

***Adab* and the Culture of Political Culture**

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## *Adab* and the Culture of Political Culture\*

In this essay I discuss two uses of the term *adab* in contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian politics. Both imply a non-specific notion of “civilized,” but one draws inspiration from Islamic understandings of proper individual behavior while the other invokes a more general notion of ethical behavior. Critics of contemporary politics, both in democratic Indonesia and in authoritarian Malaysia, invoke *adab* as a rhetorical move and in regular conversation. Reflecting on what the use of *adab* tells us about Indonesian and Malaysian politics, I propose that it reveals something essential about how Indonesians and Malaysians conceptualize politics—that political culture, either individual or collective, explains why contemporary politics is the way that it is.

In making this argument, I mean to transcend the mundane observation that the word *adab* has replaced other words for “civilized” in contemporary Indonesian and Malay, as have other loanwords like *alam* for nature or *dunia* for world. Rather, I seek to establish two points. First, that the use of *adab* in political contexts reflects a general normative complaint about political behavior that is viewed to be venal, dirty, corrupt, coarse, and backwards. Importantly, there is nothing inherently Islamic about *adab* in political discourse. As in Arabic, *adab* has an everyday meaning that is distinct from its religious uses. *Adab* and terms formed from it—*beradab*, *peradaban*, *berkeadaban*, *kurang adab*—are frequently used to describe a non-specific aspiration for civilized behavior in everyday life and in contemporary politics, and can describe both individuals and collectives. Second, I aim to show that *adab* terminology as applied towards politics

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in contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia is useful for understanding more generally the ways in which mass publics conceptualize the nature of the politics around them. In Indonesia and Malaysia, political culture is not just a description of political practice, it is an explanation for politics. This view differs in important ways from the experiences of the West, and also from the views of many contemporary political scientists.

### ***Adab in Action: Five Examples***

To see how *adab* is used in contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian politics, it is useful to examine its use in both elite discourse and in everyday discussion. I begin with a comment by then-candidate, now-President Joko Widodo (a.k.a. Jokowi) speaking in a talk show alongside Muhammadiyah members in Solo, Central Java in June of 2014, shortly before the July presidential election.<sup>1</sup> Jokowi is quoted as saying

*Politik kita sekarang merupakan politik yang kurang beradab. Mestinya sama orang-orang yang berpendidikan tidak seperti itu.*

Our current politics is an uncivilized politics. Of course educated people are not like this.

The context surrounding this comment was the so-called “black campaign” waged against Jokowi on social media, accusing him of being Chinese and/or Christian.<sup>2</sup> In the remainder of his comments, Jokowi commented on the importance of a democratic politics that brings happiness, prosperity, and meets the demands of “the people” (*rakyat*).

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<sup>1</sup> “Jokowi: Politik kita sekarang kurang beradab.” *Merdeka*, June 20, 2014. <http://www.merdeka.com/politik/jokowi-politik-kita-sekarang-kurang-beradab.html>. A related but slightly different quote is found in “Jokowi: Politik Indonesia Kurang Beradab.” *Tempo*, June 20, 2014. <http://www.tempo.co/read/news/2014/06/20/269586741/jokowi-politik-indonesia-kurang-beradab>.

<sup>2</sup> Ulla Fionna and Gwenael Njoto-Feillard, “Junctures of the Old and New: The 2014 Indonesian Elections,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2015 (2015): 139-53, 147.

A second example comes from an interview with Malaysia's opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim in the summer of 2012. At the time, Anwar had been acquitted by the High Court on his latest sodomy charge, and was at the height of his influence in anticipation of the general elections to be held in the next year. In an interview, he compared Indonesian politics to Malaysian politics.<sup>3</sup>

*Mestinya demorasi [sic] apa tidak, jelas tidak. Indonesia jauh lebih beradab dari segi itu. Dalam hal politik kita masih lebih dewasa. Bahkan sejak zaman Soeharto, Ali Sadikin tidak pernah dituduh sodomi. Zaman sekarang, hari gini masih menggunakan tuduhan sodomi, rendah betul permainan politiknya. Terus hukum digunakan sebagai alat kekuasaan.*

Democracy, surely not, clearly not. Indonesia is far more civilized from that perspective. In political matters we are still young. In fact, at the time of Soeharto, Ali Sadikin [a prominent critic of the New Order] was never accused of sodomy. These days they still use accusations of sodomy [against me], really the lowest form of political manipulation. So the law is used as an instrument of power.

It is of course interesting to note the differences between Anwar's view of civility in Indonesian politics to Jokowi's view of civility in Indonesian politics.

