

PRO-MUSLIM POLICIES IN CAMBODIA: BUREAUCRATIZING HALAL AND HIJAB IN MUSLIM MINORITY COUNTRY

Khaidir Hasram^{1*}

¹Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta, Indonesia, e-mail: khaidirhasram@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author



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DOI : http://dx.doi.org/10.30983/islam_realitas.v8i1.5520.

Submission: April 16, 2022	Revised: June 18, 2022	Accepted: June 23, 2022	Published: June 30, 2022
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Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics of Pro-Muslim policies in the Kingdom of Cambodia, specifically related to halal institutionalization and the legalization of the hijab. Both are basic needs (*dharuriyat*) in Islamic Law, although the second is debatable. According to most early-period scholars (*ulama klasik*), these two policies could only be fulfilled in an Islamic state. Instead, the Cambodian Royal Government issued two policies in favour of Muslims practicing both needs. This research is qualitative research that uses an anthropological approach. Researchers collected data through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation on policy documents, news, and articles that can be trusted. Interviews took place non-formally, face-to-face, and online via the internet. This paper argues that the pro-Muslim policies issued provide halal assurance for the consumption of the Muslims in the country (2% of the total population) and potentially improve their socio-economy in the food and beverage industry and tourism. The legalization of the hijab guarantees that Muslim women can engage in public spaces freely without worrying about discrimination because of their identity and what they wear.

Keywords: Islam in Cambodia, Pro-Muslim Policies, Regulating Halal, Legalizing Hijab

Abstrak

Tulisan ini mengeksplorasi dinamika kebijakan Pro-Muslim di Negara Kerajaan Kamboja, secara spesifik terkait dengan kebijakan pelebagaan halal dan legalisasi hijab. Keduanya merupakan kebutuhan dasar (dharuriyat) dalam Hukum Islam, meskipun yang kedua masih diperdebatkan. Menurut mayoritas ulama periode awal, dua kebijakan ini hanya bisa terpenuhi di negara Islam. Sebaliknya, Pemerintah Kerajaan Kamboja, yang secara resmi menganut Buddhisme sebagai agama resmi negara, mengeluarkan dua kebijakan yang mendukung Muslim dengan mudah mengamalkan kedua kebutuhan tersebut. Penelitian ini adalah penelitian kualitatif yang menggunakan pendekatan antropologis. Peneliti mengumpulkan data-data melalui observasi, indepth-interview, dan dokumentasi terhadap dokumen kebijakan, berita, dan artikel yang bisa dipercaya. Interview berlangsung secara non-formal, melalui tatap muka dan online melalui internet. Tulisan ini berpendapat bahwa kebijakan pro-Muslim yang dikeluarkan memberikan jaminan kepastian halal untuk konsumsi 2,0 persen Muslim di negara tersebut, serta berpotensi meningkatkan perekonomian Muslim dalam industri makanan dan minuman, serta pariwisata. Legalisasi hijab memberikan jaminan kepada perempuan Muslim untuk mampu terlibat dalam ruang publik dengan bebas tanpa mengawatirkan diskriminasi karena identitas dan apa yang ia pakai.

Kata Kunci: Islam di Kamboja, Kebijakan Pro Muslim, Regulasi Halal, Regulasi Hijab

Background

This article presents a study of the pro-Muslim policies in the official Buddhist state of Cambodia, specifically the policies on hijab and halal food that the royal government issued.

The hijab is now officially protected for public use after a circular letter regarding Khmer-Islam students' dress in various educational

institutions was released.¹ The circular was signed by the Prime Minister, Hun-Sen, one of the world's longest-serving leaders. The new order on hijab has given a new life to Muslim life in the former communist country, especially in educational institutions and the wider public area, such as job opportunities for Muslim women. While halal certification was institutionalized recently after a long planning, the halal affairs' institutional body was officially formed under the Ministry of Trade at the end of 2018. According to my documentation of news on halal certification in the mainstream media in Phnom Penh, the plan of bureaucratizing halal food in Cambodia began a decade ago. Phnom Penh Post wrote, "Govt in the process of Setting Up in the process certification Body," published on January 8, 2010.

Halal food and hijab are considered as essential injunctions (*dharuriyat*) of Islamic Law. Early Muslim scholars argued that both essentials could only be satisfied in an Islamic state or Muslim-majority country. Therefore, the Islamic discourse about Muslims living as a minority has been scantily discussed in classical Islamic references.² In the jurisprudence of

politics (*fiqh siyasah*), the discussion about the Muslim minority has been colored by the polarity between the land of Islam (*Daar al-Islam*) and the land of war (*Daar al-Harb*). The region or state ruled by non-Muslims shall be categorized as the land of war. Thus, scholars judged it to be a dangerous for Muslims to live.³ Some scholars are worried that Muslims would face problematic situations, especially when dealing with their faith⁴. However, Muslims becoming a minority is unavoidable. Migration and global political change are two significant phenomena that has positioned Muslims at the margin in several countries. In Cambodia's case, Muslims only constitute 2% of the population (around 311.000).⁵ The state officially embraces Buddhism (article 43 of the Constitution). The Muslims mostly follow Sunni Islam (Cham and Cvhea), around 80%,⁶ while the rest (20 percent) follow Imam San Group (Cham Jaheed), which practices traditional ancestor worship.⁷

