INDONESIAN STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON A HUMANITY-BASED NATIONALISM

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ABSTRACT

Do the Indonesian students revive the radical movements or do they have their own way in grasping nationalism in a globalized-world-perspective? How do they identify themselves as nation and how far they understand themselves the meaning of national solidarity? How effective their understanding on solidarity in the process of nation building? The aim of this study was to portray the perspectives of the Indonesian higher education students on nationalism. This study applied qualitative approach, by implementing series of Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and key informant interview (KII). Forty students of three private universities located in three provinces in Indonesia participated in six series of FGDs and three political figures play role as resource persons in the KIIs. The results of the study revealed that the students had three models of nationalism, that are, nationalism under the spirit of anti-colonialism, nationalism under the national interests, and nationalism under the humanity perspectives.

KEY WORDS: higher education, Indonesia, nationalism, political movement
Introduction

Nationalism is an important buzz word in Indonesian political movements. It can be traced back to the spirit of the Indonesian youth oath in October 28 1928 when the Indonesian people were ready to put aside regional, ethnic, and religious interests in building a nation. During this period, nationalism was effective in addressing the racial discrimination created by colonial society. The idea of an Indonesian nation became a weapon to fight the colonial system. In this period, nationalism was coupled with the spirit of solidarity, togetherness, and sense of justice.1

During the period of Indonesian Struggle for Independence in 1945, it became the fundamental tool for Soekarno and Hatta, the first Indonesian President and Vice President, to resist the Dutch agitation. Nationalism was then linked to the issue of State sovereignty. As Soekarno stated “Indonesian nationality is a unanimous decision! Not Javanese nationality, not Sumatran nationality, not Borneo nationality … but Indonesian nationality which forms the basis of one nationale Staat.”2

After the Indonesian Independence, nationalism - the unity of Indonesia becomes one of the five principles known as Pancasila which includes the Belief in one supreme God, a Just and civilized humanity, a Democracy led by the wisdom of deliberations among representatives, and Social justice for the whole of the people of Indonesia. In practice it was used to overcome the financial, economic, and political crises in 1998 and basically became the basic strategy in handling social and political conflicts such as conflicts in Aceh, Maluku, Poso, and Papua. In sum, nationalism is a principle which places the religious, regional, and ethnic interests under the national interest. Rather than just being trapped in primitive tribalism and religious fundamentalism, to be loyal to the nation was the way to be Indonesian.

This historical understanding has become one of the basic arguments for defending nationalism in Indonesia. Its relevance, however, might be questioned. Many believe that nationalism among the younger generations is on the decline since they are fascinated with global pop culture and its music, movies, fashion products and lifestyles.3 Nowadays, all national
identities in the world are challenged by the process of globalization which seems to be accelerating and taking place on a grander scale than ever before. Though such change is natural to human societies, the fear of the loss of indigenous cultures and the spirit of nationalism is growing. Easy movements of capital, knowledge, technology and workforce across national borders which is accompanied by easy transfer of ideas, values and life-styles of different national origins, arouse fears among many of homogeneity and standardization. But our question is, within the context of this ‘easy transfer of ideas, values and life-styles of different national origin,’ is the idea of nationalism still relevant? How can it survive in this new wave of globalization? Or better, in which way should it now be interpreted and understood?

Nationalism Defined

Nationalism is defined by Ernst Gellner as “a political principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.” Gellner suggested that nationalism should not be regarded merely as sentiment which is coupled with the militant attitude but as a theory of political legitimacy which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across the political ones.

This definition reflects an ethical universalistic spirit which holds that all ethnic identities exist under a political body and each state or political body should desire to preserve cultural diversity. This concept of nationalism involves principles, values, standards that guide behavior on various levels of awareness.

Most of the studies of nationalism in Indonesia connect it with various ethical values and principles. Yudi Latief’s book on Pancasila gave a historical sketch on the development of nationalism as a force fighting against colonialism in a diverse manner: both personal and public, archaic and rational, and religious and secular. The study ends with a discussion about the urgency of re-establishing unity within the framework of Pancasila as state ideology.
Edward Aspinall, in an article entitled “The New Nationalism in Indonesia” emphasized the idea that nationalism is an “increasingly bellicose rejection of alleged foreign inference in Indonesia’s affairs and demands for greater international recognition of Indonesia’s power and status.”

This mood of nationalism is reflected in the ways Indonesia tries to protect its domestic production and markets against foreign competition, defend Indonesian traditions in promotional and marketing activities, and defend territorial integrity in the face of aggression and internal division. Through this understanding, nationalism functions to connect individual citizens to a wider national narrative. Aspinall concluded that contemporary nationalism is strikingly un-ideological but mostly connected with a preoccupation with national dignity. The emergence of a new nationalism in Indonesia, as Aspinall wrote, is the product of the democratization of Indonesia political life.

