



The Caliph as a Head: Tjokroaminoto's Political Thought in the 1920s

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto's political thoughts on the caliphate in the 1920s, in the context of global caliphate issues after the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924. As an intellectual with a background as a santri-priyayi (Islamic scholar-noble), a skilled orator, and leader of Sarekat Islam, Tjokroaminoto viewed the caliphate as the "head" of the ummah—an important moral-political authority for maintaining the dignity of Islam under colonial domination. This view was shaped by his biographical experiences, his ideological understanding of Islam, and his involvement in the dynamics of global Islamic activism. For Tjokroaminoto, Islam and politics were inseparable; Islam encompassed not only spiritual and religious aspects, but also social and political issues. This study places the caliphate crisis in its historical context, examines the response of Muslims in the Dutch East Indies, and highlights Tjokroaminoto's role and thoughts on the issue. Tjokroaminoto's ideas on the caliphate had a major influence in shaping the boundaries and direction of political Islam in Indonesia in the early 20th century, as well as having a significant impact on Muslims at that time.

Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis pemikiran politik H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto tentang khilafah pada dekade 1920-an, dalam konteks persoalan khilafah global pasca-penghapusan Khilafah Utsmaniyah pada tahun 1924. Sebagai intelektual berlatar belakang santri-priyayi, orator ulung, serta pemimpin Sarekat Islam, Tjokroaminoto memandang khilafah sebagai "kepala" bagi tubuh umat—sebuah otoritas moral-politik yang penting untuk menjaga martabat Islam di bawah dominasi kolonial. Pandangan ini dibentuk oleh pengalaman biografis, pemahaman ideologis terhadap Islam, dan keterlibatannya dalam dinamika aktivisme Islam global. Bagi Tjokroaminoto, Islam dan politik merupakan satu kesatuan yang tak terpisahkan; Islam mencakup tidak hanya aspek spiritual keagamaan, tetapi juga persoalan sosial dan politik. Kajian ini menempatkan krisis khilafah dalam konteks sejarahnya, menelaah respons umat Islam di Hindia Belanda, serta menyoroti peran dan pemikiran Tjokroaminoto dalam isu tersebut. Gagasan Tjokroaminoto mengenai khilafah berpengaruh besar dalam membentuk batas-batas dan arah Islam politik di Indonesia pada awal abad ke-20, serta memberikan dampak signifikan bagi umat Muslim pada masa itu.

A. INTRODUCTION

Among the figures of the national movement in the early 20th century, Haji Oemar Said Tjokroaminoto occupied a prominent position. He was known as the “teacher of the nation” because a number of important figures—such as Soekarno, Kartosoewirjo, and Semaoen—were born in his boarding house in Surabaya and later played a major role in Indonesia's political journey. However, behind his reputation as a nationalist, there was a side to Tjokroaminoto's thinking that has received little attention in mainstream historiography, namely his ideas about the caliphate.

The abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate by Mustafa Kemal on March 3, 1924, was an important moment that led to the birth of these ideas. This event marked the end of an institution that had for centuries served as a symbol of political and religious unity for Muslims. At that time, a global discourse known as the Caliphate Question emerged, namely the debate over whether the caliphate should be restored, who was worthy of holding that authority, where it should be located, and what institutional form it should take. This discourse developed across regions—from Cairo, which was influenced by al-Azhar and the shadow of British colonial power, to Mecca under the control of Ibn Sa‘ūd, and from Delhi to Batavia. Mona Hassan refers to this dynamic as an “international pursuit” of a form of Islamic leadership after the Ottoman Caliphate. (Hassan, 2009:184)

The loss of the caliphate shook the global Muslim community, including Muslims in the Dutch East Indies. Despite being in a colonial territory far from the center of Islamic power, Muslims in the Dutch East Indies responded actively to this event. Martin van Bruinessen refers to this phenomenon as a period of “feverish activity,” a phase in which the issue of the caliphate became the focus of attention for the local Muslim elite before gradually disappearing from the political agenda. (Bruinessen, 1995:120).

