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“Electing a President is Islamic Worship”—The Print Media Discourse of Azyumardi Azra during *Reformasi* (1998–2004)

"L'élection d'un président est une célébration islamique". Le discours d'Azyumardi Azra dans la presse écrite pendant la Reformasi (1998-2004)

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“Electing a President is Islamic Worship”— The Print Media Discourse of Azyumardi Azra during *Reformasi* (1998–2004)

Introduction

The role of religious agency in democratization processes has caught increased academic attention since the inaccuracy of the secularization paradigm became widely accepted and a “religious turn” started to gain ground in the social sciences from the 1980s onwards. A more nuanced and fine-grained understanding on the nexus between religion and democratization has evolved, which points toward the ambivalence and the Janus-faced character of the sacred (Appleby 2000) as well as its increasing role as a public force in processes of modernization and political liberalization (Casanova 1994). Accordingly, religious actors—defined as “any individual or collectivity, local or transnational, who acts coherently and consistently to influence politics in the name of religion” (Philpott 2007: 506)—take up multifaceted roles in democratization processes (Künkler and Leininger 2009). They can support or hamper the introduction of democracy in their country (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011; Künkler and Leininger 2009; Philpott 2007; Cheng and Brown 2006), and due to several structural reasons and lack of resources may also opt to abstain from clearly positioning themselves politically (tho Seeth 2020). In societies where religion plays an important role in shaping personal and group identities, attitudes, and behavior, religious actors can take crucial leading positions during a democratic transition and publicly mobilize faithful followers for or against democracy.

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Such was particularly the case in Indonesia where during the *Reformasi* (reform/democratization) from 1998 to 2004 the future role of Islam in state and society was heatedly debated about in the public sphere. The *Reformasi* was characterized by the mushrooming of anti-democracy Islamic groups—*Front Pembela Islam* (Defenders of Islam Front, FPI), *Laskar Jihad* (Jihad Army, LJ), *Jemaah Islamiyah* (Islamic Congregation, JI), and *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia* (Indonesian Party of Liberation, HTI), just to name a few—which sought to mobilize society for Islamist ideologies by peaceful or violent means. On the other hand, a dedicated pro-democracy Islamic (counter) movement emerged, which had a strong base in the Islamic academic and Islamic intellectual *milieux* (Künkler 2013; 2011). The pro-democracy movement was particularly linked to the Islamic mass organization *Nahdlatul Ulama* (Revival of the Ulama, NU) and its leader Abdurrahman Wahid, the Islamic mass organization *Muhammadiyah* and its leader Amien Rais, the *Paramadina* Foundation and *Paramadina* Islamic University under the aegis of Islamic thinker Nurcholish Madjid, the *Jaringan Islam Liberal* (Liberal Islamic Network, JIL) that had been established by the intellectual activist Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, and, most importantly for the purpose of this article, the nation-wide diffused state-funded Islamic higher education system (*Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri*, PTKIN).¹ Individual Islamic academics and their institutes and organizational entities from the PTKIN system were highly visible in the transitioning public sphere. They approached society through diverse public channels (media, speeches, conferences, workshops) and ardently promoted the compatibility of Islam and democracy—but also upheld the separation of religion and state—by combining and balancing arguments from Islamic theology and non-religious sources, often of Western origin (tho Seeth 2020).

Against this backdrop, this article² focuses on the public print media discourse initiated by Azyumardi Azra, one of the most prominent contemporary representatives of the PTKIN system, who during the Indonesian democratization process served as rector of the country's largest Islamic academic institute: the *Institut Agama Islam Negeri Syarif*

1. As of 2020, PTKIN comprises 17 *Universitas Islam Negeri* (State Islamic Universities, UIN), 34 *Institut Agama Islam Negeri* (State Islamic Institutes, IAIN), and 7 *Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri* (State Islamic Colleges, STAIN).

2. This article is an abridged and revised version of a chapter of my dissertation on the role of Islamic universities during the democratization processes in Indonesia and Tunisia, defended in 2020 at the Department of Political Science at Philipps-University Marburg (tho Seeth 2020). The dissertation project was funded by a scholarship by the Marburg Research Academy. I thank my supervisor Claudia Derichs for her enormous support throughout the dissertation project. Furthermore, I thank Azyumardi Azra and Mirjam Künkler for their collaboration, expertise, and support from which the project greatly benefited. I especially thank the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on the previous draft of this article.

Hidayatullah Jakarta (State Islamic Institute Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, IAIN Jakarta) that in 2002 was officially transformed into a full-fledged university, the *Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta* (State Islamic University Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, UIN Jakarta). Azyumardi Azra is a public figure who combines academic intellectualism with political engagement through a public discursive practice, and an analysis of his agency is overdue. The relevance of Azra’s academic-political activism is mirrored by the official honors he has received by several foreign observers: In 2009, he was selected by the Prince Waleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University in Washington DC and The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre, Amman, Jordan, as one of “The 500 Most Influential Muslim Leaders” active in the scholarly field. In 2010, he was awarded the honorable title of “Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire” (CBE), and in 2014, he received the academic Fukuoka Price from Fukuoka City, Japan, for his strong promotion of cross-cultural and cross-religious dialogue. Already in 2005, after the Indonesian transition to democracy had been achieved, he was awarded by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono the *Bintang Maha Putra Utama* (literally “Star of the Greatest Son of the Soil”), the highest honor for Indonesian civilians, for his contribution to the strengthening of a moderate Islam in the country (Azra Website 2020).

Until now, Azra’s many writings and intense public participation during and after *Reformasi* have not been made an object of English-speaking in-depth scientific inquiry, neither in Indonesian studies nor in political science, while in Indonesia itself, already three treatises on his life and work have been published (Nurkomala 2013; Dwifatma 2011; Fathurrahman 2002). To my knowledge, the only example for an English-language discussion of Azra’s thought is Khairudin Aljunied’s *Muslim Cosmopolitanism: Southeast Asian Islam in Comparative Perspective* (2017), where, however, only a few pages are dedicated to showcasing that Azra is a cosmopolitan Islamic thinker. Aljunied’s piece is limited to Azra’s appraisal of the concept of the indigenous *Islam Nusantara*, and neither a close reading of his other works nor a contextualization of his persona within the broader streams of Indonesian Islamic academia is provided.

This is a shortsighted perspective as Azra’s public role is representative and symptomatic of the wider phenomenon of an Islamic academia-based public intellectualism that combines with pragmatic political agency in the public sphere—a distinctive particularity of Islamic and wider public political life in Indonesia. The participation of Indonesian Islamic academics in public political discourse and social activism is indeed a given. It is a historical continuum that most visibly emerged during the Japanese occupation years (1942–1945) when Islamic intellectualism was for the first time channeled into an institutionalized, bureaucratized academic form. Intense participation of Islamic academics in public political debate and engagement spanned over

the post-colonial authoritarian era and is booming by the freedoms of the contemporary democratic system. PTKIN thus served and serves as a source of an Islam-connected political activism, however, under authoritarianism, its political agency was highly controlled and coopted by state agendas.

Hence, Azra is only the most visible tip of an iceberg of a deeply institutionalized cohort of PTKIN academics who act as public Islamic intellectuals beyond the campus walls, currently mostly in a mission of strengthening a moderate interpretation of Islam, religious and cultural pluralism, democracy, and human rights. Largely trilingual (Indonesian, Arabic, English), these academics function as cultural brokers between the local Indonesian, the Arab-Islamic, and Western culture (Lukens-Bull 2013: 3), and they therefore transmit and “translate” issues of democracy and human rights for a pragmatic and localized application in Indonesia. Simultaneously, through their fluency in the English and/or Arabic language and their frequent visits to other parts of the Islamic and the Western world, they act as informal diplomats and ambassadors of Indonesia in the international sphere (Allès and tho Seeth forthcoming 2021).

Due to his reputation, popularity, and physical presence in the Indonesian capital, Azra had and still has access to the nation’s most prestigious media outlets and highest political elite circles.³ Furthermore, due to his socialization under the Suharto regime (1966–1998), Azra’s public agency is embedded in and is a product of the long history of Indonesian state-funded Islamic academia that was consciously geared toward—controlled and functionalized—public agency and political participation in domestic and international affairs. For the purpose of reinforcing moderate Islam and thus legitimizing his regime, Suharto welcomed the public presence of so-called *ulama plus*—Islamic intellectuals with a broad range of expertise in religious as well as worldly matters. The concept of *ulama plus* was first put on the table by minister of religious affairs Munawir Sjadzali (1983–1993) in the context of growing Islamist tendencies in the Middle East and rising concerns about its potential spillover to Indonesia (Lukens-Bull 2013: 15–16; Feillard 1999: 274). Himself an alumnus of Georgetown University in the US, Sjadzali was also the brain behind the initiation of increased academic exchange with the West, while he simultaneously introduced his *Reaktualisasi Agenda* (Re-actualization

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3. A comparably high public status as embodied by Azra is contemporarily held by Komaruddin Hidayat, former rector of UIN Jakarta (2006–2014) and current rector of *Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia* (International Indonesian Islamic University, UIII). Bahtiar Effendy, professor of Political Science at UIN Jakarta who deceased in 2019, is another example of a public Islamic academic. Many other members of the academic cohort affiliated with PTKIN universities and higher education institutes located in more peripheral Indonesian cities work on lower public scales at the regional level, and their concrete political attitudes and agency remain understudied. What all UINs share is the institutionalized teaching of a pro-democracy civic education course to all first-semester students, first initiated in the year 2000/2001 (Jackson and Bahrissalim 2007).

Agenda), a policy which emphasized Islamic values, ethics, and morals as a basis for Indonesia's *Pembangunan Nasional* (national development). Tellingly, a collection of three key speeches of Sjadzali on the topic was published as *Peranan Ilmuwan Muslim dalam Negara Pancasila* (The Role of Muslim Scientists in the Pancasila-State). In these speeches, Sjadzali reaffirmed Suharto's New Order policy line that scholars of Islam must engage for the nation and its development (Sjadzali 1984). Azra carries with him this legacy of the New Order regime, however, in an emancipated, updated, democratized fashion, which plays a crucial role in shaping Islamic and political discourses and agency in contemporary Indonesia. Notwithstanding its strong base in New Order socialization, the following elaborations will show that the public and political role of Indonesian Islamic academics can be traced back further back in time, preceeding the establishment of the nation-state.