Both Latief and Aspinall agree that the awareness of being colonized by the Dutch and the preoccupation with national dignity are two aspects of Indonesian nationalism. On one hand, nationalism is based on identification of the Dutch as the common enemy. Here, political unity is determined in contrast to a perceived threat. On the other hand, nationalism is also often based on the awareness that each nation has its own dignity. Recent phenomenological studies on Indonesian local wisdom carried out by Armada Riyanto reached this conclusion. He found out that nationalism is based on the readiness of all ethnicities in Indonesia to accept plurality of ethnic identity as a fact. The study concluded that nationalism is a new phenomenological experience of what it means to be Indonesian, which is broader than the local ethnic or religious communities. To be Indonesian means to be multicultural. The desire to build a nation, to respect human dignity, and serve the general will of the people, are the conditions of the possibility to be a nationalist. Through such a phenomenological awareness, the Indonesian people realize that they are unified under the principle of Unity in Diversity.
Method

This study is intended to explore the models of Indonesian’s students’ nationalism. It applies qualitative research methodology by implementing series of focus group discussions (FGD) and key informant interviews (KII). Students from three private universities in three provinces in Indonesia, namely Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi (STIE) Tri Bhakti in Bekasi, West Java, Universitas Katolik Atma Jaya (UNIKA) in Jakarta, the Capital City, and Universitas Sultan Agung Tirtayasa (UNTIRTA) in Kota Serang, Banten participated in the FGDs. The selection of the university participated in this study was based on the criteria of ethnicity and faith based affiliation. A phenomenological approach was used in analyzing the data.

FGD participants from STIE were students from class of Pancasila (a required subject to be followed by first year students). There were 20 STIE students (female= 13; male= 7) which was divided into two groups of FGD. The FGD participants from UNIKA were senior activist students (female=2 and male=9; total 11 students). The FGD participants from UNTIRTA were both activist and first year students, and was divided into two groups (female =8; male= 9; total 17 students). In total, there were 5 FGDs participated by 48 students (STIE= 20; AJCUI = 11; UNTIRTA= 17), and three political figures involved in KII.

FGD and KII protocols were developed as guidance for discussion and interviews. The focus of the questions was on the Indonesian students’ political awareness, including were questions on, “Does the Indonesian students revive the radical movements or they have their own way in grasping nationalism in a globalized-world-perspective? How they identify themselves as nation and how far they understand themselves the meaning of national solidarity? Do they prefer to realize that nationalism is congruent with the idea of freedom, independence, development, democracy, and justice? How effective is their understanding of solidarity in the process of nation building?”
Results: Models of Nationalism

The students generally understand that the aim of politics should be to produce the common good. It should give everyone dignity to live as a rational human being. Based upon this understanding they are critical of those in the government and the parliament who practice politics as an art to gain power for the sake of power itself. One of the students relates:

“We know that Indonesia is the third largest country in the world which adopts democracy. But the country does not guarantee the welfare of the people. I think most of the political elites have no concern to the welfare of the people, except for themselves and the parties. *Vox Populi, Vox Dei* is actually not real in Indonesia as long as the political elites are obsessed to power”.

They understand that such political practices endanger the existence of the nation. For them, conflicts that occur in society most often have its roots in social and physical dissatisfaction. These problems can be solved through this ethical spirit of nationalism. “In case of national conflicts, all citizens and politicians should present themselves as one nation that should work together.” In such togetherness, every element of the nation should be recognized. One student claims that citizens, “should not be discriminated according to his or her socio-economic and political background.” Nationalism, then, has two references. On the one hand, it refers to reality of the unity of the Indonesian people, but on the other hand, it refers to the ethical norms which promote the social and political rights of the people.

The students are using at least three models of nationalism based on their argumentation. The first one is *confrontation-based nationalism*: nationalism is based on the spirit of confrontation against an identified colonial enemy. Their argument is historical: “We must remember that Indonesia has been colonized for hundred years by the Dutch. Fighting against colonization is the spirit of our nationalism.” They describe that during the nineteenth century there were many small-scale rebellions
against Dutch colonialism. The Pattimura war, the Diponegoro war, the Padri war demonstrate this kind of nationalism. At this stage, nationalism was a tool of resistance by local communities against discriminatory treatment and exploitation by the colonial rulers. This nationalistic spirit of confrontation was also embraced by the Indonesian intellectuals in the 1900s. This group spoke Malay language, developed basic education for all, were united in religious and ethnic brotherhood, and had an interest in cultural and economic progress.