For a view of *adab* as used by ordinary Indonesians, we can look to an online forum at the news website Detik.com.<sup>4</sup> Starting a thread entitled "Politik beradab & beradab politik," user very\_kaka writes

*Kedua frase di atas mengandung makna bahwa Politik beradab adalah cara-cara berpolitik dengan menjunjung tinggi nilai-nilai dan norma-norma dalam berpolitik, Sedangkan Beradab Politik adalah implementasi aktivitas politik yang dilakukan oleh para pelaku politik dengan mengedepankan sikap-sikap dan perilaku yang diharapkan menjadi contoh bagi warga negara.*

The two phrases above connote that *politik beradab* is a way of being political / engaging in politics that respects high values and norms while

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<sup>3</sup> "Politik Malaysia rendahan dan tidak beradab." *Merdeka*, August 31, 2012. <http://www.merdeka.com/khas/politik-malaysia-rendahan-dan-tidak-beradab-wawancara-adi-sasono-3.html>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://forum.detik.com/politik-beradab-beradab-politik-t144637.html>.

engaging in politics. *Beradab politik* is the implementation of political activities that are done by political actors while promoting attitudes and behaviors that hopefully can become examples for citizens.

In response, user Blunder writes

*Apa saja yang dilakukan pemerintah saat ini selalu salah. Benar pun dikatakan salah. Pada jamannya eyang almarhum suharto kebebasan dibungkam sehingga sindrom tambah kuat. Sekarang keran kebebasan dibuka lebar-lebar. Memaki, menghina dan memfitnah tanpa bukti kepada pejabat pun boleh.*

Anything that the government does these days is always wrong. Even true things are said to be wrong. In the time of Soeharto freedom was silenced, so the syndrome got worse. Now the spigot of freedom has been fully opened. Abuses, insults, even baseless slander against officials is allowed.

We must be careful in inferring too much from a single online thread. But it is useful to contrast the two constructions of *politik beradab* and *beradab politik*, neither of which involves anything explicitly religious, and the latter of which does imagine an explicit role for politics as a way of shaping mass values.

For a second example from a non-elite context, I look now to Malaysia. In response to online comments about the recently deceased—in this case likely a reference to the death of UMNO Member of Parliament Jamaluddin Jarjis—a commentator from the Information Department in the Ministry of Communication and Multimedia writes<sup>5</sup>

*Meneliti kepada komen-komen buruk di media sosial mengenai kematian seseorang terutamanya yang membabitkan tokoh atau pemimpin dari kerajaan menggambarkan bahawa kita sebenarnya sedang berhadapan dengan generasi yang semakin kehilangan adab. Apakah pendidikan kita, sama ada pendidikan keluarga mahupun pendidikan formal kehilangan roh tarbiyyahnya yang sebenar?*

Looking at the evil comments on social media regarding deaths, especially those involving government officials, shows that we are faced with a

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<sup>5</sup> “Politik kebencian lahirkan generasi tidak beradab.”  
<http://pmr.penerangan.gov.my/index.php/component/content/article/524-kolumnis-akhbar/19314-politik-kebencian-lahirkan-generasi-tidak-beradab.html>.

generation that is increasingly losing civility. Is our education at home or in school losing its true educational spirit?

The use of the Arabic phrase *roh tarbiyyah*, or educational spirit, is distinctive in this passage. There is nothing otherwise religious about the discussion from which this example was drawn, and yet the use of *roh tarbiyyah* draws the audience towards an Islamic frame of reference. The same might be said of the preceding example of internet commentary, in which the user Blunder employs the words *hina* and *fitnah*, but although these two terms are Arabic in origin and refer to concepts in Islamic jurisprudence, they do not so immediately conjure a religious frame of reference.

A final example comes from Jakob Oetomo, founder of the Indonesian national magazine *Kompas*. The example appeared in the first edition following the resignation of Soeharto in May 1998.<sup>6</sup> Writing with the title *Gerakan Reformasi agar Memelopori Politik Secara Adab* (A Reform Movement to Pioneer a Civilized Way of Politics), Oetomo makes reference to Kontras, a civil society movement founded to advocate on behalf of victims of violence and the disappeared. Kontras adviser MM Billah is quoted as urging politicians to

*berpolitik secara beradab, sehingga tidak mengorbankan kepentingan rakyat banyak untuk kepentingan politik mereka masing-masing...moral dan etika politik harus ditegakkan oleh para pemimpin Parpol yang sekarang mulai berkampanya dengan cara kurang berkeadaban.*

Go about politics in a civilized way, so as not to sacrifice the interests of the people in favor of [politicians'] own interests. Political morals and ethics have to be upheld by those party leaders who now have begun to campaign in uncivilized ways.