Postulating that the intellectual thought and agency of an individual prominent figure can be representative of more widely diffused societal currents, this article demonstrates that through understanding Azra and his work, broader religious and social realities and institutionalized patterns of great relevance to Indonesian political culture can be grasped.⁴ Therefore, this article takes Azra as a point of departure for illustrating the importance of the broader Indonesian phenomenon of public Islamic academics who actively engage in the political realm. Moreover, from the perspective of media studies, Azra is also representative of what has been singled out as an Indonesian “cosmopolitan Islamic journalism” (Steele 2018). However, the contribution of Indonesian Islamic academics to this specific form of journalistic activity has not yet been covered by research and the article at hand aims to fill this lacuna. Moreover, due to the popular acknowledgement of the media as the fourth estate of democracy, a closer look at individual Indonesians' discursive media practices is worthwhile to better understand the media's function as a vehicle for pro-democracy mobilization in that country.

Furthermore, the article shows that Azra's print media discourse during *Reformasi* occasionally and partially liberated itself from the deeply institutionalized Indonesian political culture which aims to avoid conflict and seeks discursive harmony and consensus by abstaining from the articulation of direct criticism, and which reduces political discourse to inconcrete transcendental signifiers such as “Islam” and “the people”/“the nation” (see Duile and Bens 2017). While Azra defended the mainstream consensus on the centrality of the *Pancasila* and a moderate Islam, by voicing quite sharp and provocative criticism on the political and religious elites as well as on the lack of democratic quality of Indonesian civil society, Azra exited the traditional political culture of Indonesia that imposes broad consensus and harmony

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4. Another approach of contextualizing an Indonesian Islamic academic (Komaruddin Hidayat) and his work is presented in Woodward 2017.

on political issues, and he opened up space for a much needed “conflictual consensus”⁵ which furthers progressive democratic politics. Azra’s step toward this discursive practice of openly expressing criticism and political alternatives may have been encouraged by the enthusiastic, liberating atmosphere of the *Reformasi* years, as they constituted a long-awaited window of opportunity for the direct articulation of political critique, while in the contemporary constituted democracy, Indonesian political culture presents itself again in a more consensual, flattened and harmonized version (Duile and Bens 2017).

After briefly discussing some sociological aspects of public intellectuals and how they relate to Indonesia and Azyumardi Azra, the historical background and the political particularities of Indonesian Islamic academia and its function as a provider of public intellectualism and as a space for political agency are presented. The article then pursues a qualitative text and content analysis of the media articles Azyumardi Azra published during the democratic transition. The analysis is limited to articles in the four most prominent Indonesian media outlets, namely *Kompas*,⁶ *Republika*,⁷ *Tempo*,⁸ and *Gatra*,⁹ published between the collapse of the New Order regime (May 21, 1998) and the beginning of the democratic consolidation marked by the taking office of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono as first directly elected president (October 20, 2004).

Following the epistemic and methodological approaches of Mayring (2015), Kuckartz (2014), and Silverman (2011), the aim of the text analysis is to reduce the richness of information and to summarize the content of the source material.

5. The concept of the “conflictual consensus” has been put forward by Chantal Mouffe and acknowledges consensus on the institutions of a liberal democracy and the ethical and political values that inform political association, while it demands dissent on the meaning of these values and how they should be implemented (Duile and Bens 2017: 5–6). See Duile and Bens 2017 for a discussion on its lack in Indonesia.

6. *Kompas* is a daily newspaper in print since 1965. It was established by Chinese and Javanese Catholics and was linked to *Partai Katolik Republik Indonesia* (Catholic Party, PKRI). After the legislative election of 1971 and with the attempt to weaken the opposition, the Suharto regime aimed at stricter media censorship and began to end *Kompas*’ proximity to PKRI, mainly by dissolving the party and merging it into *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia* (Indonesian Democratic Party, PDI). Since 1969, *Kompas* is Indonesia’s largest newspaper.

7. *Republika* is a daily newspaper in print since 1993. It addresses the Muslim community, mostly of modernist (*Muhammadiyah*) orientation. It was established by the Suharto regime and is closely connected to *Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Se-Indonesia* (Association of Indonesian Muslim Intelligentsia, ICMI).

8. *Tempo* is a weekly magazine in print since 1971. It was established by the writer Goenawan Mohamad and was banned twice by the Suharto regime for its critical articles: for two months in 1982 and from 1994 onwards. It was relaunched after the collapse of authoritarianism in 1998. It is modeled after the American *Time* magazine.

9. *Gatra* is a weekly magazine in print since 1994. It was established by the Chinese Muslim businessman Bob Hasan, who held close relations to the Suharto regime. After the closure of *Tempo* in 1994, *Gatra* took over many of *Tempo*’s former journalists, who then followed a regime-friendly line. Like *Tempo*, *Gatra* is modeled after the American *Time* magazine.

The overall attempt of this study is to abstract after close reading the main topics and messages Azra aimed to convey and mediate to his readers. For this purpose, each Indonesian media article was coded according to a keyword that best summarizes the topic and message conveyed through the piece. The coded articles were then grouped into more abstract categories which are presented in a table that also provides quantitative information. The analyzed data set included 84 articles which were grouped into nine distinct categories. Out of these nine categories, four are presented here in detail, namely category 1 "Indonesian Democracy," category 3 "Pluralism and Peace," category 4 "Elections," and category 5a "Islam and Democracy." Throughout the presentation, the analyzed material is cited by English translation of the Indonesian original in order to enable the reader to follow in detail the discourse Azra delivered. In sum, the analysis shows that Azra must be conceptualized as a pro-democracy Islamic actor whose main concern during the democratic transition of his country was to provide the public with impulses on the compatibility of Islam, democracy, pluralism, peace, and a strong and free civil society. He merged non-religious with clearly theological argumentation and underpinned his statements with references to scientific literature and holy scriptures, thereby stimulating a constructive discourse on the fruitful interplay of Islam and democratic norms and values, not shying away from criticizing grievances in Indonesian politics and society.

Despite him being an advocate of social justice and equality with strong empathy for the needs of the underprivileged strata of society, a close reading of Azra's writing style reveals that his articles addressed the educated, cosmopolitan-oriented Muslim middle class. Based on this finding, the outreach of Azra's print media discourse remained mostly limited to the confines of the better off academic middle class milieu¹⁰—which does not mitigate the discourse's societal relevance. However, this finding demonstrates that the pro-democracy discursive mission of Azra, and also the one of his academic colleagues, tends to largely diffuse within the realms of the higher educated pious classes—where it is also constantly reproduced. As a result, the Islamic academic milieu—and alumni thereof in the middle and also upper class—continues to constitute an essential sphere for the breeding of pro-democracy sentiments. It is this social strata that has—provided that it applies more diverse class-sensitive approaches, means, and jargons—an ingrained potential to meaningfully reach out to and shape the political elite level as well as lower echelons of society in a pro-democracy mission.¹¹

10. One could argue that this is most newspapers' target group anyway.

11. Having its roots in the Sukarno era, the PTKIN system has developed an internship program called *Kuliah Kerja Nyata* (Student Service Program, KKN) which obliges students to spend several weeks to months in poorer rural areas to engage in community service for the local population. The campuses manage their KKN activities through an organizational body called *Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat* (Institute of Research and Service to

Sociological Aspects of Public Intellectuals and their Relevance in Indonesia

A zooming in on Azra's intellectual print media output and his persona as a "celebrity intellectual" (Posner 2003: 26) is inherently linked to and justified by the—mostly Western-focused—wider scholarly discussion on the role of intellectuals in the (democratic) public sphere. Habermas (1962) has shown that the origin of the public sphere in European societies can be traced back to the bourgeois' 18th century growing network of public intellectual and critique-oriented communication on art, literature, the economy, and politics in emerging public places such as literary clubs, reading circles, and coffee houses. The rise of print technology and newspapers played a crucial role in the development of the public sphere and a deliberative culture, which, in the long run, contributed to the evolution of democratic political systems. While in its very early form, the relationship between intellectuals and political authorities was characterized by patronage (Shils 1972), the contemporary popular understanding of intellectuals' duty is to be unpleasant, to question orthodoxy, to confront established authorities, to stimulate change, and therefore, as Edward Said has famously coined, "to speak the truth to power" (Said 1996: 97). Hence, intellectuals are mostly considered as having the potential to working toward the improvement of democracy and social justice, they are perceived as a potential counterpower and as a critical conscience that openly addresses grievances.

Intellectuals are not necessarily campus-affiliated academics, but it is exactly this species and its role in the public sphere that sociological literature is most curious about. Having the academic in mind, Pierre Bourdieu and his colleagues have called the intellectual a paradoxical and bidimensional being which is torn between political engagement in the real world and retreat into the ivory tower (Bourdieu, Sapiro, and McHale 1991: 656). The public academic intellectual's function is generally seen as to fruitfully connect the world of the common, lay people and the more elitist microcosm of the university by communicating "specialized knowledge in an understandable and relevant way for a public outside the specialty" (Eliaeson and Kalleberg 2008: 1). Basing their argumentations on scientific findings, academics in their function as public intellectuals inform and articulate criticism in a clear and rational manner in the public sphere, however, they at times set their own political agendas and mobilize public attention and loyal followers by their high prominence, celebrity, and charisma—Pierre Bourdieu and his anti-neoliberal engagement in the public arena is an example of the academic intellectual turning into a charismatic public rebel.

Society, LPPM). Programs and facilities like KKN and LPPM prove PTKIN's consciousness and willingness to engage with and to empower underprivileged communities, but scholarly work has not yet taken the initiative to inquire whether the community service includes pro-democracy missions or whether it is limited to religious, educational, and health campaigns.

