one or being absent for voting while there are qualified candidates is forbidden. In addition to these five points, the *fatwa* also consisted of two recommendations. First, Muslims were advised to vote for a leader and his deputy who struggle to command

<sup>52</sup> *Taushiah Forum Ukhuwah Islamiyah MUI, Pemilu; Mewujudkan Baldatul Thoyyibatun wa Rabbun Ghafur, Mimbar Ulama*, no. 307, March 2004, p.31.

<sup>53</sup> *Mimbar Ulama*, no. 310, June 2004.

right and forbid wrong (*amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*). Second, the government and the election commission need to raise awareness regarding the general elections so that people's participation increases and the rights of the people are fulfilled.<sup>54</sup>

This *fatwa* can be regarded as the most controversial one compared to the other stances of the MUI concerning the general elections. In previous elections, from 1977 to 2004, the MUI only issued a statement of *taushiyah*, but in 2009 the MUI issued a *fatwa*. It is probably that this *fatwa* was issued after a request from the chairman of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) at the time, Hidayat Nur Wahid, who coincidentally was one of the prominent figures of the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS).<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, this *fatwa* was not received well by the people. Most of them argued that it was inappropriate for the MUI to issue such a *fatwa*. One of the arguments made by the vice President Jusuf Kalla was that "if they deem the act of not voting to be *haram*, this means that all those who abstain from casting ballots will go to hell." He then added that the MUI should not have issued an extreme *fatwa* like vote abstention.<sup>56</sup> A lot of other criticism came to the conclusion that the *fatwa* was improper conduct of the MUI, which showed that the MUI was not wise and was unable to observe which issues needed to be prioritised.<sup>57</sup>

On the other hand, this *fatwa* can be considered controversial because it is unclear whether this *fatwa* is issued officially by the MUI or not. If it is official, it should be issued by the main board and not by the *fatwa* commission. Furthermore, in the year it was published, this *fatwa* cannot be accessed on the MUI website where new *fatwas* are usually uploaded after they are issued. Instead, the *fatwa* can be accessed freely through another website which is called *era Muslim*. This fact emphasised that this *fatwa* was not official but only a movement from some figures within the *fatwa* commission, who felt that issuing this *fatwa* was necessary. In addition to this fact, Din Syamsuddin, deputy chairman of the MUI, stated that this *fatwa* was not official. He attended the conference and stressed afterwards that the *fatwa* was not yet to be issued.

However, even though the *fatwa* was not yet to be issued by the MUI, many people were able to access it on the internet. Surprisingly, the reactions from the people were negative; they determined this *fatwa's* issuance to be improper. Probably, the response from the people had an unproductive effect on the performance of Islamic parties in the 2009 general elections. According to Rizal Sukma, the "influence of the clerics in shaping people's election preferences is fast eroding."<sup>58</sup> This statement is suitable for analysis of the condition of the MUI *fatwa* about vote abstention and its effect. The people seem to be disappointed by the attitudes of the MUI concerning this issue. Instead of gaining respect from the people by issuing the *fatwa*, the MUI was criticised, stating that its conduct of issuing a *fatwa* to forbid vote abstention is inaccurate. Perhaps the dissatisfaction of the people regarding this issue contributed to the people's decision not to vote for Islamic parties.

## Conclusion

Seeing this *fatwa* and comparing its circumstances to the previous attitudes of the MUI in general elections, it looks like the MUI in post-New Order times tried to be a player in the political context while in the New Order era the MUI took a safer stance. The conservative attitudes in the New Order decided upon in 1981, the year in which the MUI organised a national meeting, to, among other things; decide on the guidelines for the MUI. It is stated

<sup>54</sup> For detailed text see <http://www.eramuslim.com/dialog/pengharaman-golput-oleh-mui.htm>.

<sup>55</sup> Bachtiar Effendi, "MUI Fatwa Is Neither Necessary nor a Priority," *The Jakarta Post*, February 6, 2009.

<sup>56</sup> The Jakarta Post, "Kalla, Din Criticizes Election Edict," February 7, 2009.

<sup>57</sup> Bahtiar Effendy, "MUI Fatwa is neither Necessary nor a Priority," *The Jakarta Post*, 06 February 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Rizal Sukma, "Indonesian Politics in 2009: Defective Elections, Resilient Democracy," *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 45, no. 3 (2009): 317–36.

that the religious harmony in Indonesia relied upon the relation between the MUI and the government. Misunderstandings between the MUI and the government, either in a local, provincial or national context would disturb national stability and security.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, as we can see in most of the MUI *taushiah* or statements on general elections in the New Order era, most of them were supportive of the government.

However, since the Reformation era, especially in the 1999 general elections, The MUI shifted its position from supporting the government to supporting Islamic parties. This attitude was stimulated by the weakening power of the government. This change, in turn, also influenced the attitude of the MUI which immediately supported Islamic parties by stating that Muslims should vote only for Muslim candidates. This attitude was repeated once again in 2009 when the MUI issued a controversial *fatwa* regarding vote abstention. Only in the 2004 general elections did the MUI not take a controversial stance because most of the presidential candidates from Islamic figures

Thus, there are differences in the stances of the MUI regarding the general elections in the New Order era and the post-New Order era. Under the New Order regime, the MUI could be regarded as playing safely by supporting the government. This approach was taken because of the pressure of the government which restricted the political movement of the MUI. In the post-New Order era, on the contrary, the MUI attitudes in the general elections are determined by political developments. The MUI changed its attitude both by distancing itself from the government and it improvised its decisions in accordance with the political context. The MUI's recommendation in the 1999 general elections, which invited Muslims to vote only for Muslim candidates, and its *fatwa* in 2009 which prohibited vote abstention were an indication of this attitude. The attitude apparently emerged because the MUI want to be heard by the people. This position is chosen because the MUI has perceived that its influence in the Reformation era is not as strong as it was in the times of the New Order.

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