Many scholars have researched Islam in Cambodia. This includes Ysa Osman, who focuses on Muslim dynamics in the Khmer Rouge era and Muslim-Buddhist relations;⁸ Farina So, who explained the incident of

¹ Ysa Osman, *Navigating the Rift: Muslim-Buddhist Intermarriage in Cambodia* (Cambodia: National Library of Cambodia, 2010), pp. 8–9.

² Ahmad Suaedy, 'Islam, Identitas dan Minoritas di Asia Tenggara', *Jurnal Kajian Wilayah PSDR LIPI*, 1.2 (2010), 237–52 (p. 240).

³ However, the polarization between *daar al harb* and *daar al-Islam* is growing, not just using religious indicators. A third category has emerged: *daar al-and* or *ash-should*. See more in Ahmad Muhtadi Anshor, 'Dar Al-Islam, Dar Al-Harb, Dar Al-Shulh: Kajian Fikih Siyasah', *Epistemé: Jurnal Pengembangan Ilmu Keislaman*, 8.1 (2013) <<https://doi.org/10.21274/epis.2013.8.1.53-68>>.

⁴ Khaled Abou El Fadl, 'Islamic Law and Muslim Minorities: The Juristic Discourse on Muslim Minorities from the Second/Eighth to the Eleventh/Seventeenth Centuries', *Islamic Law and Society*, 1.2 (1994), 87–141 (p. 145) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3399332>>.

⁵ *General Population Census of the Kingdom of Cambodia 2019* (Phnom Penh: National Institute of Statistics Ministry of Planning, October 2020), p. 304 (pp. 23–24)

<<https://www.nis.gov.kh/nis/Census2019/Final%20General%20Population%20Census%202019-English.pdf>>.

⁶ Andi Bakti, 'Islam In Cambodia: Cham Religious Learning Groups And Their Contribution To Civil Society', 2009.

⁷ Bjorn Atle Blengli, 'Muslim Metamorphosis: Islamic Education and Politics in Contemporary Cambodia', in *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia*, ed. by Robert W. Hefner (United States of America: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), pp. 172–204.; Philipp Bruckmayr, 'The Birth of the Kan Imam San: On the Recent Establishment of a New Islamic Congregation in Cambodia', *Journal of Global South Studies*, 34.2 (2017), 197–224 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/gss.2017.0019>>; Eng; Hasram; Osman, *Navigating the Rift: Muslim-Buddhist Intermarriage in Cambodia*.

⁸ Ysa Osman, 'Oukoubah: Justice for the Cham Muslims under the Democratic Kampuchea Regime', *Documentation Center of Cambodia*, 2002, 167; Ysa Osman, *The Cham Rebellion: Survivors' Stories from the Villages*,

suppressing Islam during the KR period, which was dominated by the perspective of women's experiences;⁹ Bjorn A. Blengli, who described in detail the contestation of Islamic religious understanding in Islamic education in Cambodia, its linkages with politics, the economy, and civil society.¹⁰ Betti Rositas Sari traced the Cambodian Muslim transnationalism network based on Cham ethnicity, particularly in Southeast Asia, with Malaysia and Vietnam.¹¹ Yekti Maunati elaborated on the cosmopolitanism and heterogeneity of Cham identity in Cambodia.¹² Philip Bruckmayr wrote on many topics, such as transnational networks and Cham's interactions with the Persians.¹³ Then lastly, my research focuses more on the bureaucratization of Islam in Vietnam and Cambodia, which also discusses the dynamics of halal food and the hijab. However, this paper is different from the previous studies. It will focus on two pro-Islamic policies: the institutionalization of halal food and the hijab.

This research is qualitative research that uses an anthropological approach. Researchers collect data through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation on policy documents, news, and articles that can be trusted. Interviews take place non-formally,

face-to-face, and online via the internet with several religious leaders, Muslim activists, halal business actors, Muslim women, and the general Muslim community. It took place between 2017 and 2018 in Phnom Penh and online between 2018 and 2020 through WhatsApp and Facebook messenger. In addition, observations and documentation were also carried out directly by visiting the Mufti's office, religious schools, halal restaurants, and Muslim settlements in Phnom Penh, as well as following online activities of the Mufti's office, Islamic media, and the Muslim community through Facebook and Instagram which provides updated information.

This paper argues that the pro-Muslim policies issued provide halal assurance for the consumption of the Muslims in the country and potentially improve the Muslim socio-economic condition in the food and beverage industry and tourism. The legalization of the hijab guarantees Muslim women to engage in public spaces freely without worrying about discrimination because of their identity and what they wear. Furthermore, this paper also considers that these two policies can be issued because of the encouragement of Muslim figures who occupy important positions in politics and government.