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<sup>6</sup> The column is reproduced in Jakob Oetama, *Suara Nurani: Tajuk Rencana Pilihan, 1991-2001* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2001), pp. 52-54.

The word *berkeadaban*, an inflected version of *adab* that means approximately “to be in the way of having *adab*,”<sup>7</sup> appears almost exclusively in Indonesian rather than in Malaysian, and frequently modifies democracy or the state.

### ***Adab in Context***

Taken together, what do we learn from these five examples of how *adab* is used? The first thing to note is that when used in commentary about politics, *adab* can have religious undertones but it commonly does not. In the cases above, in fact, it is only the fourth one that carries Islamic undertones, and they are only visible as such due to the presence of distinctly Arabic lexicon elsewhere in the quote.

Can we say anything more systematic about the conditions under which one finds *adab* used in distinctly Islamic ways? My impression—based on my time spent discussing politics in Indonesia and Malaysia, and an admittedly incomplete review of contemporary political writing—is that invocations of *adab* in political contexts are more likely carry Islamic implications in Malaysia than in Indonesia. This difference might have roots in the different social and historical foundations of modern politics in the two countries. In the Malaysian context there is a ground for a historically grounded and fundamentally religious approach to *adab*, stemming from early Malay sources such as the *Taj al-Salatin* and the *Bustan al-Salatin*. Jelani Harun has analyzed these texts as early Malay adoptions of the mirrors-for-princes genre of Islamic courtly texts.<sup>8</sup> In this

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<sup>7</sup> There is a slight difference between *berkeadaban* and *beradab*, although both might be translated as “to be civilized.” *Beradab* connotes something active, which a politician might do, to be civilized. *Berkeadaban* connotes something more general and more passive, to become in a way that is civilized. It is usually used to describe democracy or the state, not an individual. In the quote above, it modifies political campaigns, not political party leaders.

<sup>8</sup> Jelani Harun, “Bustan Al-Salatin, ‘the Garden of Kings’: A Universal History and Adab Work from Seventeenth-Century Aceh,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 32 (2004): 21-52; Jelani Harun, *Pemikiran Adab Ketatanegaraan Kesultanan Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2003).

genre, Muslim rulers consider explicitly the issue of proper ethical behavior, and draw directly on concepts such as *adab* as well as more explicitly Islamic scriptural and jurisprudential sources. There exists a thread in contemporary Malay studies that focuses on these texts as well,<sup>9</sup> as well as on previous writings in the mirrors-for-princes genre from Persia and elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> However, these do not appear to be as influential as is the literature focusing on *adat* and Malay culture and history.

I am aware of no analogue in the case of Indonesian politics. Works such as the *Kitab Adat Sopan Santoen Orang Minangkabau (Handbook of the Manners and Traditions of the Minangkabau People)* from the late colonial era do exist, and they do contain some discussion of individual behavior vis-à-vis administrators and the state.<sup>11</sup> But this, like many of the other Malay sources for mirrors-for-princes texts, originates in Sumatra, which traditionally occupied the same cultural sphere as did peninsular Malaya. And it is Java, not Sumatra, that provides the cultural template upon which Indonesian national politics has drawn since independence. For reasons that probably lie in the historical coevolution of Islam in Java and the Javanese court, then, *adab* enters the Javanese religious and political lexicon in a different way. Harlina Indijati describes, for example, how discussions of Islamic ethics appear in nineteenth-century Javanese literature, but stipulates that they do not constitute a separate genre, as might parallel

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<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Muhd Norizam Jamian and Shaiful Bahri Md Radzi, "In Search of a Just Leader in Islamic Perspective: An Analysis of Traditional Malay Literature from the Perspective of *Adab*," *Asian Social Science* 9 (2013); Mohd Taib Osman, *Adab Raja-Raja* (Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Kebudayaan, Kesenian, dan Warisan Malaysia, 2006). For a more general articulation not directly tied to the mirrors-for-princes texts, see Mohd Zaini Ismail and Mohd Sani Badron, *Good Governance: Adab-Oriented Tadbīr in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. the discussion of *adab* and Imam al-Ghazali's *Nasihāt al-Muluk* by Aziz Jamaludin Mhd Tahir, "Politik beradab demi kemaslahatan rakyat," *Utusan Online*, January 1, 2012, [http://www1.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2012&dt=0127&pub=Utusan\\_Malaysia&sec=Rencana&pg=re\\_01.htm](http://www1.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2012&dt=0127&pub=Utusan_Malaysia&sec=Rencana&pg=re_01.htm).

