Introduction

In Indonesia, as in many other countries, same-sex relations are viewed critically by society, particularly because they deviate from the heterosexual norm. Under Suharto’s New Order reproductive heterosexuality through marriage was made the main relationship of normative social life (Blackwood 2010:60). Especially the New Order upheld an ideology that mainly ascribed to women the duty of caring for their husband and children. After the fall of President Suharto, the state has continued to promote the properness of marriage and sexuality within marriage by reverting to traditional and Islamic moral values. Since in many cases it is not possible to distinguish these from community norms, Indonesian Muslims consider sexual practice outside marriage offensive (Bennett 2005:122). Among Islamists the view prevails that women are creatures whose ‘innate being and purpose is to bear children’ (Blackwood 2005:872).

It can be stated that homosexual practice is not accepted in any Muslim country. The official doctrines of Islam forbid sexual relationships between males and pay hardly any attention to love between females (Wafer 1997:128). However, homosexuality is not subject to prosecution or punishment in predominantly Muslim countries. In Indonesia there are no specific laws against same-sex relations among adults, neither in religious nor in civil law. The state has so far remained neutral towards homosexuality. As Dede Oetomo asserts, the State Penal Code contains no laws prohibiting trans-gendered practices or acts of sexuality between individuals with the same genitalia (Oetomo 2001:296), except for same-sex relations with persons who are not yet adults. Indonesia’s State Penal Code does not prohibit homosexual

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relations between consenting adults, but neither does the 1945 Constitution explicitly protect sexual identity rights.

In the 1990s, when lesbian and gay activists increasingly put forward demands for sexual rights and same-sex marriage (see Oetomo 2001), the Indonesian government clearly voiced its reluctance to grant gay and lesbian more rights:

[...] in the 1990s the perceived threat of international gay and lesbian activists’ demands for human rights—a threat to the stability of normative gender and heterosexuality in Indonesia—led to a more explicit discourse about the abnormality of homosexuality for properly gendered Indonesian citizens.

(Blackwood 2010:62)

In the same period there were some exceptional cases of ‘political homophobia’ involving violence against gay men who staked a claim to the public sphere. While the oppression of most homosexuals in Indonesia is due to a lack of recognition, which sometimes includes pressure to enter into heterosexual marriage even though they do not wish to do so (Boellstorff 2005:223), some gay men, and yet a greater number of lesbians, encounter violence and are sexually abused by friends or members of their own families.

In the post-Suharto era conservative Muslims have pushed for more restrictive laws on sexual mores. Although homosexuality is not forbidden by law in Indonesia, an increasing number of local bylaws (perda; peraturan daerah) have been implemented that run contrary to the principles of the state motto of ‘Unity in Diversity’ (Bhinneka Tunggal Ika). In some provinces and districts, such as Palembang, such perda criminalize homosexuality. Furthermore, Islamist groups such as the Islam Defenders Front (FPI) and the Muslim Community Forum (FU1) have affronted gay and lesbian people, as a reaction to them having voiced their rights more explicitly during the last decade. For instance, on the occasion of an international gay and lesbian event in Surabaya 2011, they intimidated the organizers to the point that they cancelled the event (Sabarini 2011). Despite such offenses perpetrated by small groups of Islamists, gay and lesbian are increasingly being included and recognized in Indonesian society, although their pleas for equal treatment have largely gone unanswered. As a consequence, the lesbian and gay community has to cope with problems in finding employment, especially in civil service, the Indonesian military, the police, and in sports (Hapsari 2011).

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1 I use these terms as they are commonly employed in scholarly works discussing same-sex relations in Indonesia. Both terms are derived from the English words ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’, but they have slightly different meanings than their cognates. For a discussion of these terms, see: Boellstorff (2007b); Blackwood (2010).