Secular Societies, Religious Followers; Opportunities? Challenges?

From Majority to Minority – Being Muslim in Indonesia and Britain

I come from a country of superlatives. 'The largest archipelago in the world', 'the most volcanoes of any country', 'the largest Muslim population in the world'. Yet growing up in the UK, no one had heard of it. It's been described as the 'Biggest invisible thing on Earth'[1] – but where is it?

Drawing from experiences as a Muslim in Indonesia and the UK, I contrast the feeling of following a religion as part of the majority, and as part of the minority. Everyday experience of faith often lies in discordance with state impositions of secularism as religious followers find opportunities and strength in community. As an Indonesian Muslim in the UK, I explore how faith plays a central aspect in forming, and joining, communities and the experience of being part of a religious majority *and* minority. The shift from majority to minority as a religious follower highlights how faith unites and connects despite societal backdrops, in Indonesia, Britain and beyond.

Encompassing far more than the 'Eat, Pray, Love' Bali-bounded depiction of the country, the vastness of Indonesia provides diversity, volume and intensity of unparalleled scope. Consisting of over 17,000 islands[2], Indonesia is the largest and most populous country in Southeast Asia. A country where 'Unity in Diversity' (Bhinneka Tunngal Ika) is encrypted in its national code, a single state represents great indigenous diversity in language and religion[3]. Having proclaimed independence in 1945, a new national consciousness was forged, aiming to unify ethnic and religious distinctions under the principles of 'Pancasila'. Under this new postcolonial constitution, the nation sought to separate religion from politics, undergoing a partial secularization where the state was based on both monotheism and the freedom of worship. Increasingly, the force of religious followers challenge such state sanctioned secularism. With over 200 million Muslims[4], Indonesia has the largest population of Islamic religious followers in the world. Islam's prominence in Indonesia is unmissable. Thus, as a Muslim born in the country's capital, Jakarta, I represented the majority, the many.

In Indonesia, being Muslim is easy. Halal food is readily available, there is always somewhere to pray, conduct ablution or buy a headscarf. While not a formal theocratic state, the experience of Islam is palpable. Mosques line the streets, the call to prayer blaring as faith penetrates education, politics, and lifestyle. In Indonesia there are Muslims everywhere. Of course, not everyone is Muslim, but it is easy to find community from faith.

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[1] Elizabeth Pisani, "'Biggest invisible thing on earth?' – It's called Indonesia, and it's waking up", The Guardian, 21 November 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/nov/21/biggest-invisible-thing-on-earth-indonesia-waking-up.

[2] Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia in Vancouver, Canada, "Indonesia at a Glance", Accessed 8 December 2024, https://kemlu.go.id/vancouver/en/pages/indonesia_at_a_glance/2016/

[3] G.J. Ashworth, Brian Ashworth and J.E. Tunbridge. *Pluralising Pasts: Heritage, Identity and Place in Multicultural Societies*. (2007):129.

[4] James Sidaway "Beyond the decolonial: Critical Muslim geographies." *Dialogues in Human Geography* (2022): 347.

Moving to the UK in the early 2000s, the experience of being an Indonesian Muslim couldn't be more different. Indonesians make up a small proportion of residents in the UK, estimated to be around 10,000[5] in a country with a population of over 63 million. The Indonesian community in the UK is noticeably small compared to other minority groups. Here, we really represent the minority. It's a reality we both expect, and become used to, accustomed to filling in the 'Any other Asian background' box in equality information questionnaires. Then add on the layer of being Muslim. Despite what the media may portray, Muslims only represent 6.5% of the UK population[6] as a religious minority group. Despite the once integral role of the Church in the British state and Parliament, less than half of the population would describe themselves as Christian[7] as secularism in the UK grows unabated. Increasingly, British nationals identify as non-religious, anticipating a near-future where religious followers represent the minority. Immediately, Indonesian Muslims are identified as a minority in the UK, both within the state and religious demographic. We look different to other Muslims that represent the 'majority' of the British Muslim population, speak a different language, have different traditions and interpretations of the religion. In stark contrast to Indonesia, community must be forged, and connections made between and within culture and faith.