<sup>11</sup> See B. Dt. Seri Maharadja, *Kitab Adat Sopan Santoen Orang Minangkabau* (Fort de Kock: Drukkerij "Merapi" & Co., 1922), 71-76.

works such as *Taj al-Salatin*.<sup>12</sup> Discussions of *adab* are woven into what are otherwise fundamentally Javanese works. Because contemporary Indonesian political thought draws on these on Javanese traditions, *adab* as politics is less religious than simply civilizational. In this account, because contemporary Indonesian political thought does not draw on an Islamic courtly tradition, whereas Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy in which the Sultans are empowered to represent the interests of Malay Muslims, Islamic frames of reference are relatively more natural in Malaysian political discourse than in Indonesian political discourse. That Malaysia's contemporary political order relies so fundamentally on both Malay supremacy (*ketuanan Melayu*) and Islam as one of the three constitutive features of Malayness gives even more license for the search for Islamic roots for Malay ways of being political.

A second important observation from the examples above is that *adab* can be used in both an individual and collective sense. The individual sense of *adab* focuses on an individual's proper behavior or etiquette, and simply invokes that in the political realm. This is the more traditional sense in which the mirrors-for-princes genre employs the concept of *adab*. In the modern context, the online commentary from very\_kaka matches this use when describing *politik beradab* as a way of being political that is cognizant of ethical requirements. But *adab* is in some sense more powerful as a description of a collective state of civilization: Malaysian politics *in general* as lacking *adab*, or Indonesian society itself as striving for greater *adab*, or very\_kaka's *beradab politik* as a program that creates a more civilized politics. Whereas the individualistic perspective on

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<sup>12</sup> Harlina Indijati, "Etika Islam Dalam Serat Kalathida, Serat Wedharaga, Serat Jaka Lodhang, Dan Serat Kridhamaya Karya R. Ng. Ranggawarsita," in *Adab Dan Adat: Refleksi Sastra Nusantara*, ed. Abdul Hadi W.M., Edwar Djamaris, and Amrantasai (Jakarta: Pusat Bahasa, Departemen Pendidikan Nasional, 2003), 421.

*adab* makes it something that *individuals do*, perhaps drawing on Islamic ethics but in any case cognizant of some rightness of political behavior, the collective perspective on *adab* holds that civilization—perhaps more exactly translated as “civilized-ness”—is a feature that *societies have*. It is generally not made clear what exact properties a society would have that would allow someone to deem it civilized, but the implication is that ethically objectionable things like corruption and slander would not be present.

To what extent do these two perspectives complement one another? Here the general vagueness of *adab* as used in contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian political discourse prevents us from delving deeply or authoritatively into this question. But one can imagine two views. In the simpler view, it could be that “societies have” *adab* if “individuals do” *adab*, if not all of them then perhaps a sufficient number of them. This is a view that holds that societal properties are merely the sum of the interactions of the actions of individuals, what a sociologist would consider methodologically individualist conception of the relationship between individuals and social collectives.<sup>13</sup> Such a perspective on the role of *adab* in society might find resonance in the common fundamentalist articulation of proper Islamic society as ultimately rooted in individual adherence to the ways of the Prophet Muhammad, although it need not.

A more nuanced view is that Indonesian and Malaysian politics can have a property of *adab* that is distinct from what individual Indonesians and Malaysians do. Here, the whole is more than the sum of the parts. That could be what user\_kaka has in mind with *beradab politik*, creating a kind of politics that is civilized rather than waiting for individuals to come around to *adab* in their own behavior. It also seems more

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of this conception of individualism and social collectives, see Lars Udehn, “The Changing Face of Methodological Individualism,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 479-507, 487-90.

naturally suited to the generic use of *adab* as civilization, not just civilized-ness. The rhetorical use of *adab* in its collective sense does seem more natural match this more methodologically holist, or structuralist, perspective on the building blocks of civilization.

### ***Adab* as Mass Political Culture**

The discussion above provides an overview of how *adab* is used contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian political discourse. However, the generality of *adab* prevents us from outlining with any great detail what its usage entails, besides a series of tensions: Islamic and secular, individual and collective. For the remainder of this essay, I turn to consider what the invocation of this non-specific, frequently non-religious, often-collective concept of *adab* tells us about Indonesian and Malaysian and politics.

My claim is that the use of *adab* in contemporary discourse reveals something essential about Indonesian and Malaysian political culture. Specifically, it reveals that Indonesian and Malaysian understandings of politics at both the elite and mass level are characterized by a belief that normatively speaking, politics has an ethical foundation, and that contemporary politics in both countries is somehow at variance with that ethical foundation. Visions of how politics ought to be, therefore, invoke something more than policy change or institutional reform, they invoke a shift in mass political culture.