In the context of Dutch colonialism and the rise of Islamic political awareness, the issue of the caliphate became a central theme that colored the political and ideological discourse of Muslims in this region. Sarekat Islam (SI), as the largest Islamic organization at that time, was at the forefront in responding to the issue of the caliphate. Under the leadership of H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto, Sarekat Islam (SI) raised the issue of the caliphate not only as a response to the global crisis, but also as part of a political strategy to confront colonial domination. (Waginugroho, 2023)

For Tjokroaminoto, the loss of the caliphate was not just an event that occurred far away, but a crisis of leadership for Muslims that had a direct impact on their dignity, direction of struggle, and solidarity, including in colonized areas such as the Dutch East Indies. In his speech before members of Sarekat Islam in 1926, he emphasized that “the Muslim community without a caliph is like a body without a head” (Soeara Perdamian). This statement not only reflected a theological wound, but also contained the belief that the highest leadership of the community was necessary to maintain the dignity and direction of the Islamic struggle under colonial hegemony. This speech was one of Tjokroaminoto's many efforts to instill the importance of the caliphate institution in the minds of the general public at that time.

Tjokroaminoto believed that the caliphate was a vital institution for Muslims, including the Muslim community in Indonesia, and therefore its existence must be preserved. This belief was in line with his religious paradigm, which viewed Islam not merely as a private matter, but as a comprehensive value system. For Tjokroaminoto, Islam is ideological in nature, encompassing all aspects of life, from politics, education, and economics to state administration. (Melayu, 2014)

In Tjokroaminoto's view, Islam is a normative framework and orientation for the collective actions of the ummah, not merely a spiritual symbol. This ideological view is universal in its scope of the ummah. Therefore, his support for pan-Islamism and participation in the caliphate congresses was not rooted in historical romanticism, but was a conscious strategy to expand the space for the struggle of Muslims in the Dutch East Indies.

B. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature review method. Data was obtained from various written sources, including books, scientific articles, academic journals, and contemporary newspapers. Analysis was carried out through critical interpretation of the text, applying reflective, creative, and careful thinking to gain a deep understanding of the context and meaning contained therein.

The data collection technique in this study used the documentation method, in line with the literature review approach applied. Data was obtained from various sources, both primary and secondary, then classified for analysis. The primary sources in this study were the *Bandera Islam* (1924) and *Soeara Perdamian* (1926) newspapers. The February 4, 1926 edition of *Soeara Perdamian* contained a report

on H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto's speech, which is the main reference for this study. All of these documents were obtained from the collection of the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia (PNRI).

This study applies content analysis and data interpretation with a descriptive-historical approach to examine H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto's political thoughts on the caliphate. The main focus is on his view that Muslims without a caliph are like a body without a head. After a systematic analysis, conclusions are drawn through an inductive approach based on the findings obtained.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Caliphate Question in Dutch East Indies

Although the existence of the caliphate as a political institution has often been debated throughout history, in general the caliphate remained recognized until 1924. Amid fragile conditions leading up to its fall, many Muslims outside the Ottoman Empire continued to express their loyalty to this institution. For them, the Ottomans were the caliphate and a symbol of the independent power of Muslims capable of maintaining sovereignty. The Ottomans still had considerable influence in the Islamic world until and during World War I. As a result, the Ottoman defeat at the end of the war raised concerns about the collapse of the last power of the Muslim community. This fear, along with the various possible consequences, prompted many parties to reaffirm the need for the caliphate in their lives. (Pankhurst, 2013:35)

In this context, The Caliphate Question arose, especially after the collapse on March 3, 1924. The loss of this institution caused a crisis of legitimacy at the global level and sparked cross-border discussions about the future of Muslim leadership. Scholars, political activists, and even colonial governments viewed the issue of the caliphate as a common issue that needed to be addressed immediately.