This historical portrayal shows that nationalism is a long process: from local and regional movements to national movements which involved all elements of the nation. The aim of this national movement was to gain Indonesian Independence from colonialism. When the students explain nationalism as a political struggle against the Dutch they are working at one level with a conception of nationalism whose political roots are in the identification of enemies. This is understandable, since historically this model of nationalism colored the early stages of the birth of Indonesian nation. Nationalism took the form of a common spirit to resist colonialism.10

For the students, Soekarno was the main figure of this model of nationalism. Nationalism meant love and be loyal to the state as a political organization in confrontation to colonialism and imperialism as common enemy. For the students, Soekarno was an admirable figure who sacrificed his life for the nation. They seem to agree with Sosrodiningrat who said: “[To] dare to be independent means [to] dare to defend Indonesia and this means dare to fight” for the unity of the nation itself. In the words of the student: “Nationalism means sacrifice.”11

Besides historical argumentation which produced confrontation-based nationalism, many students also understand that nationalism is based on the spirit of Pancasila. As they say: “Indonesian nationalism is embedded in Pancasila.” Like Soekarno, the students understand Pancasila as the soul, the feeling, and the philosophy of the nation. Almighty God, humanity, Indonesian unity, democracy, and social justice are culturally based as they say:
“Long before independence, the Indonesian people had adored God as Almighty, appreciated humanity as the crystallization of spiritual and cultural richness, practiced democracy as the Indonesian way in reaching consensus, and idealized social justice as human telos in reaching happiness without humiliation, exploitation, and oppression”.

But they also add, although nationalism is represented by the third principle of Pancasila all other principles have their reference to this national interest. Even the principle of the unity of God means that the Indonesians must recognize all religions and must live according to the principle of tolerance. One of the students explains straightforwardly. It is true that “the majority of Indonesian people are Muslim, so indirectly the values adopted are religious values pivotal to Islam. But Indonesia is also an archipelagic country in which hundreds or even thousands of ethnicities live whose religions vary from each other. For this reason, tolerance must be our ethical norm.”

For the students, tolerance is not an abstract ethical principle but has its ground on Indonesian experience as nation. “We are one, we are Indonesian.” They explain, encounters with others is the common experience for all Indonesians. It is difficult to find in Indonesia a tribe living homogeneously in one area. Intermingling with “others” is a common experience for Indonesians. So by saying, “we are one, we are Indonesian” the students want to say that as human beings they are basically connected with others. “Our life cannot be separated from others, from our group, from our ethnicities, and from our nation. In unity with others we become ourselves.” Bhineka Tunggal Ika, the principle of unity in difference, is not just a motto, but an Indonesian way of life. An Indonesian has two sides: on the one hand he is a human being but on the other hand he is a cultural being. As a human being, everybody sees themselves as connected with the universe and the others. But as a cultural being, they live within a group or a religion.
This communal experience of humanity and of nation also underlies the Indonesian understanding of the practice of democracy. Democracy cannot be successful if the interests of nation are not addressed. Democracy has no meaning if national unity is sacrificed for the interest of power. We can witness this in the recent cases of politicians who violate the spirit of plurality and diversity just for the sake of power. The students are especially disappointed by the political elites who inflamed religion sentiment in connection with Jakarta’s Governor’s Election in 2016. They identify such a political practice as moral setback, because it sacrifices religious diversity and the spirit of cooperation which had been practiced for centuries by Indonesia.

Nationalism also has its own basis on social justice. In a simple way one of students says that justice means to respect the rights of others. In a larger sense it means that they understand that the content of the constitution should follow the principle of social justice, that is “for the greatest benefit of the people.”

Nationalism then is not just an abstract principle but has its roots in the Indonesia historical experience of living together as nation. through the encounter with others, everyone learns how to live as nation and has to be open to other realities. Nationalism is a part of the learning process to be Indonesian. One student describes this experience as follows:

“Actually, I graduated from an exclusive boarding school. In this school we are taught that ‘Islam is number one’. Non-Muslims are bad. The doctrine is still clear in my mind when I went to college. There were three non-Islamic students in my class. My first impression was very shameful. I judged them on the fact that they ate pork. I had no desire to get to know them of sit with them. I even avoided touching their hands. But gradually as I got to know them, I felt there was no problem to sit with them, and talk with them. Now finally I have concluded that people often become cruel when they live only in one closed environment. By understanding and entering into non-Muslim’s lives, the
lines of separation between us and them, will disappear. I also asked my non-Islamic friends: do you see things like us? Now we can be one team, one study group. We enjoy that. So there must be spaces for togetherness if we really want to eliminate the gap”.