It bears emphasizing that there is nothing unique about the invocation of ethics as part of a rhetorical exercise in contemporary politics. Americans frequently make reference to something called “American values,” for example, which is similarly vague enough that just about any political actor may argue that his or her opponent fails to respect American values. In a very different way, French politicians and citizens alike

makes continual reference to republican values that are held to be not just foundational to but in fact constitutive of contemporary French politics. The “Asian values thesis” of Lee Kuan Yew and others holds that there are specifically Asian understandings of culture and ethics that undergird an Asian way of organizing a society.<sup>14</sup> That politicians and citizens alike in Indonesia and Malaysia have an analogous set of terms that admit a vague understanding of national political culture is itself hardly surprising.

The critical difference between the way that Indonesians and Malaysians use *adab* in Indonesia and Malaysia and the invocation of, for example, “American values” is that *adab* frequently suggests a progressive aspiration while “American values” recall an imaginary past. American values are supposed to already exist, even if Americans disagree about what they are. French republicanism has actual historical roots, as do the ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. “Asian values” are held to arise from Confucian or other sources. By contrast, *politik beradab* does not yet exist, and particularly in the secular formation, it never has. It is only in the mirrors-for-princes genre in Malay literature that one might locate a historical foundation for *adab* as political ethics. But such a reading has precious little currency in Malaysia, and none in Indonesia.

In this way, *adab* is used in a way that is different from concepts in Indonesian political culture such as *gotong royong*, a backwards projection of a cultural tradition held to have been foundational to the Indonesian people.<sup>15</sup> It is also different from the *Sumpah Pemuda*, a concrete expression of an ongoing political project that expresses a

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<sup>14</sup> For an important post-mortem on this Asian values debate, see Mark R. Thompson, “Whatever Happened to “Asian Values”?” *Journal of Democracy* 12 (2001): 154-65.

<sup>15</sup> See John R. Bowen, “On the Political Construction of Tradition: *Gotong Royong* in Indonesia,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 45 (1986): 545-61.

coherent ideology of the Indonesian state: one homeland, one nation, one language.<sup>16</sup> It is furthermore different from some articulations of the ethical foundations Malaysian politics such as 1Malaysia, which holds that Malaysia was founded on a set of values that Malaysians today ought to already possess, and which can be strengthened in the future.<sup>17</sup> There are exceptions, of course. These arise when *adab* is used in the strictly Islamic sense. For example, in discussions of Islam Hadhari or civilizational Islam, a concept frequently associated with Malaysia's former Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, we can find *adab* being invoked as a retrospective claim. Still, though, in this case the retrospection focuses not on values of Malaysians (or Malays), but values of Islam from the time of the Prophet.<sup>18</sup>

If we can generalize from the discussion above, the way that *adab* tends to be used in contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia suggests that there exists a *culture of political culture* in contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia. In the same way that

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<sup>16</sup> See Keith Foulcher, "Sumpah Pemuda: The Making and Meaning of a Symbol of Indonesian Nationhood," *Asian Studies Review* 24 (2000): 377-410. The *Sumpah Pemuda* in full reads as follows: *Kami Pemuda-Pemuda Indonesia dengan ini bersumpah bahwa:*

1. *Kami Putra-Putri Indonesia mengakui satu tanah air, tanah air Indonesia.*
2. *Kami putra-putri Indonesia mengakui satu bangsa bangsa Indonesia.*
3. *Kami putra-putri Indonesia mengakui satu bahasa, bahasa Indonesia.*

We, the youth of Indonesia, hereby pledge that:

1. We sons and daughters of Indonesia recognize one homeland, Indonesia.
2. We sons and daughters of Indonesia recognize one nation, the Indonesian nation.
3. We sons and daughters of Indonesia recognize one language, the Indonesian language.

<sup>17</sup> The official articulation of the 1Malaysia concept makes this point explicit: "These are the values that have been inculcated among Malaysians for many years. The concept should be stretched further for a more solid future. The values evolve around the *culture of excellence, perseverance, humility, acceptance, loyalty, meritocracy, education and integrity.*" See <http://www.1malaysia.com.my/en/the-story-of-1malaysia>. The Malay version of this website only finds the word *adab* employed twice, in describing the proper personal values for Malaysians as "*adab sopan*" (civilized and proper). See e.g. <http://www.1malaysia.com.my/affiliates/usaha-merakyatkan-perlembagaan-0>.