After the abolition of the caliphate, various competing proposals emerged. Some parties encouraged King Fu'ād in Egypt, while others supported Sharif Husain in Hijaz—who even proclaimed himself caliph. Others placed their hopes on Ibn Sa'ūd, the new ruler of Mecca and Medina, who needed broader political legitimacy. Al-Azhar University planned to hold a caliphate congress in Cairo, while Ibn Sa'ūd prepared for the Mecca Congress in 1926. The debate that arose revolved not only around 'who' was worthy of becoming caliph, but also 'what form' the caliphate should take. For some,

the most rational solution was to hold an international Islamic conference. Hassan noted that this idea gained widespread support because it was considered capable of preventing unilateral claims to the caliphate by a particular country or group. This global forum was expected to establish collective legitimacy and reduce the potential for internal conflict among Muslims. (Hassan, 2014:188)

In addition, the dynamics that occurred after the collapse of the caliphate caused turmoil in the Dutch East Indies. Martin van Bruinessen notes that R.A. Kern, the Dutch East Indies Government Advisor for indigenous affairs, even referred to this moment as “a milestone in the Muhammadan movement in this country.” For several years, the issue of the caliphate became a major concern for Indonesian Muslim leaders (Bruinessen). Many of them had shown interest in Ottoman developments since their involvement in World War I, until its collapse and the emergence of the idea to reestablish a new caliphate. This interest was not merely informative, but also accompanied by a sense of responsibility to discuss and find solutions to the issue. (Noer, 1996:242)

When news spread that the Ulama Al-Azhar would hold a caliphate congress in Cairo, this information was immediately received positively. The Sarekat Islam, Muhammadiyah, and Al-Irsyad coalition then held a special meeting in Surabaya on October 4–5, 1924, which was attended by organizational leaders, national figures, and influential local clerics. The main agenda of the meeting was to discuss the urgency of sending a delegation to the conference, which was planned to take place in 1925.

In opening the discussion, the leader of Sarekat Islam, Tjokroaminoto, delivered a touching speech, emphasizing the importance of a caliph as a world and spiritual leader for Muslims. Following the speech, the leader of Muhammadiyah, Haji Fakhruddin, proposed that decisions should not be made hastily. He proposed the formation of a special committee tasked with formulating views and carefully preparing the delegation to Cairo. As a follow-up to this proposal, the Central Comité Chilafat was formed, consisting of representatives from traditionalist and reformist circles. This committee then initiated the Extraordinary Congress of All Islam in the Indies (Kongres al-Islam Hindia), which was held on December 24-26, 1924, in Surabaya. (Bruinessen, 1995:128-129)

Since then, the idea of reestablishing the caliphate continued to grow in the Dutch East Indies. The majority of Muslims felt they had a moral responsibility to discuss the issue and find the right solution. For several years, this issue became a

major topic on their agenda in the hope that the institution could be restored and once again become a symbol of unity for Muslims around the world. Their contribution in responding to the Caliphate Question cannot be separated from the central role of Sarekat Islam, which was the most active Islamic organization in promoting and fighting for the idea of Pan-Islamism.

Tjokroaminoto played a very important role in directing Sarekat Islam to get involved in the Caliphate Question. Sarekat Islam's actions were closely related to Tjokroaminoto's actions. Tjokroaminoto's ideas about Pan-Islamism were driven by his inspiration to create a united global Muslim community. His interpretation of Islamic unity included not only the unity of Indonesian Muslims, but also solidarity with the struggles of Muslims elsewhere. It was this attitude that made Sarekat Islam responsive to the issue of the caliphate.

2. Tjokroaminoto's Response to the Caliphate Question

For Sarekat Islam, the struggle to establish a caliphate was an important step in realizing the ideal of Pan-Islamism, namely the unity of Muslims throughout the world under a way of life based on Islamic teachings. As understood by Tjokroaminoto, Pan-Islamism is the deepest form of unity among Muslims. This unity is not only intended for Muslims in Indonesia, but encompasses all Muslims in various parts of the world. Sarekat Islam's commitment and involvement in the issue of the caliphate has been evident since the 11th Congress held in August 1924 in Surabaya. At this congress, an invitation from Al-Azhar scholars to attend the Cairo Congress was discussed, and Sarekat Islam decided to give its full support and seek to send a delegation from the Dutch East Indies to the meeting. (Waginugroho, 2023: 29)

The increased interest in the ideas of Pan-Islamism and the caliphate in the 1920s was largely influenced by the leadership of Sarekat Islam, especially by Tjokroaminoto. The strong influence of communist ideology at that time, coupled with the political dynamics of the Islamic world, also influenced political life in Indonesia. These conditions prompted the leaders of Sarekat Islam to reaffirm Islam as the ideological basis and direction of their movement. (Melayu, 2002: 63)

