Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi


Islam and gender are often thought of as obstacles to women’s political advancement. This book, which deals with the current rise of female politicians in Indonesia, goes against this stereotype. According to Dewi, women have been successful in elections because, not in spite, of the increasing prominence of Islam and changing perceptions of gender in the Indonesian public sphere.

Dewi’s study focuses on the political careers of three women in Java. It is based primarily on interviews conducted in 2009–2010. Rustriiningisih became the district head (bupati) of Kebumen, Central Java, in 2000. Five years later, she added a second term when she became the first woman to compete successfully in direct elections. In 2008, her career took another leap as she won a term as the vice-governor of Central Java (in Indonesian elections, political candidates compete in pairs). Siti Qomariyah was elected bupati in Pekalongan, Central Java, in 2006. Ratna Ani Lestari, the third of the three case studies, was the bupati of Banyuwangi, East Java, between 2005–2010. The book starts with a chapter on the political context (democratization, decentralization, Islamic revival) and a chapter on traditional Javanese ideas about Islam and the role of women in society. Subsequent chapters each discuss one of the case studies. The conclusion provides a summary of the differences and similarities between the cases and a few (rather sketchy) comparisons with other Muslim countries.

The main argument is that female politicians in Indonesia make use, actively and successfully, of their faith and their gender in order to attract voters. The increasing visibility of Islam in the public sphere leads them to showcase their piety and to emphasise religious values. At the same time, their performances confirm rather than challenge dominant gender norms (a well-known phenomenon, the author notes, in the broader literature on female political leadership). These women presented themselves, simultaneously, as educated professionals and as responsible wives and mothers. They made good use, moreover, of the fact that they were the only female candidates, evoking and building on stereotypes of women as being more trustworthy, caring, and honest than men.

There are other important similarities between the cases. All three women were highly educated, possessed strong personalities, and were able to make use of the (social, political, or religious) networks of their husband or father. Particularly interesting is the fact that all three women competed in rural dis-
districts where Nahdatul Ulama (NU)—the organisation of traditional Islamic scholars—has had great influence. Rusriningsih and Ratna Ani Lestari successfully courted local scholars (kyai) for support. Siti Qomariyah is the daughter of a well-known kyai in Pekalongan and has been a religious student herself. A crucial element in her campaign was the active and supportive role played by the local branch of Muslimat NU (the ‘women of NU’).

The stance of NU is an important theme. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, the organisation became a major site of innovation with regard to the (re-)interpretation of classical Islamic doctrines on the position of women. In 1999, one year after the collapse of the Suharto regime, a lively internal debate about female political leadership resulted in a fatwa (legal opinion) stating the permissibility of a female president. One of the greatest values of Dewi’s book, in my view, lies in the fact that it shows very concretely just how critical these debates and formal stances have been with regard to the success of female politicians, at least in these particular (rural Javanese) settings.

Without this progressive consensus, it seems to me, support among local NU leaders and cadres would have been much more difficult, if not impossible, to realise.

Unfortunately, Dewi’s study focuses almost exclusively on electoral strategies (from intra-party contestations about candidacy to the election campaigns). In the end, we learn little about these women’s political and religious ideas, their practical leadership, and their policies. The discussion of their time in office remains limited to the general observation, applying to all three case studies, that female political leadership does not necessarily translate into (attempts to achieve) more gender equality. As an analysis of gender in local politics, then, I found it thin. How do Indonesian female political leaders manoeuvre, and present themselves, in social and institutional contexts (the bureaucracy, media, religious institutions) that are dominated by men? To what extent does it lead to changes in political relations or social conventions at the level of the government?

Dewi’s argument that Islamisation is a major factor in ‘expanding’ women’s roles in politics is open to debate. Other factors—the end of the (deeply patriarchal) New Order regime, democratisation and the increasingly personalised and mass media-dominated nature of elections—are equally (and arguably more) important factors. Dewi is right to stress that progressive religious currents, such as the distinct Muslim feminist streams in both NU and Muhammadiyah, have played a crucial role in providing (religious) arguments against those who are hostile to the idea of female leadership. The rise of normative Islam in Indonesia has come with a range of consequences for women, however, some of them enabling, some of them constraining. The analysis could
have been stronger, I feel, if it had been more sensitive to the complex and often contradictory effects of political and religious change on gender relations and discourses.

Having said that, the book will certainly be of interest to students and scholars of Indonesian politics. The rise of female leadership is a trend that seems likely to continue in the near future. Local elections are entering a new phase. Many (male) politicians have reached the maximum of two terms and seek to maintain power within their families by pushing forward close relatives, including their wives and daughters, as electoral candidates. Dewi’s study offers an important warning that the success of these women should be judged not only on the basis of their family background, but on a combination of connections and networks, gender dynamics and individual qualities.

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