Shils’ (1972) observation that in history intellectuals and political authorities for a long time maintained a symbiotic relationship is worth discussing in the Indonesian context as the nexus between the PTKIN system and the Ministry of Religious Affairs has always been strong, and it still is. Personnel is actively exchanged between PTKIN and the ministry and networks and individual friendships stretching between both state entities are maintained. To a certain extent, their status as *pegawai negeri* (civil servants) constrains Indonesian Islamic academics’ independence and public agency, and therefore their public statements mostly oscillate within an informal discursive frame that determines what is generally perceived as socially accepted and politically correct. This informal frame of institutionalized norms and values is the product of the Indonesian state- and nation-building project, and particularly shapes the Islamic academic discourse by what is officially considered a mainstream “good Islam” (moderate, tolerant, peaceful, inclusive, pluralism-friendly, progressive, loyal to the nation-state and accepting the *Pancasila*) and a “bad Islam” (literal, extremist, exclusive, violent, regressive, aiming for alternative political concepts).¹² Furthermore, as mentioned in the introduction, political discourse in Indonesia is mostly characterized by the avoidance of conflict and the imposition of broad consensus on political issues, which is an inherent threat to democracy (Duile and Bens 2017). In public political discourse, PTKIN academics are confronted with these constraints and have to navigate their way through or around them. Against this backdrop, it is remarkable that in several media articles Azra clearly transgressed the harmonized, consensual Indonesian political culture by expressing sharp criticism on politics, religious elites, and society.

In some points, public Islamic intellectualism in Indonesia converges and in others it contrasts with developments of intellectual life that Posner (2003) has observed in the United States: as in America, in Indonesia we note a robust demand and supply of public intellectuals that is, however, not filled by independent thinkers who may even be societal outsiders or systemic underdogs, but by established university-based academics.¹³ However, different than in America, in Indonesia the thematic scope of individual academic intellectuals’ debates in the public sphere is not shrinking and public intellectualism is not undergoing a shift from academic “generalists” to academic “specialists.” As exemplified by Azyumardi Azra’s multi-disciplinary training, polyglotism, cosmopolitan attitude, and broad intellectual horizon that all mirror in the manifold issues he addressed in his print media discourse during *Reformasi*, in Indonesia the generalists continue to dominate the public scene. This is not to say that Indonesian Islamic academics are not holders of specialized knowledge and experts in their respective academic field(s). It rather points to the fact that

12. I here liberally lean on and modify the terms Mahmood Mamdani uses in his critical discussion on the Western distinction of Muslims into “good Muslims” and “bad Muslims” (Mamdani 2002).

13. This phenomenon is known as the “academization of intellectual life” (Posner 2003: 29).

they do not shy away from linking insights from their specialized knowledge to academic discussions outside their prime intellectual comfort zone(s), and relating the fused findings to broader questions of societal relevance. Also, Indonesian Islamic academics tend to present, promote, and market themselves in a self-esteemed fashion as generalists—nowadays particularly through the instrument of social media—and they invest time and energy to educate themselves on subjects that are beyond their original training.

Bourdieu posits that the intellectual world is constituted through competition, inclusion and exclusion, a series of struggles, and individuals' accumulation of capital. In the intellectual world, the most highly valued form of capital is competence in one's field or discipline, and the official reputation and authority (symbolic capital) that it generates. It is a high amount of symbolic capital that enables individual academics to distinguish themselves from the mass of their peers and to enter the political world. Writes Bourdieu: "Very plainly, the intellectual is a writer, an artist, a scientist, who, strengthened by the competence and the authority acquired in his field, intervenes in the political arena" (Bourdieu 2002: 3). This leads to the question what distinguished Azyumardi Azra from his colleagues, what allowed him to participate in political debate in the democratizing public sphere to an extent highly above the average, and becoming a "celebrity intellectual."

In his creative practice of merging theological with non-religious argumentation, Azra was not necessarily different from other academic or non-academic Islamic intellectuals who publicly promoted democracy during *Reformasi*; neo-modernist Nurcholish Madjid, for instance, followed a similar line. What contributed to Azra's uncomplicated access to political debate in the public sphere and to him being widely listened to, being read, and being invited to public events was the high officially sanctioned social-religious position he occupied as head of the nation's largest and most established facility of state Islamic higher learning. In a Bourdieusian sense, as rector of IAIN/UIN Jakarta, Azra possessed a high amount of symbolic capital, the resource that refers to prestige, authority, and a high position in social space. In this aspect, he had an advantage over, for instance, Madjid, who had opened his private Islamic Paramadina University only in early 1998, and which was thus an institutional newcomer in the academic scene.¹⁴

Similar to pro-democratic Islamic intellectual Abdurrahman Wahid, who served as Indonesian president from October 1999 to July 2001 and who had before led the Islamic civil mass organization NU (1984–1999), Azra had a strong, well-working, and well-known institutional and infrastructural

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14. However, Madjid's impact on the introduction of democracy in Indonesia was crucial as in a personal visit to the presidential palace in May 1998, he persuaded dictator Suharto to finally step down.

base at his disposal—a whole *apparatus*—which facilitated public visibility, communication, mobilization, and thus his rise to public prominence. Vast parts of the politically interested public welcomed Azra in the public sphere and in political deliberation, because he was perceived to speak not only on behalf of himself, but in the name of a bigger institution and as an authoritative representative of the PTKIN avant-garde of Islamic knowledge, which historically always has had a share in (controlled) public political participation in Indonesia. From the perspective of the media outlets, these circumstances made him “marketable to the demanders of public-intellectual work” (Posner 2003: 46). Furthermore, Azra’s lead position as campus rector was an outcome of the first-ever free democratic election by the IAIN Jakarta senate members—a fact which contributed to his credibility and legitimization as a *homo democraticus*.

The History of Indonesian Public Islamic Academic Intellectualism

While in the Middle East Islamic (intellectual) thought is mainly disseminated through books and mosques, in Indonesia it is spread through organizations, thus having a strong social function and a communitarian character (Assyaukanie 2009: 224–225). It is against this backdrop that in Indonesia Islamic academia-based public intellectualism is since long a given and societally widely accepted. Moreover, Islamic academics and alumni from the PTKIN system enjoy a high reputation and are acknowledged as religious authorities by mainstream Muslim society. The Indonesian state authorities actively support the public role of Islamic academics by frequently upgrading professors from PTKIN facilities to high religious and political positions within the state bureaucracy, most notably to leading ranks within the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Many professors serve parallel to their university occupation as leading members in the state-funded *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (Indonesian Ulama Council, MUI), current examples being Professor Amany Lubis (rector of UIN Jakarta 2019–2024) and Professor Sudarnoto Abdul Hakim (professor of Islamic History at UIN Jakarta). Another example for PTKIN’s public visibility and the overlap of the political, religious, and Islamic academic sphere is the appointment of former UIN Jakarta professor Nasaruddin Umar to function for a second term (2020–2024) as Imam of Jakarta’s main state mosque Istiqlal. Since circa 2013, Indonesian governments seek to include Islamic academics as actors into the state’s Islamic public diplomacy and soft power agenda, which aims at internationally branding Indonesia as a religiously moderate, modern, peaceful, and democratic country. For this purpose, new Islamic academic institutes that are heavily based on the PTKIN model and that draw on its staff are being established in Indonesia as well as abroad, and PTKIN scholars act on the international parquet as cultural and religious brokers, informal diplomats, and ambassadors (Allès and tho Seeth forthcoming 2021).

In all these positions, Islamic academics move between the elitist-scholarly, the political, and the popular sphere, making abstract, intellectualized—and oftentimes foreign—ideas and concepts accessible to the wider Muslim populace. Their high mobility between different social spheres strongly resembles what has been observed in the context of Indonesian civil society elites as “boundary-crossing” and “zig-zagging” between social subfields (Haryanto 2020). Where does this multidimensional competence and profile of Indonesian Islamic academics, and in particular their public and politicized feature, stem from?

While the institutionalized public political function of Indonesian state Islamic academia can be traced back to its founding momentum in July 1945 under the Japanese occupation administration, the existence of individual Islamic intellectuals with a public mission and a high media presence precedes that date. Yudi Latif distinguishes six generations of what he calls “Indonesian Muslim intelligentsia,” mentioning Azyumardi Azra as a member of the fifth generation. This showcases the importance of understanding Azra and his contemporary colleagues as forming part of a longer tradition and historical chain of publicly engaged Islamic intellectuals, and who also incorporated elements from Western thought (see Latif 2008, especially page 472). Prominent early examples of this kind of public Islamic intellectuals include Agus Salim¹⁵ (1884–1954) and Hasbi Ash Shiddieqy (1904–1975). Salim was a highly learned cosmopolitan man who drew on intellectual sources from both classical Islam and modern Western science. In the 1920s, he was considered the “thinker” (Kahfi 1996: 107) of the Islamic nationalist *Partai Sarekat Islam* (Islamic Union Party, PSI), and later, in independent Indonesia, he served as minister of foreign affairs (1947–1949). The forerunner of his political engagement was, however, the written word: From 1916 to 1920, Salim was editor-in-chief and journalist of the newspaper *Neratja*, which took an openly critical stance toward Dutch colonialism. Moreover, he expressed the personal religious experience he had obtained through the pilgrimage to Mecca and his ideas on Marxism and socialism in Islam through interviews and articles in national and international media outlets (Kahfi 1996: 7; 107).

Ash Shiddieqy was an Islamic legal scholar who, before his engagement in independent Indonesia in organizations such as *Majlis Syuro Muslimin Indonesia* (Consultative Council of Indonesian Muslims, Masyumi) and *Persatuan Islam* (Islamic Union, Persis), aimed at making intellectual debates on Islamic law more accessible to lay Muslims. Particularly during the 1930s, his medium for public communication was the mass media where he regularly wrote articles for *Pedoman Islam* and served as editor of *Soeara Atjeh* and *al-Islam* (Feener 2002: 90). In his treatise on the movements for the creation of a national Islamic legal school in Indonesia, Michael R. Feener posits that Ash Shiddieqy’s “most long-lasting contributions to Indonesian thought came

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15. I thank Delphine Allès for directing my attention to Agus Salim.

about through his involvement with the Indonesian system of State Islamic Institutes (IAIN)” (Feener 2002: 90). This comment hints at the crucial role of an institutionalized and highly bureaucratized state Islamic academic system—the PTKIN—for the effectiveness of Islamic intellectual occupation in Indonesia, to which I will turn later in detail.