Students believe that nationalism has deep roots in Indonesian human life. In the Islamic communities they praise several role models, such as Gus Dur, Quraish Shihab, and Gus Mus. According to the students, these figures understand religion and also understand the plurality of Indonesian cultures. We call this model of nationalism as national-interest-based-nationalism.

As far as nationalism is a learning process, a movement among the young people toward a humanity-based-nationalism can also be considered. This would be a third model of nationalism. The students realize that nationalism is not merely based on the political interests but on the recognition of cultural and religious diversity. One of the students says: “In reality, we are living harmoniously in a pluralistic society. Muslims and Christians are all my neighbors. We are living in a harmonious way, except in moments of parliamentary or presidential elections. At those events we have to be more sensitive to the situation.” This means the encounter with others in all his or her differences is common for the students. For them, diversity is the truth of humanity and respect of other human persons means to be open to other religions and cultures.

This kind of nationalism is appreciated by students who are educated in a critical environment. This group of students is quite unique because they no longer live in a specific political and social ghetto but in a multinational world which based on relationship, friendship, equality, and brotherhood with many other people outside Indonesia. They no longer live according to the collective identity that we created, but in a new identity that transcends the national, cultural, and religious identity. Digital technology and social media have brought them out of a merely national horizon. Basically, they are very critical of the authoritarian
leadership, to the violations of privacy, and to the hatred and black campaigns in social media.

For them, nationalism should be embedded in the spirit of humanity, democracy and social justice. With a critical tone, they emphasize that all human beings are equal and should be treated as an end not as the means for political interests. To live as a nation means to meet other human beings in all his or her differences. Based on this understanding they cursed the Jakarta Governor Election in 2016 as a human tragedy. One of them says: “It is shameful that religion is used as a means for politics. This practice endangers the solidarity which has been developed so far among religions, ethnicities, and races in Indonesia.” The students realize that religion is not just the personal choice but also the way everybody exercises his or her life as human beings in a community. It should not be used as instrument for politics and power since any act of instrumentalization of religion will damage the social life and collective solidarity.

In addition, they argue that democracy is the basis of nationalism. For them people should be given the opportunities to express their freedom, aspirations and capabilities to control the power they have been entrusted with. One of them says: “Precisely because there is democracy, demonstration is a possibility. There used to be no democracy unless actually you can talk freely.” They argue that under Soeharto, democracy has been practiced under the primacy of economic and political interest. In such context, the possibility for people to freely express their opinions is closed. For them, the quality of democracy is determined by freedom of expression. As far as people are free, democracy can become one of the pillars for nationalism.

Lastly, nationalism has a close relationship with justice. As an illustration, one of the students explains: “The economy in my village is still poor; the way the people work on land is still traditional; we do not have sophisticated technology; education is still lacking. So we need equal distribution of development.” For this student, nationalism means that every citizen should have the same opportunity to enjoy welfare, health and education. Nationalism is here connected to equality and prosperity.
The Nation as the Experience of Humanity

Phenomenologically speaking, at the heart of the students’ models of nationalism is the proposition that each nation has a unique contribution to the experience of humanity. Unlike the confrontation-based-nationalism where each nation stands in confrontation with an enemy, and unlike the national-interest-based-nationalism where nation can be seen as the principle which gives form to unity in diversity, the humanity-based-nationalism is an ethical imperative for the Indonesian to develop him or herself according to new values such as humanity, democracy, and justice. Understood in this way, the national experience of the humanity cannot be replaced.13

“In fact, we are not afraid. We already live together as a minority and a majority, the Christians and the Muslims. It is certain in our experience: to be Indonesians means to be humans”.

The students claim that there is correspondence between the religious, cultural and social experience, and the nation experience of the humanity. On the one hand, each religion, ethnicity, and culture are not only responsible for the realization of their values, but assist in the enhancement of the values of living together as nation. On the other hand, insofar as the nation is based on humanity, the nation can work together for the enhancement of the values of religion, ethnicity, and culture.

Students’ notions of humanity-based-nationalism is not merely a summation of the confrontation-based-nationalism and nation-interest-based nationalism models. The students’ ideal notion of humanity-based-nationalism transcends the confrontation model and the national-interest model in the sense that the former is the standard to measure the latter models of nationalism. Students’ notions of nationalism are often attempts to transcend a one-sidedly confrontation conception, and a one-sidedly national-interest conception.