Unlike other ethnic groups who practice Islam in the UK, Indonesian Muslims find fewer opportunities of representation and community. Until recently, there have been no 'Indonesian mosques' or permanent community centres in the UK which merge culture and religion for Indonesians. This stands in huge contrast to the many South Asian and Arab mosques and communities across the UK. Save grassroots national community gatherings such as 'KIBAR' (*Keluarga Islam Indonesia di Britannia Raya* – Indonesian Muslim Association in Britain), communities are forged at much smaller, local scales. These come to life in the form of '*pengajians*'. The term doesn't have a straightforward translation into English, but alludes to a gathering for studies, teaching, recitation and doctrine. The experience of a *pengjian* in the UK looks a little something like this: a group of, largely, Indonesian Muslims come together for a religious gathering for remembrance and learning. The event is as social as it is spiritual, with the central affairs being the sharing and eating of food together and the teaching of religious lessons, from the Quran, hadith and personal experience. Apart from these two functions, *pengajians* have few prescriptive elements. They are simple and informal occasions – often held in someone's home, families filling every room, sitting cross legged and eating on paper plates with their hands. People cook and bring their own Indonesian food, the children play outside and families mingle with the few other people who have shared the same experiences as them. In a secular society such as the UK, minority ethnic-religious groups such as Indonesian Muslims find community, however small, through the shared experience of being a majority and minority religious follower.

Despite the community we provide for each other, many search for larger, wider spiritual connections. Because of the difficulty in finding other Indonesian Muslims in the UK, we learn to integrate and join existing Muslim communities. From mosques to Islamic societies at

[5] "Moving to the UK from Indonesia", Immigration Advice Service, 17 July 2023 https://iasservices.org.uk/moving-to-the-uk-from-indonesia

[6] "Religion by age and sex, England and Wales: Census 2021", Office for National Statistics, 30 January 2023 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/religionbyageandsexenglandandwales/census2021

[7] "Religion by age and sex, England and Wales: Census 2021", Office for National Statistics, 30 January 2023 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/religionbyageandsexenglandandwales/census2021

University, the Islamic faith has a unique unity despite diversity. Although Indonesians largely find themselves to be the minority within British Muslims, we connect with those ethnic backgrounds of similar inconspicuousness. From Sri Lankan Muslims to Mauritius, to Scottish Muslims and Sudanese, there are myriad other minority Muslim groups in search of community. And for many of us, faith is the binding factor. Despite the challenges that come with being a minority – a lack of representation, the absence of a cultural-religious base, not having people who have had the same experiences as you – Islam provides countless opportunities for connection. Being a minority can come with less expectation. You don't expect people to know anything about your country, your traditions, or cultural norms. Yet this can open opportunities for learning, growth and integration. You enter new communities ready to experience something different and learn from others, their different cultures and ways of doing.

This is the mindset that has helped me navigate being Indonesian and Muslim in the UK. Coming in with an open mind and ready to join Muslim communities knowing I'll be the only, or one of only few, Indonesians there. Coming from a place where I was once the majority demographic, I began to understand that you have to be the change you want to see for yourself. For British Muslim communities to be inclusive, open and representative of a wide range of people of different socio-cultural backgrounds, minority groups must immerse themselves into mosques, groups and institutions. Initial feelings of unfamiliarity and discomfort of being around people who have had a very different experience of Islam, are superseded by a willingness to seek mutual understanding and experience. It compels us to see religion beyond its cultural restrains and to follow the faith for its universal values and teachings. There is much we share: the Arabic language, our prayers, our religious text, our love of food! In uniting for the sake of Allah and for Islam, faith becomes a centre point of community against a secular society.

The relationship between secularism, the state and society are complex and often contradictory when understanding it through the lens of a religious follower. Community is forged at the local level, and religious followers find community in faith, in spite of wider secular society. The case of Indonesia and the UK expose the blurriness of state secularism as a lived experienced for religious followers and shows how faith followers – whether representing the national majority or minority – find opportunities for connection and community, drawing from the 'unity in diversity' of faith.

I don't mind that people don't know much about Indonesia. But I'm ready to be the person to tell them about it, and to represent the many people who have experienced Islam as an Indonesian, within British Muslim communities and beyond.

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