Another important “generation” of publicly engaged Islamic intellectuals that emerged before the creation of the Indonesian nation-state and its state-funded Islamic higher education system was constituted by a group of men born around the year 1910 (for instance Hadji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah “HAMKA,” Prawoto Mangkusasmito, Mohammad Natsir). These had acquired through their Dutch education and/or autodidactic learning a solid expertise in non-Islamic epistemologies and channeled their wide-ranging religious and non-religious knowledge of and approaches on social issues into modernist Islamic political activism to further Indonesian independence. In his seminal work on Masyumi, Rémy Madinier demonstrates how, despite their strong Islamic outlook, these personalities were in many topics heavily inspired by Western authors and openly referenced them in their own writings and public argumentations, while they rather neglected references to Indonesian history and past Indonesian polity (Madinier 2015: 1–60). Madinier concludes that these Islamic intellectuals who constituted the Masyumi leadership “favoured an attitude of openness to the rest of the world and forged for themselves a political culture which was a mixture of Western references and Muslim values” (Madinier 2015: 60). This assessment is partially confirmed by Khairudin Aljunied who devotes a whole book to carve out that HAMKA was a “cosmopolitan reformer” (Aljunied 2018).

It was then under the Japanese rule over the Indonesian archipelago that the seeds were planted to channel this particular kind of Islamic intellectualism—public, pragmatic, worldly oriented, socially and politically engaged—into a politically functional academic system: In the context of their Pan-Asian and anti-Western ideology, the Japanese initiated the establishment of Indonesia’s first Islamic higher education institute, the *Sekolah Tinggi Islam* (Higher School of Islam, STI) in Jakarta. STI was installed as a political instrument and as a bulwark against the Western powers and for enforcing Indonesia’s road toward independence. Accordingly, it was staffed with politically experienced prominence from the independence movement and worked at the interstices of academia and state- and nation-building. After independence was declared in August 1945, STI staff simultaneously occupied leading positions in the government or in leading Islamic organizations, thereby deepening the close relationship between Islamic academia and the world of politics (tho Seeth 2020). Also, in October 1945, the *Gerakan Pemuda Islam Indonesia* (Movement of Young Muslims, GPII) was founded at STI, which used the campus as a platform to spread Islam and to defend the Republic (Madinier 2015: 73).

President Sukarno and his regime (1945–1966) furthered the institutionalization of Islamic academia as a political actor. Sukarno did so by popularizing the idea of *ulama intelek*, i.e. Islamic scholars who should be able to combine classical Islamic and modern Western epistemologies, thus emphasizing the need for pragmatic application of Islamic academic thought for resolving contemporary real-world problems and to empower the nation. Out of the initial STI cell and some of its offshoots, he started to establish from 1960 onwards a nationwide system of IAINs. To the disadvantage of the modernist Islamic civil mass organization *Muhammadiyah*, Sukarno predominantly employed at the IAINs followers of the rivalling traditionalist NU. As a consequence, state Islamic academia became a bastion of NU and it backed up Sukarno's power. The state regarded the IAINs as an "efficient instrument for revolution" (Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia 1965: 247), tasked to spread through its staff ideas on "character and nation-building" (Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia 1965: 249), which included socialization into the *Pancasila* state ideology and into a loyal, state-compatible Islam.

Moreover, Sukarno's concept of *Tri Dharma Perguruan Tinggi* (Three Noble Aspects of Higher Education),¹⁶ with which he came forward in 1962 after the introduction of his Guided Democracy in 1959, obliged IAIN campuses to directly serve the development of society and to solve pressing national questions of education, healthcare, hygiene, and welfare. Students were sent through a service program to remote villages to assist in alphabetization and health campaigns. Already in 1962, a health corps for the local population was set up at IAIN Jakarta which offered medical and welfare services for mothers and children (Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia 1987: 110–11), and later Jakarta students started to raise money to build local schools. In addition to its role for the uplifting of society, the student service program intended to counter the communist and Islamist opposition in the country and to discursively legitimize the Sukarno regime, all of which contributed to Islamic academia's growing participation and competence in the political realm.

Under President Suharto, state-funded Islamic academia was heavily aligned to represent and mobilize for the New Order's national developmentalist agenda, which was oriented toward capitalist growth and modern Western civilization. To achieve this goal, Suharto expanded the number and infrastructure of the IAINs, put an end to their liaison with NU, and instead staffed them with followers of *Muhammadiyah* (Porter 2002: 53–55). With its urban middle-class milieu and its focus on modernity, progress, and a rationalist interpretation of Islam, *Muhammadiyah* was seen to better fit the national modernization project and to cater for its compatibility with Islamic teachings. Through academic as well as more public conferences, media

16. The three noble aspects, which are in place until today, are: *Pendidikan/Pengajaran, Penelitian, Pengabdian pada Masyarakat* (Education/Teaching, Research, Service to Society).

appearances, and the persisting close relationship with the political elite—particularly with the Ministry of Religious Affairs—the IAINs became a mouthpiece of modernist Islamic intellectualism, the *Pancasila*, and the state mantra on national development. Public academic workshops on the campuses and state-financed scientific publications propagated the regime’s ideological preferences, and the public appearance of Islamic academics was explicitly asked for, if not even expected.

Suharto supported the careers of IAIN-based modernist Islamic intellectuals like Mukti Ali (1923–2004)¹⁷ and Harun Nasution (1919–1998)¹⁸ who had pursued religious studies in the 1950s and 1960s at the Canadian McGill University and who had shaped with their international academic insights and cosmopolitan outlook the curricula of the IAINs. Exchange of IAIN staff with Western universities and the integration of non-religious, Western-developed methods and theories from the social sciences into the study on Islam became a defining marker of New Order Islamic scholarship. The academic exchanges bred a strong cohort of cosmopolitan-oriented Indonesian Islamic academics who promoted a progressive, moderate Islam, and intercultural and interreligious dialogue, especially with Western civilization and Christianity. These “cosmopolitan Muslim intellectuals” (Kersten 2011) produced unique critical Islamic discourses that in the 1980s and 1990s also started to include appreciation of democracy, human rights, religious freedom, and gender equality (van Bruinessen 2012) and thus—as a consequence of their close contact with Western democracies—began to indicate a gradual inner emancipation from the repressive Suharto regime.

It has been observed that in the 1980s and 1990s Muslim intelligentsia began “to dominate socio-political discourse in the Indonesian public sphere” (Latif 2008: 421), and seven years before the collapse of authoritarianism it was found that “Muslim intellectuals speak continually about the value of democracy to Islam and Indonesia” (Federspiel 1991: 245). The incremental development of free political thought and speech was backed up by the institutional support for rational analysis by the IAINs, which was particularly furthered by Harun Nasution, a sympathizer of the rationalist Islamic school of thought of the *Mu’tazila* (van Bruinessen 2012). IAIN Jakarta graduate Nurcholish Madjid (1939–2005) was another public figure, who stimulated an Islamic renewal (the *Pembaruan* movement) with a liberal, cosmopolitan outlook, particularly after having proceeded his studies on Islam from 1976 to 1984 under the aegis of Pakistani modernizer Fazlur Rahman at the University of Chicago. Back at IAIN Jakarta, Madjid founded the *Mazhab Ciputat* (Kersten 2011: 124)—an Islamic school of thought or informal think tank, named after the district in South Tangerang, a neighboring city of Jakarta,

17. IAIN graduate, professor, and minister of religious affairs (1971–1978).

18. IAIN graduate, professor, and rector of IAIN Jakarta (1973–1984).

where IAIN and now UIN Jakarta is located—which sought to “deconstruct Islam” (see Effendy 1999) through intellectual discourse. One of its few hand-picked members was Azyumardi Azra.¹⁹

Azra’s Media Writings during *Reformasi*

Hailing from a lower middle-class background, Azyumardi Azra was born in 1955 in the small town of Lubuk Alung close to Padang on the island of Sumatra. His family came from the ethnic Minang and followed the *Muhammadiyah* Islamic tradition. After having finished the local elementary school, Azra proceeded to a middle school in Padang, which prepared its students to work as teachers in religious schools. After graduation from this middle school, in 1975, Azra left Sumatra for Jakarta to study at the Department of Arabic Language, Faculty of *Tarbiyah* (Islamic Education), at IAIN Jakarta, from which he graduated with a bachelor’s degree in 1979. During his following student years, he was appointed from 1979 to 1982 as chair of the student senate at the Faculty of *Tarbiyah*, and from 1981 to 1982, he served as chair of the *Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam* (Muslim Students’ Association, HMI). In 1982, he completed his *doktorandus*²⁰ at the Department of Islamic Instruction, at the Faculty of *Tarbiyah*. The same year, Azra was employed at the *Lembaga Riset Kebudayaan Nasional* (Research Center of National Culture, LRKN), which formed part of the *Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia* (Indonesian Academy of Sciences, LIPI), while simultaneously working as a part-time lecturer at IAIN Jakarta. After having quit LRKN in 1985, he started a full-time academic employment at the Faculty of *Tarbiyah*, IAIN Jakarta. In 1986, Azra received a Fulbright scholarship from the US government to conduct MA studies at Columbia University, New York City. At Columbia, in 1988, he received a master’s degree in Middle Eastern Studies and in 1989 another master’s degree in History. Azra continued his academic career with historical PhD research at the same university which he finished in 1992 with a well-known study published in 1994 by University of Hawai’i Press as *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern Ulama in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. From 1994 to 1995, he was a research fellow at the University of Oxford and returned to IAIN Jakarta in 1996 to become professor of Islamic History (Nurkomala 2013; Dwifatma 2011; Fathurrahman 2002).

After the fall of Suharto in May 1998, in October of that year, after the first-ever democratic election of the IAIN Jakarta’s senate, Azra was officially appointed as IAIN Jakarta rector by President B.J. Habibie. Reelected in October 2002

19. The other members were Ihsan Ali-Fauzi, Bahtiar Effendy, Nasrulah Ali Fauzi, Hadimulyo, Badri Jatim, Ali Munhanif, Saiful Muzani, Muhamad Wahyuni Nafis, Jamal D. Rahman, Irchamni Sulaiman, Nanang Tahqiq, and Ahmad Thaha (Kersten 2011: footnote 71).