<sup>18</sup> Writes Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "Islam Hadhari was neither a new religion nor a new *mazhab* (denomination), but an effort to bring the Ummah (Islamic community) back to the fundamentals of the Quran and the Hadith – the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad—which formed the foundation of Islamic civilization." Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "Islam Hadhari: Abdullah's Vision for Malaysia," (RSIS Commentaries, No. 053, Nanyang Technological University, 2004). For a practical example of how *adab* appears in Islam Hadhari, see the website of the Institute for Islam Hadhari at the National University of Malaysia: <http://www.ukm.my/hadhari/>.

philosophers such as Adam Smith thought about the moral prerequisites of politics,<sup>19</sup> and in the same way that many social scientists study politics using terms like “civic culture,”<sup>20</sup> elites and mass publics alike in Indonesia and Malaysia speak and act as if they believe that their beliefs and ethics lie at the heart of why their countries are ruled the way that they are. This second-order political culture in Indonesia and Malaysia does not imply that all Indonesians and Malaysians agree on their values are or what they ought to be. Rather, it holds that the diagnosis for political problems of many forms in Indonesia and Malaysia is a failure of political culture, rather than a failure of law, policy, leadership, and/or imagination. For those who subscribe to Islam Hadhari, the solution is a return to the classical values of Islamic civilization. For others, it may something else altogether, perhaps unknown. The point is, if society itself is the source of political problems, then societal reform is the solution.

Where does this culture of political culture come from? It is beyond the scope of this essay to offer definitive conclusions, but this impulse in Indonesian and Malaysian politics has lineages at least back to the independence period. In the Indonesian case, for example, Darul Islam leader Kartosoewirjo wrote of the necessity of “freeing the mind” from colonialism.<sup>21</sup> The idea of a cultural and national “awakening” in which Indonesians sought to establish an Indonesian worldview has frequently been invoked in descriptions

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<sup>19</sup> For an overview of different Enlightenment perspectives on this question, see Ian Shapiro, *The Moral Foundations of Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> See Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1963); Ronald Inglehart, “The Renaissance of Political Culture,” *American Political Science Review* 82 (1988): 1203-30.

<sup>21</sup> I thank Chiara Formichi for suggesting this example. On Kartosoewirjo’s life and political thought, see Chiara Formichi, *Islam and the Making of the Nation: Kartosuwiryo and Political Islam in 20th Century Indonesia* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

of Indonesia's anti-colonial movements.<sup>22</sup> Exact parallels in the case of Malaysia are harder to find, however.

For an illustration of just what this kind of aspiration for a better kind of political culture means, we need look no further than Jokowi's presidency and his notion of a *Revolusi Mental* (*Mental Revolution*). According to the official government website of *Revolusi Mental*,<sup>23</sup>

*Revolusi Mental adalah gerakan seluruh rakyat Indonesia bersama Pemerintah untuk memperbaiki karakter bangsa menjadi Indonesia yang lebih baik. Banyak permasalahan yang terjadi di negara kita saat ini, mulai dari rakusnya pejabat yang memperkaya diri sendiri, pelanggaran HAM, hingga perilaku sehari-hari masyarakat seperti tidak mau antri dan kurang peduli terhadap hak orang lain. Namun, perilaku bisa diubah, mental dan karakter bisa dibangun. Karena itu Revolusi Mental bukanlah pilihan, tetapi suatu keharusan, agar bangsa kita bisa berdiri sejajar dengan bangsa-bangsa lain di dunia. Kita bisa membuat Indonesia menjadi lebih baik dengan memulai Revolusi Mental dari diri sendiri, sejak saat ini.*

*Revolusi Mental* is a movement of all Indonesians, together with the government, to improve the national character and create a better Indonesia. There are many problems today in Indonesia, from greedy officials who only enrich themselves, to human rights violations, down to everyday problems like people refusing to stand in line and not caring about the rights of others. However, behavior can be changed, and mentality and character can be developed. For this reason, *Revolusi Mental* is not a choice, it is a necessity, to ensure that the Indonesian nation can stand with other nations around the world. We can make a better Indonesia beginning with *Revolusi Mental*, starting with ourselves, right now.

For a further elaboration, consider the hand-written document entitled *Impian Indonesia 2015-2085* (*The Indonesian Dream, 2015-2085*) that circulated in late 2015.<sup>24</sup> Authored

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<sup>22</sup> See e.g. Ruth T. McVey, "Taman Siswa and the Indonesian National Awakening," *Indonesia* 4 (1967): 128-49.

<sup>23</sup> <http://revolusimental.go.id/>.

