CHAPTER FIVE

POWERPOINTING ISLAM: FORM AND SPIRITUAL REFORM IN REFORMASI INDONESIA

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Introduction

At the front of a large hall in Krakatau Steel’s education and training centre, a familiar form was projected on three floor-to-ceiling screens. A Microsoft PowerPoint slide spelled out “Good Corporate Governance.” Below, six underlined, bulleted points read “Transparency, Independence, Accountability, Responsibility, Fairness, and Social Awareness.” The lead trainer, Rinaldi, was a handsome man in his mid-thirties who wore a magnetic smile and a dark business suit. He lectured the assembled on how these characteristics were not only critical criteria for success in global business, but also essential attributes of being a good Muslim. These attributes were several of the asmaul husna, or “most beautiful names”, to which every Muslim was expected to aspire. The next slide was titled “The Work Culture (Budaya Kerja) of PT Krakatau Steel” and listed four attributes: discipline (disciplin), openness (keterbukaan), mutual respect (saling menghargai), and cooperation (kerja sama). Rinaldi said that these attributes were “the ideal CEO characteristics [and] are the same as the characteristics and the names of Allah.” This lecture was part of a three-day “spiritual training” programme that lasted from seven a.m. until the evening. The programme was centred on an elaborate Microsoft PowerPoint presentation that combined conventional bullet-pointed slides with brilliant images, music videos, and film clips from Indonesian and Hollywood blockbusters. In 2004 at Krakatau Steel and other state-owned companies in Indonesia, PowerPoint was the preferred technology through which a rapidly growing movement for spiritual reform was mediated.

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This paper is framed around two interrelated questions about religion and media technology. First, I ask what specifically is new about “new media in the Islamic world,” as one recent synthetic account (Eickelman and Anderson 2003) depicts this assemblage. Second, how might we account for the apparent efficacy of “new” technologies in projects of religious proselytization? In addressing these queries I provide the accounts of participants in a self-described “spiritual reform movement” in contemporary Indonesia.

Drawing on the explanations of participants, I argue that this movement entailed an alteration of the form of religious knowledge and practice. In so doing I build on the work of anthropologists who have treated form as a social fact and a technique of political intervention. Paul Rabinow, for example, has written about how in nineteenth-century France diverse fields of knowledge created “forms adequate to understand and to regulate what came to be known as modern society” (Rabinow 1989: 9). I further argue that the novelty of new media of Islamic practice and instruction lies in the replicability of form. I show how a specific spiritual reform initiative and its accompanying technologies constituted a search for forms adequate to governing contemporary Indonesian society during a period of history that has come to be known by many Indonesians as reformasi (reform or reformation). This period of history followed the end of the authoritarian regime of the former autocrat Suharto. However, I argue that this term indicates not simply a period or process of political change, but rather individual and communal reflection on how Indonesians thought they should live.

The Novelty of “New Media”

In their introduction to an edited volume on new media in the Muslim world—re-issued in wake of the events of September 11, 2001—Dale Eickelman and Jon Anderson address what they term “new media” in the Muslim world. They argue that social life in the contemporary Muslim world is being reconfigured by the proliferation of new media, including everything from “the small media of fax machines, desktop publishing, and video- and audiocassettes” to the internet, television, and radio (Eickelman and Anderson, 2003:3). The proliferation of new media has two consequences. First, a “fragmentation in religious authority” in which Islamic educational institutions and state governments no longer maintain an imposing hold over authorizing religious