20. Drs.; a Dutch academic degree that can be obtained after a bachelor’s degree.

for a second term until 2006, he was the campus’ first democratically elected rector and the key person who accompanied and shaped IAIN/UITN Jakarta’s fate during Indonesia’s democratic transition. In his position as university rector, Azra exceeded far beyond the classical administrative tasks demanded of that function. Building on the journalistic experience he had gained over many years during the Suharto era as contributor to the newspapers *Panji Masyarakat*, *Merdeka*, and *Kompas*, throughout the transition he addressed the public through the media on several issues concerning the ongoing democratization process. Through his intense media presence, he participated in the country’s newly democratizing public sphere, claiming public space and raising his voice as a representative of Islam, thereby underpinning his—and Islamic academia’s—role as a religious and social-political authority. During *Reformasi*, he composed a total of 84 articles for the four most prominent media outlets *Kompas*, *Republika*, *Tempo*, and *Gatra*. Azra’s journalistic output peaked in the election year 2004 when he was offered a weekly column in *Republika*.

The following analysis of the media articles shows that Azra commented on a manifold of topics which were relevant to the challenges of transitioning Indonesia. Issues of democracy, the role of Islam therein, challenges and hindrances to democratic consolidation, and criticism of Indonesia’s democratic deficits featured strongly. As his language and writing style suggest, the articles addressed an educated, academic, cosmopolitan audience of the middle class. Azra made at times excessive use of an array of abstract foreign words and expressions—some of them academic terminology—alien to the average-educated Indonesian (e.g. “*l’histoire se répète*,” “*vis-à-vis*,” “anathema,” “brain-drain,” “blessing in disguise”). In many articles, Azra drew on insights he had gained at international conferences or from academic books which he referred to and from which he cited in order to strengthen his arguments.

The majority of the literature Azra referred to was of Western origin. He strongly engaged with the works of prominent US scholars who dominated the academic scene in the social sciences and humanities during the time of writing in the early 2000s (e.g. Robert Hefner, Samuel P. Huntington, Dale F. Eickelman), but also with Western classics (e.g. Max Weber). In some articles, he referred to classical Islamic scholars (e.g. al-Ghazali, al-Farabi, al-Mawardi, Ibn Taymiya), as well as to religious sources (Qur’an, Hadith, Old and New Testament). Despite his tendency to refer more often to non-Muslim than to Muslim authors, in qualitative aspects, Azra did not prioritize Western thoughts and arguments over the ones of Muslims, but he tried to balance both. He rather engaged in an educative mission that aimed to widen the Indonesian readers’ intellectual horizon through introducing them to Western scholars and their works. Azra’s fluency in Arabic and English allowed him to consult original sources from both cultures, to compare them, and to transmit his findings to the Indonesian audience. Azra thus functioned as a broker between different cultures. Equally important, he legitimized the

particularities of Indonesian culture and Indonesian Islam, and thereby tried to nourish Indonesian Muslims' self-esteem, independence, and emancipation from established Arab role models. His academic training as a historian shone through in many articles where he contextualized polarizing, controversial political, social, and religious affairs by explaining their historical origin and developments and presenting global comparisons. Azra's tone was generally rational, neutral, and mediating, and a calming, educative mission led most of his articles, trying to promote intra- and interreligious, intercultural, and interethnic tolerance and peace.

In contrast, Azra's tone was more outraged and even accusing when he broached the issues of democratic deficits in Indonesia and what he perceived as misinterpretations of Islam. Recurrent targets of his criticism were political and religious elites who, in his view, did not engage enough in the democratization process and the dissemination of a peaceful Islam. His criticism was also directed toward Indonesian civil society, which, according to Azra, lacked a democratic civic culture. Azra emphasized the importance of a deeply embedded democratic civic culture as a necessary precondition for the realization of a consolidated democracy. From Azra's perspective, the Indonesian political and religious elites were responsible for the lack of such a democratic civic culture. As can be concluded from his writings, Azra clearly favored a top-down approach for disseminating pro-democracy sentiments in the country, and he expected the political and religious elites to initiate this dissemination. Azra himself engaged in this project by addressing through his articles the educated middle and upper echelons of society on the importance of democracy and on a tolerant, peaceful Islam, hoping that these convictions would then trickle down to the wider masses of society. The following table presents an overview of the articles' topics, their underlying messages, and frequencies. Categories 1, 3, 4, and 5a will be discussed in greater detail.

Indonesian Democracy [Category 1]

In most of his articles (24 articles/28 percent), Azyumardi Azra discussed the qualitative status quo of Indonesian democracy. He held a very critical stance toward Indonesia's transition process as "there are not yet convincing signs which would indicate that the transition which now halfway proceeded can truly succeed in realizing an authentic democracy."²¹ Accordingly, democracy "is still weak."²² Azra arrived at this conclusion because of his holistic understanding of democracy which strongly emphasizes a deeply entrenched democratic culture: "However, democracy is more than only party politics and elections; democracy

21. "belum terlihat tanda-tanda yang meyakinkan (convincing signs), yang mengindikasikan bahwa transisi yang tengah berlangsung dapat benar-benar berhasil mewujudkan demokrasi otentik (authentic democracy)" (Azra, June 28, 2000: 63), brackets with English terms in original.

22. "masih lemahnya" (Azra, July 20, 2002: 63).

Rank	Topic	Content/Message	Number	Percent (rounded)
1	Indonesian Democracy	Indonesia suffers from democratic deficits. Democratic civic culture, political rationalism, and good governance must be strengthened.	24	28%
2	Contemporary Islamic Issues	Issues concerning Islam must be understood in historical, political, and social context.	21	25%
3	Pluralism and Peace	Islam is tolerant and peaceful. Different religions and cultures must peacefully coexist.	14	16%
4	Elections	Elections and active voter participation are important for Indonesian future. Islam supports elections of political leaders.	9	11%
5a	Islam and Democracy	Islam and democracy are compatible.	5	6%
5b	Indonesian Islamic Identity	Indonesian Islam is not subordinate to Arab Islam.	5	6%
6	Islamic Education	Islamic education needs reform and more funding.	3	4%
7	Other	Epitaph on Edward Said; critique on George W. Bush	2	2%
8	Education System	Education system must engage in democratic socialization.	1	1%

Table 1 – Topics and contents of Azyumardi Azra’s 84 media articles (*Kompas*, *Republika*, *Tempo*, *Gatra*, May 21, 1998 to October 20, 2004)

is also a cultural attitude, a social attitude, a moral attitude, an ethical attitude, and an attitude of responsibility.”²³ He posited: “Democracy is also a view of life that needs to be realized in everyday-life.”²⁴

From Azra’s perspective, for a democracy to work, a democratic culture needs to be present within civil society where relationships “are carried out cooperatively rather than conflictually.”²⁵ This must be secured by a state that is “able to guarantee the basic rights of civil society, like the freedom to have an individual opinion, to organize, and to take initiatives.”²⁶ In a similar vein, he wrote that “democracy starts by the principle of broad public participation, the freedom to form an individual opinion and to choose (self-determination), political equality, and so on.”²⁷ Azra thus stressed the relevance of the civil component for the success of the transition process.

However, he did not find a strong democratic culture to exist in Indonesia, neither within civil society, nor on the political elite level: “elite politics and many parts of society are not yet ready for what I call a civilized democracy, and to borrow the above mentioned frame from Hefner, a democratic civility.”²⁸ Against the backdrop of *premanisme* (thuggerism) and vigilantism, which were dominant phenomena during the transitory period, Azra found that Indonesia was a “mobocracy”²⁹ rather than a democracy. He repeatedly stressed that this was due to the weakness of democratic sentiments within civil society, as well as within elite politics: “there has not yet been established a civic culture and democracy in society, appreciation toward the rule of law is weak, and the political parties have not yet succeeded in democratizing themselves by building up a civic culture and civility on the leadership level as well as within the masses.”³⁰

23. “Tapi, demokrasi lebih daripada sekadar parpol dan pemilu; demokrasi juga adalah sikap kultural, sikap sosial, sikap moral, dan sikap etis, dan sikap bertanggung jawab” (Azra, April 15, 2004: 12).

24. “Demokrasi juga berarti pandangan hidup, yang diwujudkan dalam kehidupan sehari-hari” (Azra, September 23, 2004: 12).

25. “menjalin hubungan yang lebih kooperatif daripada konflik” (Azra, June 28, 2000: 63).

26. “menjamin hak-hak dasar masyarakat madani seperti kebebasan berpendapat, berorganisasi dan berprakarsa” (Azra, June 28, 2000: 63).

27. “demokrasi bertitik tolak dari prinsip partisipasi public yang luas, kebebasan berpendapat dan memilih (self-determination), kesetaraan politik, dan seterusnya” (Azra, January 8, 2004: 12), English term and bracket with English term in original.

28. “elite politik dan banyak kalangan masyarakat belum siap dengan apa yang saya sebut demokrasi keadaban (civilized democracy) dan meminjam kerangka Hefner di atas, keadaban demokratis (democratic civility)” (Azra, June 28, 2000: 63), brackets with English terms in original.

29. “mobocracy” (Azra, January 8, 2004: 12).

30. “belum terbentuknya civic culture, dan demokrasi dalam masyarakat, lemahnya penghargaan kepada rule of law dan belum berhasilnya parpol mendemokratisasikan dirinya dengan membangun civic culture dan civility baik pada tingkat pimpinan maupun massanya” (Azra,

The overall tone of Azra's articles testifies that he saw the political—and at times religious—elite to be responsible of fostering a democratic civic culture within civil society. He blamed the country's elite for being responsible for the lack of a strong democratic civic culture, for prevalent democratic deficits, and the potential failure of the democratization process. Azra defended a top-down rather than a bottom-up approach as the recipe for a successful democratization. Azra was, however, skeptical about the elite's actual ability to serve as a democratic role model. He heavily criticized the political elite, Muslim leadership figures, and Islamic organizations for their involvement in money politics, corruption, despotism, and for their internal fragmentation and instability.