<sup>24</sup> "Jokowi's time capsule praised," *The Jakarta Post*, December 30, 2015, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/12/30/jokowi-s-time-capsule-praised.html>.

by Jokowi himself, it is a list of seven hopes and dreams, and expresses precisely the kind of aspirations for an ethical society that I have argued above are so typical of Indonesia (and Malaysia). Particularly revealing are items two and three:

2. *Masyarakat Indonesia yang menjunjung tinggi pluralisme, berbudaya, religius dan menjunjung tinggi nilai-nilai etika.*
3. *Indonesia menjadi pusat pendidikan, teknologi dan peradaban dunia.*

2. An Indonesian society that reveres pluralism, is cultured, religious, and reveres ethical values.
3. Indonesia is a center of education, technology, and global civilization

I note that *peradaban* here is simply the word for civilization, and its usage here contains no Islamic undertones. But more importantly, it is hard to imagine such a list of hopes and dreams being created by a sitting executive in most countries in the global North, and certainly not one that contains this particular set of hopes and dreams. Given the task of creating such a wish list, a politician like U.S. President Barack Obama would likely invoke notions of equality, or fairness, or opportunity, things that a government ought to provide, rather than that a society ought to be.<sup>25</sup>

Once again, I wish to emphasize there is nothing unique about political culture being so important to Indonesian and Malaysian politics. However, the culture of political culture described above is probably not a general feature of all modern states and societies. And does have some interesting features, which may be politically consequential for Indonesian and Malaysian politics.

The first feature to note is that when articulated an aspiration rather than a tradition, *adab* is fundamentally progressive in nature. The orientation towards a more ethical kind of politics conjures an image of a body politic that is still developing,

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<sup>25</sup> For such language from Obama, we can consult “Obama's November 7, 2007, speech on the ‘American Dream’,” <http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/12/21/obama.trans.americandream/>.

especially when paired with the belief that political culture itself is responsible for the current state of politics in Indonesia and Malaysia. *Politik beradab* is, in principle, something that can be achieved. Two caveats are in order to this progressive view, though. The first is that individualist, and especially religious, invocations of *adab* may not be progressive at all. Islam Hadhari, for example, strives to be a progressive vision for Islam in Malaysia, but other invocations of past traditions may be anti-progressive, as would a strong reading of the Minangkabau text cited above on how people ought to engage with politicians and administrators. The second caveat is that a progressive vision for a civilized politics is not necessarily an emancipatory vision. Because *adab* is so general, it is also open to interpretation, and to authoritative statements of what is and is not *adab*. I return to this point below.

A second notable feature of *adab* as used in contemporary political discourse is that the conception of political culture that it invokes is not merely descriptive, it is also causal. A *politik beradab* would not just reflect a different kind of ethical values, but foreshadow a different kind of political process as a result; *beradab politik* is explicitly an effort to change politics. An alternative view, one common among those political scientists who tend to be skeptical of political culture as a causal explanation, is that political culture is instead the observable manifestation of political behavior and discourse, something that describes politics but does not drive it.<sup>26</sup> If culture is causal, not merely descriptive, then changing culture is a way to change politics. If culture is not causal, then changing politics requires changing something else. For political scientists, the challenge is to distinguish between actors' preferences and their actions, recognizing

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<sup>26</sup> One useful summary the skeptics' critiques of political culture is John S. Duffield, "Political Culture and State Behavior: Why Germany Confounds Neorealism," *International Organization* 53 (1999): 765-803, 772-74.

that even if political culture does explain behavior in a causal sense, culture may be invoked strategically or purposively nevertheless.<sup>27</sup> Scholars of *adab* might learn from this view that the very flexibility of the concept suggests that its use in any specific circumstance is likely to be strategic in nature. However, as I have suggested above, the general tendency to use *adab* and what it applies about political culture reflects a shared assumption that political culture *is* causal. One possibility, beyond the scope of this essay, is that the invocation of *adab* is a way to distract mass publics from other, perhaps more concrete problems that have more concrete—if contentious—solutions. Instead of demanding that legal systems prosecute corrupt politicians, mass publics dream of a more ethical and civilized national society in which corrupt politicians do not exist.

A final critical feature of *adab* is that because this concept is at once vague and general but normative and progressive, *adab* may be martialled for exclusionary purposes as well. For an example, I turn to contemporary Malaysian politics.<sup>28</sup>

*Pemuda Umno mengecam tindakan Penasihat DAP, Lim Kit Siang kerana menyanggah pelaksanaan hudud dan pada masa sama dilihat cuba mengajar rakyat Kelantan berhubung hukum itu dalam ceramah yang berlangsung Ahad lalu.*

*Exco Pemuda Umno, Nazir Hussin Akhtar Hussin mendakwa, perbuatan Kit Siang itu jelas menunjukkan beliau sebenarnya seorang yang biadab dan tidak tahu adab.*

*"Kit Siang bukan individu yang layak untuk memperkatakan tentang undang-undang Islam, apatah [sic] lagi mengajar masyarakat perkara berkaitan hudud.*

UMNO Youth is criticizing the actions of DAP Adviser Lim Kit Siang because he opposes the implementation of *hudud* and at the same time is seen as trying to instruct the Kelantanese people about this law in a *ceramah* last Sunday.