Documentation Series, no. 9 (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2006); Osman, *Navigating the Rift: Muslim-Buddhist Inter-marriage in Cambodia*.

⁹ Farina So, *The Hijab of Cambodia: Memories of Cham Muslim Women after the Khmer Rouge* (Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2011).

¹⁰ Bjorn Atle Blengli, 'Muslim Metamorphosis: Islamic Education and Politics in Contemporary Cambodia', in *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia*, ed. by Robert W. Hefner (United States of America: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), pp. 172–204.

¹¹ Yekti Maunati and Betti Rosita Sari, 'Construction of Cham Identity in Cambodia', *Suvannabumi*, 6.1 (2014), 30; Betti Rosita Sari, 'Cambodian Cham Muslims and the Islamic World: Towards a Transnational Network', in *The Cham Diaspora in Southeast Asia: Social Integration and Transnational Networks: The Case of Cambodia*, ed. by Yekti Maunati and

Betti Rosita Sari, First edition (Jakarta: LIPI Press, 2013), pp. 129–50.

¹² Maunati and Sari, 'Construction of Cham Identity in Cambodia'.

¹³ Philipp Bruckmayr, 'Cambodian Muslims, Transnational NGOs, and International Justice', *Peace Review*, 27.3 (2015), 337–45 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2015.1063378>>; Bruckmayr, 'Persian Kings, Arab Conquerors and Malay Islam'; Bruckmayr, 'Persian Kings, Arab Conquerors and Malay Islam'; Philipp Bruckmayr, 'Divergent Processes of Localization in Twenty-First-Century Shi'ism: The Cases of *Hezbollah Venezuela* and Cambodia's Cham Shi'is', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 45.1 (2018), 18–38 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2017.1387416>>; Philipp Bruckmayr, 'The Changing Fates of the Cambodian Islamic Manuscript Tradition', *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts*, 10.1 (2019), 1–23 <<https://doi.org/10.1163/1878464X-01001001>>.

In addition, the increasingly international solid network of Muslims positively impacts the development of the Kingdom of Cambodia.

To discuss this topic systematically. I start by discussing halal regulation. I describe how halal food is a basic need for Cambodian Muslims, then explain the state's desire to accommodate it and the economic potential of the halal market. Then, examine the hijab as identity and how the hijab policy empowers Muslim women.

Regulating Halal Certification in Cambodia

Halal is a unique term in Islam originating in Arabic, meaning "which is permissible".¹⁴ The word halal is mentioned more than 15 times in the Qur'an, related to various aspects of Muslim life, including *ibadah*, i.e., the relationship with Allah, and *muamalah*, i.e., the relationship with fellow human beings. According to al-Qardawi, the scope of permissible (*halal*) is extensive. Everything is halal unless a clear argument (*nash*) state that it is prohibited (*haram*).¹⁵

However, in general, the halal is more often used in regard to food. However, it can also describe medicine, cosmetics, and fashion. It has become the standard for anything that is safe for Muslims to consume or wear. According to Sharia provisions, halal rules in Islam fall into the category of *dharuriyat*, which must be obeyed and can only be ignored in certain emergency conditions.

Islam has ordered its people to consume halal (*halalan*) and good (*toyyiban*) food (Q.S Al Baqarah, verses 168, 172; Al-Maida, verse 88; an-Nahl, verse 114). In general, the Qur'an

mentions in detail the foods that are prohibited (haram) for consumption by Muslims, such as "carrion, blood, pork, and animals which when slaughtered are offered to names other than Allah" (al-Baqarah, verse 173). In addition, some drinks are expressly prohibited, namely drinks containing alcohol (*kehamr*) (al-Maidah, verses 90-91). The MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council) fatwa, a reference for halal institutions in Asia, states that what is meant by "*kehamr* is anything that intoxicates, whether in the form of drinks, food, or others. The ruling is that these are illegal.¹⁶ The prohibited foods and drinks are common, often served from home dishes to dishes at public restaurants in non-Muslim countries, such as Cambodia. In addition, slaughtering animals is an essential issue because it must meet the provisions in Islam. Some of the conditions include: the slaughterer must be Muslim and have reached puberty, the animal must not be hurt by stunning it mechanically, electrically, or chemically, and the slaughter of the animal must comply with the following provisions: to recite the name of God (*basmalah*), to use sharp cutting tools, and the animal must be alive when cut.¹⁷

Those who live in Muslim-majority countries find it easy to get halal food because it has become a commonplace presence. In addition, the state or religious organizations issue policies to ensure the certainty of halal food, such as through a halal certification and a labelling program that are fully supported by the state.¹⁸ Meanwhile, minorities in non-Muslim areas experience difficulties and dilemmas in

¹⁴ Ahmad Warson Munawwir, *Kamus Al-Munawwir: Arab-Indonesia* (Pustaka Progresif, 1984).