A recurring person under critique was NU intellectual Abdurrahman Wahid in his position as Indonesian president from 1999 to 2001. Azra even went as far as accusing Wahid of the "desacralization of the presidential institution."³¹ He disapproved of Wahid's tendency to personalize politics and to follow intuition rather than rational consideration in decision-making. This made President Wahid unpredictable, which is "clearly not conducive to the rise of a democratic political culture which needs predictability, transparency, rationality, and accountability."³² An entire article critically treated Wahid's involvement in what Azra called "The Mystification of Indonesian Politics at the Beginning of the New Millennium."³³ In this article, Azra reflected on Wahid's frequent visits to the tomb of Ahmad Mutamakin, a Muslim saint believed to have had supernatural powers that he used to defend justice in society. As Wahid had publicly declared to be Mutamakin's descendant and seeking to continue Mutamakin's missions, Azra detected here a mystification of politics he felt uncomfortable with. Azra criticized that some parts of Indonesian society—followers of NU in particular—perceived Wahid as a "saint,"³⁴ which Wahid himself boosted through his esotericism.

Furthermore, Azra found that Wahid showed contradicting characteristics by, on one hand, having a track record as an engaged promoter of democracy and the principles of openness, plurality, tolerance, and egalitarianism, while on the other hand, he clearly stood in for a mystical Islam and criticized followers of a more formalized religion. Azra pointed toward the unreflected "unreserved mass mobilization to show support for President Abdurrahman Wahid"³⁵ and to Wahid's discursive support for the introduction of Islamic

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January 8, 2004: 12), English terms in original.

31. "melanjutkan 'desakralisasi' institusi kepresidenan" (Azra, June 28, 2000: 63).

32. "jelas tidak kondusif bagi pertumbuhan budaya politik demokratis yang memerlukan prediktabilitas, transparensi, rasionalitas, dan akuntabilitas" (Azra, June 28, 2000: 63).

33. "Mistifikasi Politik Indonesia di Awal Milenium Baru" (Azra, January 1, 2000: 48).

34. "waliyullah," Arabic, lit. 'representative of Allah' (Azra, January 1, 2000: 48).

35. "pengerahan massa untuk menunjukkan dukungan tanpa reserve kepada Presiden Abdurrahman Wahid" (Azra, March 4, 2001: 80), English term in original.

law including *hudud* law (corporal punishment) in Aceh, even though, so Azra stressed, “Indonesia is not an Islamic state.”³⁶

In the aftermath of Wahid’s impeachment, Azra continued with his sharp criticism of Wahid’s and his followers’ blending of Islam and politics. After the *Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat* (People’s Consultative Assembly, MPR) had announced Wahid’s deposition on July 23, 2001, Islamic scholars of NU gathered in a *taushiiyyah* (a conference in a small circle)³⁷ to decide over the legality of the impeachment by consulting classical Islamic legal sources and to issue a recommendation addressed at the government. Commenting on this procedure, Azra wrote:

Indonesia is not an Islamic state. And arguing on the basis of classical Islamic political law, like it is done by Islamic scholars of NU (...), is irrelevant and does not fit Indonesia which is not an Islamic state. (...) Democratization rejects absolute power—like the one incorporated by a caliph and sultan from the era of classical Islam.³⁸

Azra defended the separation of religion and politics and advocated politics based on human reason. He judged critically the practice of *istighatsah* (praying collectively to Allah for achieving a certain goal) if done publicly by politicians:

Istighatsah is not a real political power; politics has its own logic, system, institution, and procedure. (...) the use of religious language (and [religious] ritual, symbolism, as well as institution) should be avoided. The politicization of these religious elements is a very dangerous reduction, because it gears everything [religious] toward political power. Religion is divine and as such sacral; its politicization is a desacralization which inevitably reduces religion [to politics].³⁹

He stated that “It is about time that—for the benefit of our democracy and the sustainability of the Indonesian state and nation—political rationalism also becomes the attitude of our politicians.”⁴⁰

36. “Indonesia bukan negara Islam” (Azra, March 20, 2001: 54).

37. For the Indonesian readers, Azra translated the term ‘*taushiiyyah*’ as “rekomendasi,” by which he means a recommendation based on Islamic deliberation (Azra, July 28, 2001: 46).

38. “Indonesia bukanlah negara Islam. Dan hujjah (argument) fiqu siyasah yang sering digunakan sementara kiai NU (...) tidak relevan dan tidak kontekstual dengan Indonesia yang bukan negara Islam. (...) Arus demokratisasi yang menolak absolutisme kekuasaan—seperti khalifah dan sultan pada masa Islam klasik” (Azra, July 28, 2001: 46), bracket with English term in original.

39. “*istighatsah* bukanlah kekuatan politik riil; politik memiliki logika, sistem, lembaga, dan prosedurnya sendiri. (...) penggunaan bahasa (dan juga ritual, simbolisme, serta lembaga) agama seyogianya dihindari. Politisasi perangkat-perangkat agama tersebut merupakan reduksi sangat berbahaya, karena mengorientasikan semuanya kepada politik kekuasaan. Agama adalah sesuatu yang ilahiai dan—karena itu—sacral; politisasi terhadapnya merupakan desakralisasi yang—tak bisa lain—dapat reduksi agama itu sendiri” (Azra, June 10, 2004: 12), English term in original.

40. “Sudah waktunya rasionalisme politik juga menjadi sikap para politisi kita demi demokrasi dan keberlangsungan negara bangsa Indonesia” (Azra, April 15, 2004).

Openly voiced criticism of corruption and calling for the strengthening of good governance were of special concern to Azra. One extensive article from 2003 was dedicated to convincing the readers that Islam does not accept corruption. Azra backed up his point by citing a Hadith in its Arabic original and then translating it into Indonesian and explaining its meaning:

I am convinced that no matter what religion, and Islam in particular, condemns acts of corruption in whatever form. The above cited Hadith actually only says “Allah’s curse over the one who commits bribery and over the givers of bribe money,” but in a modern Arabic dictionary *risywah* not only means “bribery,” but also “corruption” and “dishonesty.”⁴¹

Azra extended this linguistic and theological discussion by writing that “In the wider context of Islamic doctrine, corruption is an act that contradicts the principle of justice (*al-‘adalah*), accountability (*al-amanah*), and responsibility (...) Islam really hates corruption.”⁴²

He explained the causes of corruption as originating from an unauthentic religiosity which is split between the private and public sphere: “Here happens what is a sharp disparity between personal religiosity and social religiosity, a severe separation between a religious attitude in the mosque or in places of worship and the behavior in the office, on the main roads, and so on.”⁴³ He suggested that this religious split could only be overcome by a holistic understanding of religiosity. Here, Azra saw religious organizations like churches, NU, and *Muhammadiyah* in direct responsibility to act. These organizations are, however,

Unfortunately (...) more interested in issues concerning religious worship and the principal personal rituals toward God than in “social worship,” such as the eradication of corruption and the creation of good governance. (...) These organizations have to release a “fatwa” about the obligation to do jihad against corruption.⁴⁴

41. “Agama mana pun, khususnya Islam, saya yakin, mengutuk tindakan korupsi dalam bentuk apa pun. Dalam hadis yang dikutip di atas, memang hanya dinyatakan ‘kutukan Allah terhadap penyuap dan pemberi suap’, tetapi dalam kamus bahasa Arab modern, ‘risywah’ tidak hanya berarti ‘penyuapan’ (bribery), tetapi juga korupsi dan ketidakjujuran (dishonesty)” (Azra, September 5, 2003: 4), brackets with English terms in original.

42. “Dalam konteks ajaran Islam yang lebih luas, korupsi merupakan tindakan yang bertentangan dengan prinsip keadilan (*al-‘adalah*), akuntabilitas (*al-amanah*), dan tanggung jawab. (...) Islam amat membenci korupsi” (Azra, September 5, 2003: 4).

43. “Di sini terjadi disparitas tajam antara personal religiosity dan social religiosity; bahkan lebih parah lagi terjadi pemisahan antara sikap keberagamaan di masjid atau rumah-rumah ibadah dengan tingkah laku di kantor, di jalan raya, dan sebagainya” (Azra, September 5, 2003: 4), English terms in original.

44. “Sayangnya (...) lembaga-lembaga seperti ini lebih tertarik pada masalah-masalah ibadah dan ritual mahdhah (pokok) daripada ‘ibadah sosial’ seperti pemberantasan korupsi dan penciptaan good governance. (...) Jika perlu, lembaga-lembaga ini dapat mengeluarkan ‘fatwa’ tentang wajibnya melakukan jihad melawan korupsi” (Azra, September 5, 2003: 4), English term in original.

In the run-up to the presidential election in 2004, Azra criticized the nominated presidential candidates of the Golkar Party and the Democratic Party for their ongoing unrealistic “romanticism about the good state of the economy and the stable security situation during the New Order,”⁴⁵ which distracts the population from the nation’s real problems. He suggested to nominate presidential candidates who stand for the principle of good governance: “choose presidential candidates and vice-presidential candidates who are able to bring this country into a state of good governance. Choose personalities who possess a political will, a strong commitment, a clear strategy and program to eliminate corruption which has broken out like a disease in the last few years.”⁴⁶ On October 14, 2004, a day before the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan and six days before Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was sworn in as new president, Azra reflected upon the clearing intention of Ramadan and hoped for wider social-political effects:

Trust, control, and self-cleaning during the Ramadan: This can also concern the refreshing of the new national leadership and other public leadership by establishing a clean leadership and good governance. (...) Therefore, may the blessings of the Ramadan lead to purity and piety not only on the private, individual, but also on the social-public level.⁴⁷

Pluralism and Peace [Category 3]

A thematically fairly coherent group of 14 articles (16 percent) addressed the topic of religious, cultural, and ethnic pluralism, and mutual tolerance. Against the backdrop of the increase of interreligious clashes during Indonesia’s transitory period and the event of September 11, 2001, these articles argued against religiously motivated violence, interreligious conflicts, and for a peaceful, tolerant Islam. Azra repeatedly asserted that since the collapse of authoritarianism, too much bloodshed had occurred in Indonesia: “The phenomenon of conflict and violence between the followers of the Abrahamic

45. “romantisme tentang keadaan ekonomi dan keamanan yang baik selama masa Orde Baru” (Azra, April 1, 2004: 12).