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<sup>27</sup> David S. Laitin, "Political Culture and Political Preferences," *American Political Science Review* 82 (1988): 589-97.

<sup>28</sup> "Kit Siang tiada adab, tak layak pertikai hudud," *Sinar Harian*, May 15, 1015, <http://www.sinarharian.com.my/politik/kit-siang-tiada-adab-tak-layak-pertikai-hudud-1.390229>.

UMNO Youth Exco Nazir Hussin Akhtar Hussin charges that Kit Siang's action shows clearly that he is actually an uncivilized person who does not know manners.

"Kit Siang is not someone for whom it is appropriate to talk about Islamic law, much less instruct the people about *hudud* matters."

We see here *adab* used in its individual sense, as an indictment of the behavior of an individual in a political setting. It is also clearly being invoked in an Islamic context, with the implication that because Kit Siang is not a Muslim, he has no standing to comment on Islamic affairs. His insistence on doing so is what demonstrates his lack of *adab*. The apparent contradiction here is that *adab* is used in an Islamic context to indict a non-Muslim for not having proper manners in matters dealing with Islam.<sup>29</sup>

### **Concluding Thoughts**

My reflections on the use of *adab* in Indonesian and Malaysian politics and political discourse are not designed to explain "what *adab* really means" or how it ought to be applied for contemporary politics. Its varied and frequently vague use reflects the different ways in which it has come into the lexicon in Indonesian and Malay, as an ordinary word for manners, as an Islamic word invoking religiously sanctioned practices, as claim about what constitutes the essence of a people, as a desire for a better society.

My interest, instead, is in trying to draw some conclusions about what the use of *adab* in politics says about the people who use it. The core argument is that it reveals something

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<sup>29</sup> This passage also contains the interesting word *biadab*. Most Indonesian and Malay translations give a meaning for *biadab* that is equivalent to uncivil or unmannered, but *biadab* is also used to describe actions such as rape or murder that are best translated as barbarous or savage. For examples and discussions, see James T. Siegel, "Thoughts on the Violence of May 13 and 14, 1998, in Jakarta," in *Violence and the State in Suharto's Indonesia*, ed. Benedict R. O'G. Anderson (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Publications, 2000), 108-09; Benedict Anderson, "How Did the Generals Die?," *Indonesia* 43 (1987): 109-34, 110. An example using *biadab* in contemporary Malay is Md Shukri Shuib, "UMNO, PAS mesti bersatu demi Islam," *Berita Harian*, September 24, 2012, which describes the controversial anti-Muslim film *Innocence of Muslims* as *biadab* and urges unity between the Islamist opposition party PAS and the ruling Malay party UMNO for the sake of defending Islam.

about political culture—not any specific content to any specific culture, but a widely shared cultural assumption in Indonesia and Malaysia that political culture matters. I hesitate to draw parallels with how *adab* and terms like it inform our understanding of political culture outside of these two countries, but Indonesia and Malaysia are probably not unique. Nor, probably, is the cultural belief that political culture explains politics.

It is in thinking through the implications of a culture of political culture that we can discern some of the interesting features of Indonesian and Malaysian politics. These include both a tendency to diagnose political problems as emerging from society rather than from politicians or institutions, and a willingness to anticipate a political future characterized by a more civilized form of politics from which other popular or societal benefits may follow. An approach to politics in either country that comes from either a scriptural/theological perspective or from a mainstream political science perspective would probably miss such features of Indonesian and Malaysian mass politics. A fruitful direction for further exploration would be to consider how a culture of political culture emerges from or interacts with other strands of political culture in the two countries, in particular with Javanese understandings of power and ethics in Indonesia<sup>30</sup> and the resurgence of Islam in Malaysian politics.

There is a risk in overemphasizing the extent to which a culture of political culture pervades Indonesian and Malaysian political life. There are many Indonesians and Malaysians who pursue a kind of politics that implicitly rejects the conclusion that political culture drives politics and hence political reform requires some change to mass culture. For them, the task for reform is not changing Indonesians and Malaysians, but

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<sup>30</sup> See Benedict Anderson, “The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture,” in *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. Claire Holt (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972); Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Etika Jawa: Sebuah Analisa Falsafi Tentang Kebijakan dan Hidup Jawa* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1985).

instead enforcing good laws, changing bad laws, reforming institutions, voting for politicians who make good policies. One of the pernicious effects of *adab*-minded political discourse, as the case of Kit Siang and *hudud* in Malaysia illustrates, is that it threatens to disempower such a politics by appealing to the propriety of politics itself.