But the students do not completely deny the relative importance of
the confrontation-based-nationalism. The students have in mind that the confrontation-based-nationalism in some sense is necessary to defend the interest of the nation and its uniqueness. But insofar as the confrontation model fall short of its conception of nation’s uniqueness, the students’ ideal performs the critical function of pointing to the possibility of respecting the uniqueness of every nation.

And on the other hand, insofar as the national-interest model recognizes the nation as uniqueness, this humanity-based-nationalism appropriates the idea of the national-interest-nationalism and intensifies it so that diversity is instrumental in the creation of human values. While the national-interest-model subordinates religious and ethnic interests to the national interest, the students’ ideal form of humanity-based-nationalism sees the nation as a community of human persons where all the members of the society can be enhanced. A nation then is not just a compilation of the individuals but precisely a community of human persons in interaction, where the variety of religions, cultures and educational background are important parts of their social experiences. As Renan writes, “A nation is a soul, a spiritual being.”

It is not a descriptive concept. It is not a fact but a status nascendi. In its nature, it is always in potentia, never becomes in actu. Anchoring to this concept of nation, nationalism is not just an ideology but a social experience of human beings in its togetherness.

From a phenomenological perspective, nationalism is not just an acknowledgement of nation as a political unity or a representation of collective identity but a kind of human solidarity in which the dialogue between cultures and values effects the quality of the whole value of a nation as moral cosmos. Soekarno once called it gotong royong, or being together. Such moral cosmos has certain social boundaries according to Indonesian historical, cultural, and religious experience.

Conclusion

Nationalism does not have a single meaning. The Indonesian students surveyed are developing their own meanings according to their religious, cultural and social experiences as national and global citizens.
Whatever model they tend to embrace, they include religion, culture, education and social relationships in their understanding of nationalism. We may conclude that the more open the scope of education and social interactions, the more progressive their understanding of nationalism as an experience of humanity will be.

The models represent the 20s years old students’ political awareness. This means that the students involved in this research are a part of the global culture and the internet generation. The results of the study show that the encounter with others can change their perspectives on the world, culture, and religion. This means that the confrontation-based-nationalism is possible as far as the students live and are educated in a traditional closed environment. In such environment, they can often be suspicious of otherness. This tendency however, can be reduced. In the globalized internet, the students are invited into the virtual world in which everybody is involved in shared knowledge and values with cultural and religious “others.” In this new environment, the students can identify themselves both as Indonesian and human. Based on this identification, nationalism is the possibility of being cosmopolitan or international. It is possible because the encounter with other religions, ethnicities, and races can open up the possibility of understanding each other as humans.

In such a new moral cosmos, the students can be very critical concerning issues of social justice. The gap between the rich and the poor can become a trigger for the rise of anger. For the students, the legitimacy of nationalism lies in two things, namely prosperity and economic growth. If it fails to provide these two, nationalism will lose its meaning. For the students, nationalism is congruent with the people expectation for better life and an improved standard of living.

These findings concerning the evolution of nationalism, of course, are connected to the times. The students are now living in a period of ideas: nationalism, freedom, equality, and brotherhood, justice, and democracy. But these ideas cannot have a hold on their imagination without their practical presence within the community. The older nationalism which regarded the outsider as enemy still has an influence on Indonesian
emotional and mystical experience. So radicalism remains a real possibility when nationalism is separated from the people expectations for prosperity and a better life.

ENDNOTES

5 Max Sylvius Handman. “The Sentiments of Nationalism,” Political Science Quarterly 36/1 (1921): 104-121
8 Ibid.
9 Armada Riyanto et.al., (Editors) Kearifan Lokal Pancasila Butir-Butir Filsafat Keindonesiaan (Pancasila and Local Wisdom, an Indonesian Philosophy) (Yogyakarta: Kanisius 2015), pp. 36-37
10 Yudi Latief, Negara Paripurna, Historisitas, Rasionalitas, dan Aktualitas Pancasila (The Pure State: The Historicity, Rationality, and Actuality of Pancasila), p. 305
11 Ibid., p. 329
12 The Constitution of Republic of Indonesia, Article 33
13 Armada Riyanto et.al., (Editors) Kearifan Lokal Pancasila Butir-Butir Filsafat Keindonesiaan (Pancasila and Local Wisdom, an Indonesian Philosophy), p. 27
14 Ernst Renan, “What is a Nation?” Text of a conference delivered at the Sorborne of March 11th 1882, an English Translation by Ethan Rundell. The text is taken from the internet: ucparis.fr/lifes/9313/6949/9943/what_is_a_nation.pdf


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