46. “memilih capres/cawapres yang dapat membawa negeri ini ke dalam penciptaan good governance, yang memiliki political will, komitmen kuat, strategi dan program yang jelas bagi pemberantasan korupsi, yang semakin merajalela dalam beberapa tahun terakhir” (Azra, June 24, 2004: 12), English terms in original.

47. “Amanah, pengendalian, dan penyucian diri sepanjang Ramadhan, bagi kepemimpinan nasional baru dan kepemimpinan public lainnya dapat diaktualisasikan dalam pembentukan pemerintahan bersih, good governance. (...) Dengan demikian, berkah Ramadhan untuk mencapai kesucian dan derajat ketakwaan tidak hanya pada tingkat pribadi, individual-personal, tetapi juga dalam kehidupan sosial-publik” (Azra, October 14, 2004: 12), English terms in original.

religions is also rising in our home country, at least in the last three years.”⁴⁸ He stated: “There has been too much violence in the last years in this country.”⁴⁹

Azra found these violent outbreaks to conflict with democracy, because “one of the essences of democracy is peaceful conflict-resolution.”⁵⁰ In several articles he stressed that Islam is a peaceful religion that rejects violence: “Islam is a religion of peace (...) and each Muslim is obliged to realize this essence of Islam in the way he thinks and acts;”⁵¹ “Islam means grace for the universe, it is neither a religion of violence, nor of terror;”⁵² “Islam criticizes violence, in particular terrorism.”⁵³ He cited from the Old and New Testament and from the Qur’an to show the shared appreciation of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam of their common ancestor, Abraham.⁵⁴ In an article on Muslim-Christian relations titled “Building a Bridge,”⁵⁵ Azra admitted that theological differences between the two religions exist, however, he argued that interreligious dialogue is essential for “developing a more accurate mutual understanding of the above mentioned doctrines until, amidst some differences, an attitude of appreciation evolves.”⁵⁶

In order to counter Muslim disapproval of other faiths and cultures, Azra called for “initiating a campaign to make Indonesian Islam a refreshed example of *ummatan washatan*,”⁵⁷ which is a Qur’anic concept he proved by citing from the holy scripture. The term describes “a well-balanced Muslim community, located within the middle, one which does not stand in extreme poles.”⁵⁸ The contemporary need for *ummatan washatan*—also referred to as *washatiyyah*—was a recurrent topic in many articles. Azra stated that according

48. “Gejala konflik dan kekerasan di antara pengikut agama Ibrahim juga meningkat di Tanah Air kita, setidaknya-tidaknya dalam tiga tahun terakhir” (Azra, December 23, 2000: 4).

49. “Sudah terlalu banyak kekerasan terjadi dalam beberapa tahun terakhir di negeri ini” (Azra, March 1, 2004: 1).

50. “salah satu esensi demokrasi adalah peaceful resolution of conflict” (Azra, March 11, 2004: 1), English term in original.

51. “Islam adalah agama perdamaian (...) dan setiap Muslim berkewajiban mewujudkan esensi Islam itu dalam cara berpikir dan bertindak” (Azra, January 15, 2004: 12).

52. “Islam adalah rahmatan lil alamin, rahmat bagi semesta alam, bukan agama kekerasan apalagi teror” (Azra, March 7, 2004: 54).

53. “Islam mengecam kekerasan, apalagi terorisme” (Azra, August 19, 2004).

54. Azra, December 23, 2000: 4.

55. “Membangun Jembatan” (Azra, April 22, 2004: 12).

56. “menumbuhkan pemahaman lebih akurat satu sama lain terhadap doktrin-doktrin tersebut, sehingga dapat memunculkan sikap menghargai di tengah berbagai perbedaan” (Azra, April 22, 2004: 12).

57. “mengampanyekan Islam Indonesia sebagai contoh aktualisasi *ummatan washatan*” (Azra, August 19, 2004: 12).

58. “umat yang berada di tengah, seimbang, tidak berdiri pada kutub ekstrem” (Azra, August 19, 2004: 12).

to his understanding, in Indonesia, *ummatan washatan* has been in the making since the end of the 12th century through the peaceful dissemination of Islam and its blending with local religious beliefs and practices. It is also “imprinted in the Pancasila”⁵⁹ and is in contemporary times “relevant and contextual for modernity and democracy.”⁶⁰

Besides *ummatan washatan*, Azra emphasized the concept of a multicultural democracy, which he wanted to see blossoming in Indonesia: “What is of importance now and in the future is how the now half-consolidated democracy can develop toward the direction of a multicultural democracy. In some of my papers on multiculturalism, I have emphasized the importance of multiculturalism as the basis of citizenship.”⁶¹ Under a multicultural paradigm, so Azra argued, “a person is appreciated and recognized based on his merit, achievement, and abilities.”⁶² He claimed that cultural freedom needs to be fostered in post-Suharto Indonesia, but that unfortunately “Until now, a conservative culture has survived that rejects diversity.”⁶³ For Azra, cultural freedom was key for the development of the nation, because “cultural freedom is important not only within the domain of culture alone, but it strongly determines the success and failure of the social, political, economic domains, etc.”⁶⁴ He repeatedly referred to the *Pancasila* and the Indonesian state motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) as a good basis for a multicultural democracy. However, he simultaneously pointed out that more needs to be done for the dissemination of multicultural sentiments.

In this context, Azra once more supported a top-down approach. For instance, for strengthening Muslim-Christian relations, he saw in charge “leaders, personalities, and intellectuals of the different religious communities who must improve mutual understanding.”⁶⁵ It is

59. “terpatri dalam Pancasila” (Azra, August 19, 2004: 12).

60. “relevan dan kontekstual dengan modernitas dan demokrasi” (Azra, August 19, 2004: 12).

61. “Yang penting sekarang dan di masa datang adalah bagaimana demokrasi yang tengah dikonsolidasikan sekarang ini dapat berkembang ke arah demokrasi multikultural. Dalam beberapa makalah tentang multikulturalisme, saya menekankan tentang pentingnya multikulturalisme sebagai basis kewargaan” (Azra, August 12, 2004: 12).

62. “seseorang dihargai dan diakui berdasarkan merit, prestasi, dan kemampuannya” (Azra, June 22, 2004: 1), English term in original.

63. “Sampai sekarang ini konservatisme budaya yang menolak keragaman masih bertahan” (Azra, August 5, 2004: 12).

64. “kebebasan kultural penting bukan hanya dalam ranah budaya itu sendiri, tetapi juga sangat menentukan dalam keberhasilan dan kegagalan dalam ranah sosial, politik, ekonomi, dan lain-lain” (Azra, August 5, 2004: 12).

65. “para pemimpin, tokoh, dan cendekiawan agama-agama mesti meningkatkan saling pengertian dan pemahaman” (Azra, April 22, 2004: 12).

the state that needs to acknowledge diversity and cultural differences in the constitution, in the rule of law, and in other legislation. The state must also formulate policies to protect the interests of different groups, may they be ethnic or cultural minorities, or may they concern the ones who have been socio-culturally and historically marginalized.⁶⁶

Azra called this a “politics of recognition”⁶⁷—a political approach which acknowledges minorities as equal citizens and strengthens their political participation in democratic processes.

Azra also regarded the sphere of education as key for spreading multicultural values. He wrote:

The formation of a multicultural Indonesian society should not be taken for granted or handled with an attitude of trial and error. On the contrary, it must be sought systematically, programmatically, in an integrated manner, and continuously. The most strategic step is to be taken through a multicultural education which needs to be carried out by all educational institutes.⁶⁸

The focus of a multicultural education should be on teaching “collaboration, teamwork, mediation, and the negotiation of differences in order to resolve conflicts”⁶⁹, as well as on teaching values of “humanity, commitment, and the cohesion of humans through tolerance and the mutual respect of personal and communal rights.”⁷⁰ Azra addressed the importance of secular schools as well as Islamic *madrasahs* to engage in the teaching of religion with a “multicultural perspective.”⁷¹

Elections [Category 4]

In nine articles (11 percent), Azra discussed the importance of democratic elections and active voter participation for the future of Indonesian society and politics. All of these articles were written and published in the year 2004,

66. “negara perlu mengakui keragaman dan perbedaan-perbedaan kultural dalam konstitusi, tata hukum, dan perundangan lainnya. Negara juga perlu merumuskan kebijakan-kebijakan untuk menjamin kepentingan-kepentingan berbagai kelompok berbeda, apakah kelompok etnis dan budaya minoritas, atau mereka yang secara sosio-kultural dan historis termarginalisasi” (Azra, August 12, 2004: 12).

67. English term in original, (Azra, August 12, 2004: 12).

68. “Pembentukan masyarakat multikultural Indonesia tidak bisa secara taken for granted atau trial and error. Sebaliknya harus diupayakan secara sistematis, programatis, integrated, dan berkesinambungan. Langkah yang paling strategis dalam hal ini adalah melalui pendidikan multikultural yang diselenggarakan melalui seluruh lembaga pendidikan” (Azra, September 3, 2003: 5), English terms in original.

69. “kolaborasi, kerja sama, mediasi, dan negosiasi perbedaan-perbedaan dan dengan demikian, menyelesaikan konflik” (Azra, September 3, 2003: 5).

70. “kemanusiaan, komitmen, dan kohesi kemanusiaan termasuk di dalamnya melalui toleransi, saling menghormati hak-hak personal dan komunal” (Azra, September 3, 2003: 5).

71. “perspektif multikulturalisme” (Azra, August 26, 2004: 12).

in the run-up to and aftermath of the country's legislative election on April 5, 2004, and the first direct presidential election, which took place in two rounds on July 5, and on September 20, 2004.