Tjokroaminoto's interest in The Caliphate Question was reflected in a special meeting held in Surabaya in October 1924. On that occasion, he emphasized the importance of a caliph for Muslims. According to him, all Muslims in the world needed

a leader who was explicitly recognized as the worldly and spiritual head of all Muslims. (Bruinessen, 1995: 128-129)

Tjokroaminoto also emphasized the need for the active involvement of Muslims in the Dutch East Indies in responding to the issue of the caliphate and the invitation from Cairo. He stated that there had never been a world Islamic congress in history, and this momentum was the first opportunity that must be seized. Therefore, he considered sending representatives to Cairo a moral obligation for Muslims. To build confidence, Tjokroaminoto asserted that many people in the Dutch East Indies had the ability and competence to represent Muslims at the forum. (Bandera Islam, October 30, 1924)

However, for various reasons, they decided not to attend the Cairo Congress and instead focused on the Congress in Mecca. Husnul suggested three possible reasons behind this change. First, there was a perception that the Egyptian side looked down on the Indonesian delegation, even considering them to be nothing more than “flies” and underestimating the capabilities of the Indonesian people. Second, Agus Salim's enthusiasm for Ibn Saud is thought to have influenced Tjokroaminoto's decision to prioritize the Mecca Congress. Third, as noted by Martin van Bruinessen, Tjokroaminoto refused to participate in efforts to legitimize the Egyptian King, Fu'ad, as caliph, because he considered the appointment to be merely an extension of imperialist interests. (Melayu, 2002: 136)

Nevertheless, the Cairo Congress was still attended by two figures from Sumatra, namely Sheikh Abdullah Ahmad and Sheikh Abdul Karim Amrullah. However, until the congress ended, not a single decision was reached. Finally, the congress was dissolved and the issue of the caliphate was declared closed without result. (Kramer, 1986:109-10)

The Mecca Congress took place on June 1, 1926, and was attended by delegations from various Muslim countries, including representatives from the Dutch East Indies with H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto as one of its members. The presence of the Dutch East Indies delegation did not attract much attention because they rarely spoke. However, for them, this participation was significant as it was the first time Indonesian Muslims had participated in a global Islamic forum. Like the Cairo Congress, the Mecca Congress ended without producing a solution to the Caliphate Question. (Kramer, 1986; Bruinessen, 1995)

Although the various efforts made were unsuccessful in determining the form and direction of Islamic world leadership after the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate, Tjokroaminoto's participation in the Mecca Congress reflected his deep concern for the Caliphate Question. For him, solidarity among Muslims across borders was a source of legitimacy and political energy that strengthened the struggle. Therefore, the idea of Pan-Islamism and his participation in various caliphate congresses were seen as a strategy to expand the scope of the Islamic struggle in the Dutch East Indies.

On various occasions, Tjokroaminoto sought to educate Muslims and their leaders about the importance of the caliphate institution. He always linked these efforts to the plight of Muslims, including those in the Dutch East Indies. One example of this was evident in his speech, in which he stated that Muslims without a caliph were like a body without a head.

3. The Caliphate as a Head in Tjokroaminoto's Thought

Then, in front of the members and leaders of Sarekat Islam, Tjokroaminoto reaffirmed the importance of the institution of the caliphate. As recorded in the 1926 Soeara Perdamaian newspaper in the section "Kongres Partij Sarekat Islam di Jawa Barat" (Congress of the Sarekat Islam Party in West Java), he outlined six main points related to the continuity of the caliphate and the condition of Muslims. First, the legitimacy of the continuity of the caliphate from the time of Abu Bakar to the Ottoman Empire; second, the importance of control over the Arabian Peninsula as a prerequisite for legitimate Islamic leadership; third, the urgency of the caliphate for Muslims; fourth, criticism of the negligence of Muslims in the Dutch East Indies; fifth, the emergence of a new awareness to fight for Islam; and sixth, a concrete call for Indonesian Muslims to play an active role in sending representatives to the Mecca Congress. (Soeara Perdamaian, February 4, 1926)

Tjokroaminoto opened his speech by highlighting the legitimacy of the continuity of the caliphate, which had lasted for approximately 1,300 years. According to him, this institution had long historical roots, beginning in the era of Abu Bakr ash-Shiddiq until the reign of the Ottoman Turks. He referred to the last two caliphs, Wahiduddin and Abdul Majid, as leaders who had lost their authority and political power. For Tjokroaminoto, the caliphate was an institution that was essentially continuous, even though it eventually collapsed due to weak leadership and external political pressure.