¹⁵ Muhammad Yusuf Qardhawi, *Halal Dan Haram Dalam Islam* (Jakarta: PT. Bina Ilmu, 1993).

¹⁶ MUI, 'Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia Nomor 4 Tahun 2003 Tentang Standarisasi Fatwa Halal' (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 2003).

¹⁷ Muhammad bin Shaleh Al-Utsaimin, *Halal Haram dalam Islam*, trans. by Imam Fauzi, 1st edn

(Ummul Qura, 2014); Yusud Qaradhawi, *Halal Dan Haram Dalam Islam*, 1st edn (Jakarta: Robbani Press, 2002).

¹⁸ Akim Akim and others, 'The Shifting of Halal Certification System in Indonesia: From Society-Centric To State-Centric', *MIMBAR: Jurnal Sosial dan Pembangunan*, 35.1 (2019), 115–26 <<https://doi.org/10.29313/mimbar.v35i1.4223>>.

getting halal food. In addition, the state seems to have no interest in guaranteeing the certainty of halal food for a small group of Muslims. However, even non-Muslim countries have competed to enter the halal market in the last decade. Thus, the availability of halal food in these countries is increasingly guaranteed.¹⁹

In this section, I will elaborate on how the need for halal food is regulated by non-Muslim countries, which will be explained in the following two sections: first, halal is a basic necessity of life for more Cambodian Muslims; and second, the desire of the Cambodian government to participate in the global halal market potential.

Basic Need: Halal in the Daily Life of Cambodian Muslim

For a long time, Cambodian Muslims lived in uncertainty related to the need for halal food. They survive by trusting Muslim fellows, then buying meat or food from the known Muslims. Ismail, a young Muslim living in Kampong Batu, Phnom Penh, warns me about choosing a restaurant for meals around my homestay in the city. He said, "Even many restaurants with the halal label, the owner made those. Non-Muslims own some labelled halal restaurants".²⁰ Ismail did not say that restaurants owned by non-Muslims are not halal. However, he is worried that the owner did not understand halal based on Sharia law.

The Cambodian Muslims survived in this condition for a long time. Almost all Muslims who live as minorities in various countries have the same experiences. They must ensure that the food they eat is allowed in Sharia Law. One practice way is to buy groceries at a shop whose owner is a Muslim, which is very limited. In this

condition, Cambodian Muslims are stringent regarding food, such as the animal slaughtering procedures, the cooking process, and the ingredients and spices.

Meanwhile, some Muslims are moderate in regard to beverages, such as choosing places to hang out. Sam, a young Muslim activist, invited me to meet at Amazon Café. The cafe does not have a halal label or a sign indicating that a Muslim owns the establishment. However, inside the cafe, it turns out that more than five women are wearing the hijab. Sam told me that the cafe is well known and frequented by young Muslims because the brand originates from Thailand.²¹

Sam's statement is interesting. It refers to Thailand legitimizing the halal certification of the product instead of Malaysia or Indonesia as Muslim countries. Thailand is predominantly Buddhist (94.6 percent), while Muslims are only 4.3 percent of the population. For a decade, Thailand and Malaysia have dominated the Cambodian domestic halal product market demand. Mare, a Muslim woman, showed me the snack products she consumes daily. Of the five products, all have a halal label issued by the halal authorities of Thailand²² and Malaysia²³.

The absence of an official halal label makes halal food industry players, such as restaurant owners, take two strategies to survive. First, they accentuate their identity as Muslims by participating in religious activities and by trying not to sell prohibited food or drinks in Islam, such as alcohol or beer. Second, they make their halal label and stick it in their restaurant to convince Muslim customers that it serves halal food. Mas Fir, an Indonesian who owns a restaurant in Phnom Penh, said: "My restaurant

¹⁹ Bergeaud-Blackler, Lever, and Fischer.

²⁰ Ismail, Kampong Batu 7, 2017.

²¹ Sam, Informal at Amazon Cafe, 2018.

²² Mohd Saiful Anwar Mohd Nawawi and others, 'Halal Food Industry in Thailand: History, Prospects, and Challenges' (presented at the The 1st International

Halal Management Conference (IHMC) 2017, Seoul, Korea: Sejong University, 2017) <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319531544_Halal_Food_Industry_in_Thailand_History_Prospects_and_Challenges>.