Azra confessed that "democracy is also time- and energy-consuming"⁷² and that "a general election is not an easy affair,"⁷³ which is particularly the case, so he wrote, in such a geographically and culturally complex country as Indonesia. However, he wanted his readers to understand democracy as a process and procedure in which elections play a key role, because they, for instance, legitimize the national leader and preserve the viability and sustainability of democracy. General elections are "much more than just for the sake of a democratic party,"⁷⁴ it is through elections that a newly won democracy must be protected.⁷⁵ Azra not only emphasized that "to vote in general elections is the right of every individual or citizen,"⁷⁶ but he also portrayed voting as a citizen's key responsibility: "The general election forms part of the citizen's responsibility to prevent the state's backslide into political, economic, and social adversity."⁷⁷ Through the presidential election, which Azra called a "golden opportunity,"⁷⁸ democracy could be consolidated⁷⁹ and Indonesia could gain stability.⁸⁰

Azra assessed non-voting as problematic and he aimed to encourage his readers to cast their vote. He did so by referring to Islam, which, so he claimed, does not support non-voting: "Islam deplores non-voting or abstaining from choosing a leader."⁸¹ Three days before the general election took place, he even condemned non-voting as a sign of *jahiliyah*, a Qur'anic term that refers to pre-Islamic ignorance and unbelief: "Furthermore, in contemporary times, there is a tendency in our political world to lose our patience, which shows through anarchical acts and non-voting, which means not wanting to vote in the general election. Things like these illustrate the reality of jahiliyah in our

72. "Demokrasi juga time- dan energy-consuming" (Azra, March 18, 2004: 12), English terms in original.

73. "pemilu bukanlah urusan yang mudah" (Azra, March 18, 2004: 12).

74. "lebih daripada sekadar pesta demokrasi" (Azra, March 31, 2004: 33).

75. Azra, March 18, 2004: 12.

76. "mencoblos dalam pemilihan umum (pemilu) adalah hak setiap individu atau warga" (Azra, April 2, 2004: 13).

77. "Pemilu adalah bagian tanggung jawab warga negara untuk mencegah negara jatuh kembali ke dalam keterpurukan politik, ekonomi, dan sosial" (Azra, March 31, 2004: 33).

78. "Kesempatan Emas," title of article (Azra, September 30, 2004: 12).

79. Azra, July 3, 2004: 45.

80. Azra, July 8, 2004: 12.

81. "Islam menyangkan sikap-sikap golput atau tidak berpartisipasi dalam pemilihan pemimpin" (Azra, April 2, 2004: 13).

politics.”⁸² Thus, voting is an Islamic duty, also because “Islamic theologians and experts of state law from al-Mawardi to Imam al-Ghazali have already outlined that it is obligatory for the Muslim community to establish and empower a state.”⁸³ Azra sharpened the religious underpinning of his argument by calling the election of a president *ibadah*, Islamic worship: “electing a president is Islamic worship. And Islamic worship has to be done as genuinely as possible, with a sincere and honest conscience.”⁸⁴

Islam and Democracy [Category 5a]

In five articles (6 percent), Azra commented on the relationship between Islam and democracy and advocated their compatibility. This was clearly stated when he wrote that “In a nutshell, there is an Islam which is tolerant, inclusive, modern, and compatible with democracy and with contemporary development.”⁸⁵

In one article of this category, Azra engaged in a deep discussion on the relationship of Islam to absolute political power and to democracy. He aimed to transmit to the readers that Islam does not support absolute political power, but that it features in itself democratic concepts. He identified the Qur’anic notion of *al-amr bil maruf wa i-nahy an al-munkar* (enjoying good and forbidding wrong) as the equivalent to the democratic concept of “checks and balances,” which also legitimizes the depositioning of sovereigns when they do wrong.⁸⁶ He claimed that “for democracy to grow (...), conceptual support is needed, in particular from an Islamic perspective.”⁸⁷

For Azra, the transitory period was the decisive momentum for the Indonesian state and society to disprove the widely spread assumption that Islam and democracy cannot go together. Over the course of the election year of 2004, he repeatedly made this point and expressed it in growing sharpness. Shortly after the general election and in the run-up to the presidential election, he postulated that “the Indonesian Muslim community can prove that Islam has

82. “Apalagi pada masa sekarang, ada kecenderungan di dalam dunia politik kita, bahwa kita sering kehilangan kesabaran, yang bisa dalam bentuk tindakan anarkis, golput tidak mau memilih dalam pemilu. Hal-hal tersebut menggambarkan realitas jahiliyah dalam politik kita” (Azra, April 2, 2004: 13).

83. “Para ulama dan figh siyasa, sejak dari al-Mawardi sampai Imam al-Ghazali telah menggariskan, bahwa wajib bagi kaum Muslimin untuk mendirikan dan memberdayakan negara” (Azra, July 7, 2004: 29).

84. “memilih presiden adalah ibadah. Dan ibadah haruslah dilaksanakan sebaik-baiknya, dengan nurani yang ikhlas dan jujur” (Azra, July 7, 2004: 29).

85. “Singkatnya adalah Islam yang toleran, inklusif, modern, kompatibel dengan demokrasi dan perkembangan kontemporer” (Azra, March 25, 2004: 12).

86. Azra, July 25, 1999: 30.

87. “pertumbuhan demokrasi (...) perlu dukungan konseptual, khususnya dari perspektif Islam” (Azra, July 25, 1999: 30).

no problem with democracy”⁸⁸ and that “the Indonesian Muslim community proves the compatibility of Islam with democracy.”⁸⁹ After the successful accomplishment of a free and fair presidential election which constituted the country’s democratic consolidation, he enthusiastically concluded that “Indonesia, which is the biggest Muslim nation and state in the world, shows to the world that there is no problem between Islam and democracy on this earth.”⁹⁰ According to Azra, what distinguishes Indonesia from other democratic Muslim-majority countries like Turkey is that through the legal framework and the state ideology *Pancasila* which acknowledges the belief in God, “the Indonesian democracy is a democracy which is not hostile toward religion.”⁹¹ This “gives great hope that Indonesia will evolve as a model for the compatibility of Islam and democracy.”⁹²

Conclusion

This article has looked in-depth at the media writings the Islamic academic, public intellectual, and former university rector Azyumardi Azra published during the Indonesian democratization. It has made the point that much of the characteristics and focus of Azra’s media discourse is embedded in and representative of a greater Indonesian historical and social structure still of relevance today: the public political engagement of state-funded Indonesian Islamic academia (PTKIN) which is of a cosmopolitan orientation and engages for a moderate Islam. Throughout Indonesian history, in their function as political, cultural, religious, and intellectual brokers and authorities, Islamic academics constituted a crucial element within the public sphere and its regime-controlled official political discourse, largely addressing the educated middle-class milieu, which has left certain traces in public political and Islamic academic life until today.

In the post-Suharto era, this public and politicized feature of Islamic academia has gained a new democratic quality. Many individual academics—such as Azra—who under the New Order had been trained to participate in the controlled public political discourse now gear debates toward the compatibility of Islam and democracy. They also promote the institutional separation of

88. “kaum Muslim Indonesia bisa membuktikan bahwa Islam tidak punya persoalan dengan demokrasi” (Azra, April 8, 2004: 12).

89. “Kaum Muslimin Indonesia membuktikan kompatibilitas Islam dengan demokrasi” (Azra, May 13, 2004: 12).

90. “Indonesia yang merupakan bangsa-negara Muslim terbesar di dunia menunjukkan kepada dunia bahwa tidak ada masalah antara Islam dan demokrasi di bumi ini” (Azra, October 7, 2004: 12).

91. “demokrasi Indonesia adalah demokrasi yang tidak bermusuhan terhadap agama” (Azra, May 13, 2004: 12).

92. “memberikan harapan besar bagi pertumbuhan Indonesia sebagai model bagi kompatibilitas Islam dan demokrasi” (Azra, May 13, 2004: 12).

Islam and democratic politics, and they call for the responsibility Islamic authorities and Muslim civil society have for the success of the democratic project. This is primarily done by arguing from within Islamic theology for the advantages of a democratic society and a democratic political system, underpinned by rational and cosmopolitan-flavored arguments and global and historical comparison and contextualization. These arguments are also informed by a sound academic knowledge of and practical experience with consolidated democratic life, often gained through long-term study stays in Western democracies. Moreover, the discourses show a strong emphasis on the upholding of a moderate Islam, the promotion of societal and religious pluralism and peace, and they also spur a critical observance of the political processes and the behavior of individual politicians and religious leaders. Therefore, so this article argued, a significant part of Indonesian Islamic academics from the PTKIN system must be recognized and conceptualized as a distinctive group of religious actors in political processes, who take up leading public roles in backing up the democratic system, thereby manifesting themselves as politically engaged public intellectuals. Another central argument this article put forward was that through his sharp criticism of political and religious elites as well as civil society, Azra's print media discourse during *Reformasi* partially transgressed the frame that confines political discourse in Indonesia to a strongly structured and harmonized consensus on how to speak politics, and that he thus moved toward practicing a much needed “conflictual consensus” (Duile and Bens 2017). On the other hand, Azra's discourse once more proved the persisting consensus on the *Pancasila* as a key reference in political and Islamic academic debate in Indonesia.

Future research should take individual Islamic academics from the state-funded PTKIN system and their written output, public speeches, and comments as starting points for enlarging understanding on the discursive practices that occurred during the country's transition phase (1998–2004), but also in the more contemporary era. In any case, such analyses must be of a relational character. They have to contextualize individual academic persona and embed them within their (international, Western, and Islamic) educational trajectories, social networks, and within Indonesia's political structure in order to arrive at a complex understanding of the origins and impulses that these academics' discourses and public actions derive from. Sociological literature on public intellectuals in the Western context provides theoretical and conceptual approaches and perspectives (capital endowment, nexus of state and intellectuals, specialists vs. generalists) that may help to identify similarities, differences, and specific configurations in Indonesian public intellectual life. In particular, not much is known about the concrete political orientation and agency of academics who are based at peripheral PTKIN institutes in more remote regions outside of Java, mainly in Eastern Indonesia.

On another level, insights on the aforementioned KKN-program⁹³ and whether its activities in the countryside include pro-democracy missions are necessary.

A reality check may also reveal more conservative, regressive academia-based trends that are counterproductive for the blossoming of democracy and inter-faith equality and peace in Indonesia. Only recently, a controversial study ranked UIN Bandung as the country's first, and UIN Jakarta as the second, most fundamentalist campus (Setara 2019). Findings like these underpin the importance of campus ideology and Islamic academic discourses for the future of Indonesian society and politics, and follow-up research must be channeled toward better understanding past and current developments of ideological preferences and political agency within the Islamic academic milieu.

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93. See footnote 11.

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