Furthermore, Tjokroaminoto highlighted power in the Arabian Peninsula as an important element in the continuity of the caliphate. He emphasized that a caliph cannot be established without control over this region, because the Arabian Peninsula, especially Mecca, is the spiritual and political center of the Islamic world. In his view, Mecca had a symbolic position that made whoever ruled it hold moral responsibility for all Muslims. This statement showed Tjokroaminoto's sensitivity to the political dynamics after the conquest of the Hijaz by Ibn Sa'ud, while also reflecting his concern about the possibility of the politicization of the Holy Land for the sake of power alone.

The third aspect emphasized by Tjokroaminoto was the urgency of the caliphate for Muslims. According to him, the caliphate was a fundamental necessity because without unifying leadership, Muslims would be scattered like "a body without a head." This speech echoed his famous statement, "Muslims without a caliph are like a body without a head," which reflected his theological and political views.

In the fourth part of his speech, Tjokroaminoto delivered sharp criticism of Muslims in the Dutch East Indies. He asserted that they had not understood the importance of the caliphate for hundreds of years, thus losing their unity and glory. The criticism was reflective, not accusatory, but intended to raise collective awareness. Therefore, he called on Muslims to rise from their backwardness, cultivate political awareness, and play an active role in fighting for the interests of the wider community.

The fifth aspect of Tjokroaminoto's speech highlighted the emergence of a new awareness among Muslims. He welcomed the increased attention to Islamic politics after the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate, which he believed marked the revival of the spirit of unity and solidarity across borders. For Tjokroaminoto, this awareness should not stop at the level of discourse, but must be realized through concrete actions to strengthen the position and dignity of Muslims.

The last part of Tjokroaminoto's speech contained a concrete call to action. He emphasized the importance for Muslims not to ignore or waste important issues concerning Islam. Tjokroaminoto called on the Indonesian people to show their sincerity and concern for the issue of the caliphate by sending representatives to the Mecca Congress organized by Sultan Abdul Aziz bin Sa'ud.

The *Koran Soeara Perdamaian* also described the enthusiastic atmosphere of the participants who attended Tjokroaminoto's speech. When the speech ended, the entire audience responded with a resounding "amen" in the courtroom. This moment became a strong sign of the support and spirit of unity among Muslims at that time.

D. CONCLUSION

Exploring the connection between Tjokroaminoto's thinking and The Caliphate Question makes an important contribution to enriching the discourse on the history of Islamic politics in Indonesia. H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto's speech, published in the Soeara Perdamaian newspaper in 1926, is an important political document for understanding his views on the caliphate and the position of Muslims amid the dynamics of global colonialism. In his speech delivered before members and leaders of Sarekat Islam in West Java, Tjokroaminoto sought to raise awareness among Muslims to reexamine the meaning of leadership and solidarity in Islam. He emphasized that the caliphate was not merely a spiritual symbol, but also a moral and political foundation for the unity of Muslims throughout the world.

Tjokroaminoto's speech reflected a balance between Islamic idealism and the realities of life under colonialism. He realized that Indonesian Muslims did not yet have political independence, but he continued to emphasize the importance of moral and intellectual involvement in global Islamic issues. Therefore, this speech was not merely a religious appeal, but also a reflection of Tjokroaminoto's political vision of Islam as a comprehensive ideology.

Through this view, Tjokroaminoto emphasized that the caliphate, in a broader sense, was not merely a question of who was in power, but how Muslims maintained the values of unity and Muslim leadership. He saw the political struggle of Indonesian Muslims as part of a global movement to restore the dignity and power of Islam amid the changing times.

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