²³ Mare, Informal via Facebook Messenger, 2019.

does not need a halal certificate or halal label because I am Muslim. I buy meat, vegetables, and other food ingredients from local Muslims." He also confirmed that he made the halal label in front of his restaurant himself without an inspection by the government or local Islamic authorities. However, he would be more than happy if the government would release a precise regulation on halal food and establish the halal institution. This would be effect the customer's trust in halal restaurants in the Buddhist country. According to him, some customers still doubt that the dishes in halal restaurants are really halal.²⁴

However in 2017, the Deputy Mufti of Cambodia, whom I interviewed in early 2017, confirmed that the restaurant owner himself makes the halal label in every halal restaurant. They cannot be blamed for this action because there are no clear rules regarding halal policy in Cambodia, although HICIRAC²⁵ has always tried to ensure halal certainty for Muslim consumption for a long time. Within the agency, a special division has been set up to monitor halal issues, but they do not have the power to inspect all restaurants, only restaurants that submit requests are served.²⁶

The Muslim community's responses to these conditions make them more cautious and selective in choosing where to eat or buy their meat. They had to deal with this problem for more than three centuries. However, due to changes in lifestyle and a more open relationship, they need guarantees for what they can consume. Especially after they get complete access to public spaces, such as schools and government, they will be more exposed to social interactions in public cafes or restaurants. This

makes them require guarantees for what they consume.

The State's Desire: Institutionalizing State Halal Body

A year later, at the end of 2018, I again visited Cambodia and met with the Deputy Mufti. He conveyed the happy news that the Cambodian halal institution was officially established, formed under the Ministry of Trade, and coordinated directly with HICIRAC. Ten people were selected from Mufti's Office to become members of the halal institute.

The government's institutionalizing of official halal institutions goes through a dynamic process and takes a long time. Based on the study of documentation related to halal discourse in Cambodia's mainstream media, halal institution building plans were discussed a decade ago. In January 2010, the Phnom Penh Post reported in an article entitled "govt in the process of setting up halal certification body." Representatives from the Ministry of Religion and Belief confirmed this cooperation between Islamic groups and the government. Different from other countries in halal management, Islamic organizations in the country usually carry out.²⁷

The fact that the Cambodian government has officially established a halal institution, especially under the Ministry of Trade, is not only to ensure the halal status of domestic Muslim food but will also encourage further growth in the country's economic development. There are three motives: to promote local products and tourism potential to broader consumers; to open opportunities for intimate cooperation with Muslim countries; to facilitate

²⁴ Mas Fir, Informal Interview at Phnom Penh, 2017.

²⁵ Highest Islamic Council of Islamic Religious Affairs of Cambodia (Muftih of Cambbodia)

²⁶ Haji Muhammad Daud Bin Kasim, Formal Interview at Hicirac Office, 2017.

²⁷ Ith Sothoeuth, 'Govt in Process of Setting up Halal Certification Body', *Phnom Penh Post* (Phnom Penh, 8 January 2010) <<https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/govt-process-setting-halal-certification-body>>.

Cambodian Muslims for the need for halal certainty.

According to data on international tourist arrivals to Cambodia from 2014-to 2019, the number of tourists has increased yearly. No Muslim countries are listed in the top ten. In the Middle East, only 2.341. While from Southeast Asia, we have Indonesia (3.252 tourists), Malaysia (10.222), and Brunei Darussalam (only 54).²⁸ In the next year, in 2018-2019, the arrival significantly increased, and one Muslim country was listed in the top ten arrivals country: Malaysia, with 135.301 in 2018 and 138.371 in 2019.²⁹

Cambodia is in the top twentieth exporting country in Asia, and top seventh in Southeast Asia, after Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, with an estimated 17.7 billion worth of goods in 2020.³⁰ Meanwhile, Cambodia has succeeded in growing its export value. From 2015 to 2019, the export value is up +73.5 percent. In comparison, Indonesia is down to -7.1 percent.³¹ Approximately 85.9 percent of Cambodia's products are exported to Asian countries (40.1 percent), North America (34.7), Europe (23.4), and a small number to Australia, Latin America, and Africa (Workman, 2021). According to data from World Integrated World Solution (WITS) by the World Bank, most of food products exported from Cambodia are imported by Muslim countries: Indonesia with a trade value of 193,370.90

USD; Malaysia with a trade value of 49,913.01 USD, and the Middle East and North Africa with trade value 5,798.95 USD.³²

The desire of Cambodia's government to take into the "assemblage of global halal" is consistent with the country's opportunities in the trade of goods and tourism. The number of tourists increased every year. Most of them visited Phnom Penh, Sihanoukville, and Angkor Wat. The tourists came from non-Muslim countries, Europe, America, East Asia, and the Middle East, and Southeast Asian countries, where most are Muslim. However, the mutually reinforcing motives to materialize the halal policy are an advantage for the Muslim community's religious needs and economic welfare.

Legalizing the Hijab in Cambodia's Public Sphere

Although there are still differences of opinion about whether all Muslim women must wear the hijab under Sharia law. In reality, the world community has placed the hijab as an Islamic identity rather than a culture in Arab society. The hijab is a form of non-negotiable religious obedience for some Muslim women. The community sometimes negatively criticizes Muslim women who do not wear the hijab. However, the hijab is controversial in many countries, especially among Muslim minorities in Europe and America. Some have developed narratives related to the hijab. They view it as a form of isolation that prevents Muslim women

²⁸ Kingdom of Cambodia Ministry of Tourism, *Tourism Statistics Report of Cambodia 2017* (Phnom Penh: Statistic and Tourism Information Department, Ministry of Tourism, Kingdom of Cambodia, 2017) <https://www.nagacorp.com/eng/ir/tourism/tourism_statistics_201701.pdf>.

²⁹ Kingdom of Cambodia Ministry of Tourism, *Tourism Statistics Report September 2019* (Phnom Penh: National Institute of Tourism, Tourism Statistics Department, Ministry of Tourism, Kingdom of Cambodia, 2019) <https://www.nagacorp.com/eng/ir/tourism/tourism_statistics_201909.pdf>.

³⁰ Daniel Workman, 'Cambodia's Top 10 Exports', *Worldstopexports.Com*, 2021 <<https://www.worldstopexports.com/cambodias-top-10-exports/>>.

³¹ Workman.

³² World Bank World Integrated Trade Solution, 'Cambodia Food Products Imports by Country and Region in US\$ Thousand 2016', *Wits.Worldbank.Org*, 2016 <https://wits.worldbank.org//CountryProfile/en/Country/KHM/Year/2016/TradeFlow/Import/Partner/ALL/Product/16-24_FoodProd>.

from developing in public engagements. The hijab is considered as a symbol of backwardness that does not follow modernity.³³ This is similar to the way that Ataturk in Turkey treated the hijab, by prohibiting its wearing in public spaces during the country's modernization era.³⁴ It is often perceived as a form of affirmation for political Islam. The increasing phenomenon of Islamophobia after the tragedy of September 11 (9/11) and the influx of refugees from the Middle East also has prompted many European countries and China to issue policies prohibiting the use of the hijab in public spaces.

In Cambodia, there was a period when the government banned wearing the hijab and all symbols of Islamic and ethnic Cham identity when the Khmer Rouge ruled the country from 1975-to 1979. Farina noted that the policy significantly impacted Muslim women because they could not follow the Islamic dress code by wearing a headscarf and traditional long clothes. They were forced to choose between maintaining tradition and following religious teachings or being punished and even killed by the Khmer Rouge government.³⁵ However, Muslim women started to wear a *kerama* (a frangipani scarf) wrapped around the head to cover the hair. However, according to the testimony of a Muslim woman, one time, the hair covering she wore were forcibly pulled as if she was forbidden to cover her hair.³⁶

The situation slowly changed four decades after the Cambodian government officially announced a policy that allowed wearing the hijab in public spaces in 2008, especially in education and public service areas. The policy significantly influenced the empowerment and

advancement of Muslim women in this Buddhist country. I argue that the emergence of policies that guarantee the unrestricted use of hijab and Muslim clothing in education and public services is based on two things: first, the hijab phenomenon, which is becoming increasingly popular as a world fashion trend, along with the phenomenon of multiculturalism, and the increasing awareness of cultural identity in Muslim society. Second, the emergence of awareness accompanied by the opportunity for Muslim women to continue their education, especially in Islamic countries. This has motivated them to develop, one of which is by creating a series of social activities aimed at empowering and advancing the Muslim community in various sectors, especially education and socio-economy, as well as in politics. The following two subsections will deal with both of these.

Identity and Trend: Hijab in Cambodian Muslim Women

According to Fadwa El Guindi (1999), wearing the hijab is not just a religious formality but a phenomenon full of nuances throughout history. It functions as a language that conveys social and cultural messages.³⁷ Women's head coverings that resemble the hijab are worn by Muslim women and have been worn by women in Jewish and Christian religious traditions in pre-Islamic times. Hijab is treated differently according to its context and function, as a tribute or even a curse.³⁸ In Islam, the instructions for wearing the hijab are based on the Koran, in Surah Al Ahzab verse 59 and Surah An-Nur verse 31. These two verses show that the function the law obligating the hijab is

³³ Arif Nuh Safri, 'Pergeseran Mitologi Jilbab: Dari Simbol Status ke Simbol Kesalehan/Keimanan', *Musawa Jurnal Studi Gender dan Islam*, 13.1 (2014), 19 <<https://doi.org/10.14421/musawa.2014.131.19-28>>.

³⁴ Gul Ceylan Tok, 'The Securitization of the Headscarf Issue in Turkey: "The Good and Bad Daughters" of the Republic', *Ritsumeikan Annual Review of International Studies*, 8 (2009), 113–37 (p. 115).

³⁵ So, p. 56.

³⁶ So, p. 62.

³⁷ Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, and Resistance* (Oxford: Berg, 1999).

³⁸ Leny Marinda, 'Komodifikasi Jilbab dalam Sejarah Peradaban Manusia', *Jurnal Kajian Perempuan & Keislaman*, 12.2 (2019).

to distinguish identity and increase security for the woman so as not to be disturbed, as written: "make them more recognizable, so they are not disturbed." However, at this point scholars differ in what contexts a woman is obliged to wear the hijab.

Cambodian Muslim women interpret the hijab as a form of articulation of identity in the public sphere. At least in the last decade, they feel it is important to display their religious identity and ethnicity. Instead, they feel protected and valued by different people. Sabila, a Muslim woman who works in non-governmental organizations and has many non-Muslim friends, recounted that one day seeing her hijab, the restaurant owner where she hung out warned her that some of the food in her restaurant was not halal. Hijab, in this case, protects Sabila from eating foods that are prohibited in her religion because her identity as a Muslim is known from the hijab she wears.³⁹ Nasihah, a Muslim woman who teaches in a private kindergarten, teaches children from various religious backgrounds. Of course, the majority of the parents of these children are Buddhists. She said she had not found it difficult to get along during the past year of teaching. Her co-workers and parents, predominantly non-Muslim, accept her even though she wears the hijab daily⁴⁰.

This phenomenon contrasts with the reality in some Muslim minority countries, which prohibit the hijab in public spaces. Likewise, more than a decade ago, Muslim women were not wholly free to wear the hijab in Cambodia. Many Muslim women cannot access education at the university level because they are worried about taking off the hijab. In

their opinion, they must dress according to the rules of public schools that are not Islamic. Being in a foreign non-Muslim majority environment, they do not have total freedom to dress according to their wants. Wearing a head covering, long shirts past the elbows, and skirts or pants covering the ankles is a foreign dress style in public spaces, such as schools, government offices, and public service facilities. In the world of education, women get lower opportunities than men. According to Blengsli (2009), a combination of economic and cultural problems prevents women from getting equal education to men in Cambodia, especially Muslim women. In the family environment, men tend to prioritize continuing their education over women.⁴¹

There are at least two interrelated possibilities. First, society stigmatizes foreigners and treats them in a discriminatory manner. Second, the minority communities feel insecure and do not have the confidence to appear and live side by side, let alone compete with the majority community. Salas, a Muslim activist, said that before the government issued a policy that allowed Muslim women to wear the hijab in schools, many Muslimah in rural areas could not continue their studies at universities in Phnom Penh because of the hijab. However, at the same time, many Muslims have received scholarships from abroad to study at universities in Phnom Penh.⁴²

Muslim women who want to continue their studies often find themselves in a dilemma. On the one hand, they want to continue their education at university, but on the other hand, they are also unable to take off their hijab. Furthermore, if they do not take off their hijab,

³⁹ Sabila, Informal at Phnom Penh, 2018.

⁴⁰ Nasihah, Informal at Phnom Penh, 2018.

⁴¹ Bjorn Atle Blengsli, 'Muslim Metamorphosis: Islamic Education and Politics in Contemporary Cambodia', in *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia*, ed. by Robert W.

Hefner (United States of America: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), pp. 172–204.

⁴² Salas, Informal Interview in Phnom Penh, 2018.

they doubt they can get along well on campus without discrimination. In those days, very few Cambodian Muslim women attended campuses in the country. They chose to seek education abroad, such as in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Middle East region. Most, for example, chose to go to Malaysia, because they are often financed by generous individuals who pay for school fees and living expenses. Betti Rosita Sari noted that the choice of Muslims to go to Malaysia is more influenced by religious relations and ethnicity, fellow Muslims, and the Cham people. The Cham and the Malay people have a very close relationship and are often assumed to be the same ethnic group, the Champa Malays. In addition, the presence of the Cham community, which in large numbers fled to Malaysia during the Khmer Rouge regime and were economically established, also opened up access to education and job opportunities for Cambodian Cham Muslims in Malaysia.⁴³

This condition changed after the government issued a policy stating that the hijab and Muslim clothing were free to use in public spaces. State intervention in regulating the domestic affairs of Muslims in Muslim minority areas is necessary, especially in this era of strengthening appreciation for the values of ethnicity and humanity. Some demands have come from within and outside the country to ensure and guarantee that Muslim minority groups live like citizens and practice their religion freely without being disturbed. This demand cannot be ignored because it involves relations between countries and financial assistance for the country's development.

Empowerment of Muslim Women

Regulations on the freedom to wear Muslim dress have encouraged the development of Islam in this Buddhist country. This policy forms a solid foothold to encourage and advance Muslim women in education, social, and economic activities. This will be further reinforced by the help and opportunities coming from abroad. This new development coincides with the opportunity of Muslim women to continue their education, especially in Islamic countries. This has motivated them to develop their community by creating social activities to empower and advance the community in various sectors, especially in education, the economy, and lately in politics.

In late 2018, a decade after the hijab was issued, I witnessed a significant development in the engagement of Cambodian Muslim women in the public sphere. They wear the hijab full of optimism and enthusiasm to contribute to Islamic society and their country. Sary, a Muslim woman who studies medicine at a private campus in Phnom Penh, said that the hijab is not a barrier to achieving her dream of becoming a doctor and helping people in the village in the future. During the two years of attending college and socializing with non-Muslims, she said that she has not been harassed by anyone because of her hijab. Instead of holding her back, the hijab has become an identity that makes people around it respect it.⁴⁴

Several Muslim women I interviewed between 2017-2020 had similar experiences. The decision became a momentum that allowed Muslim women to continue their education in state educational institutions ruled by the Khmer people. This has given a new optimism to Muslim parents to send their daughters to

⁴³ *The Cham Diaspora in Southeast Asia: Social Integration and Transnational Networks: The Case of Cambodia*, ed. by Yekti Maunati and Betti Rosita Sari, First edition (Jakarta: LIPI Press, 2013).

⁴⁴ Sary, 'Informal Interview' (Phnom Penh, 2018).

public schools. Bjorn's research has mentioned how boys were prioritized over girls to continue their education⁴⁵. Now however, there is access for Muslim women to education in both Islamic and public schools.

The increasing accessibility of Muslim women to general education further strengthens their motivation and resources to pursue higher education at home and abroad. Moreover, Muslims in Cambodia are Muslim communities that receive substantial financial assistance from various countries, especially in education. The aid came from Malaysia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Libya, and Indonesia⁴⁶. The cooperation is carried out between the state and or the private sector. The assistance is intended to establish schools, dormitories, mosques, and scholarships, from the high school level to universities. All the Muslim women I interviewed who are still or have completed their education at the university in Phnom Penh received scholarships from overseas institutions, mainly from Kuwait. In addition, some Muslim women also received scholarships from the Indonesian government for Master's studies at several universities in Indonesia.

Educational assistance for Muslim women ultimately aims to empower them to be economically independent and improve their living standards in their communities. Education opens up opportunities to work. Moreover, the state's legitimatization of the hijab and Muslim clothing makes the climate in the workplace more open welcomed.

Conclusion

Cambodian Muslims are a Muslim minority group in a non-Muslim country experiencing the most rapid and significant changes in its relationship with the state. While Muslim minorities in various countries are still trying to accommodate and negotiate their religious and cultural identity with state institutions, Cambodian Muslims have experienced empowerment by the state through several policies, including the regulation and institutionalization of halal and the legalization of the hijab. These are considered as *dharuriyat* in Islam, making it difficult for previous scholars to imagine that non-Muslim rulers could guarantee and fulfill them. Therefore, the fatwas of classical scholars largely forbid Muslims to live in areas controlled by non-Muslims.

The Cambodian experience shows that the antagonism between Islam and non-Muslim rulers is slowly fading away. They are accommodating and empowering the Muslim minority group. This can be seen in halal regulation and the legalization of hijab in Cambodia. Halal regulation was carried out on two impulses: first, halal is a basic need of life for two percent of Cambodian people. So far, there has been no certainty and precise regulation regarding halal products. Cambodian Muslims fulfill their halal needs with halal assurance that is carried out independently. They sure they buy meat and groceries from known fellow Muslims. The snacks they consume are generally imported products from Malaysia and Thailand.

⁴⁵ Bjorn Atle Blengsl, 'Muslim Metamorphosis: Islamic Education and Politics in Contemporary Cambodia', in *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia*, ed. by Robert W. Hefner (United States of America: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), pp. 172–204.

⁴⁶ Bjorn Atle Blengsl, 'Muslim Metamorphosis: Islamic Education and Politics in Contemporary

Cambodia', in *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia*, ed. by Robert W. Hefner (United States of America: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), pp. 172–204.; Bruckmayr, 'Cambodian Muslims, Transnational NGOs, and International Justice'; Sari.

Meanwhile, they prefer brands from countries that export halal products when choosing a hangout place. The absence of halal regulations also makes halal stalls or restaurants create their halal labels without strict inspections. The halal label is based on trust as a fellow Muslim. Second, the country's strong desire to take advantage of the halal market was welcomed with assistance and cooperation from Muslim countries, such as Malaysia and countries in the Middle East. The efforts are even getting assistance from Muslim minority country that is more advanced in its management of the halal industry, namely Thailand.

In addition, regulating the freedom to wear Muslim clothing in public spaces has recently led to significant developments in Muslim life in education, social, economic, and political aspects. This arrangement significantly impacted two things: first, the articulation of identity and the development of Muslim fashion trends. Similar to the perspective of Southeast Asian Muslims, the hijab is a non-negotiable identity for Cambodian Muslim women. Many Muslim women's families choose not to send their children to further education for fear of being asked to remove their hijab. Giving Muslim women the freedom to continue wearing the hijab and Islamic attire according to their religious demands is the first stage to encouraging them to go to school and improving the lives of Muslim women and the Muslim community. Second, the empowerment of Muslim women is increasingly significant with the emergence of these regulations. Making educational institutions the main gateway that frees Muslim women to self-actualize is the right choice to empower Muslim women in various fields of life: social, economic, and political. Muslim women began to show their attitude to contribute to their country and community. This change can be seen in the emergence of various career options

for Cambodian Muslim women, not only in the domestic sphere of the household, but some have played an essential role in government organizations and institutions.

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