

Civil Society and the Guardian of Multiculturalism: Understanding Banser's Role in the 'Swadaya' Society

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Keywords: Banser, civil society, swadaya, multiculturalism, minority groups.

Abstract: The element of civil society in Indonesian social and political structure has distinct features compared to Western experience. Since non-state agents have played a significant role in forging the direction of democratic and multicultural system, social and political actions of mass organizations and their supporting units, it shows important contributions of the efforts of guarding multicultural society. This study examines the social and political role of Banser (Barisan Ansor Serbaguna/Ansor Multipurpose Unit) in the maintenance of multiculturalism and protection of religious minority groups from any disturbance of intolerant groups. This study attempts to capture the ideas and practices of Banser agents in the changing Indonesian social and political constellation in the post-New Order regime, particularly its role in escorting Christian churches during Christmas celebrations and other holy days. Instead of being trained with military skills and weapons, this security unit of Nahdlatul Ulama who relies on the traditional technique of self-defense in the world of *pesantren* and having a relax style of securing events and places. This study emphasizes on the quest of original concept and practice concerning the imagined duty of security by civilian under the idea of 'swadaya' and 'gotong-royong' which has a deep root among Indonesian society.

1 INTRODUCTION

The new democratic system adopted by various countries indicates a different pattern of implementation. The modern ideas, values, and practices have challenged the old social and cultural system under the contested and negotiated pattern of dialectic. The interplay of traditional and modern mindset among social and political actors has lasted in various forms. (Inglehart, R and Welzel, C. 2005) The relations between the state and civil society in the wax and wane pattern of Indonesian political atmosphere has fostered elements of civilian groups who have a concern in participating in the security issue. One of popular elements is the Banser (Barisan Ansor Serbaguna/ Ansor Multipurpose Unit) who becomes an interesting manifestation of the traditional force of Muslim organization in taking part of securing religious events and also guarding churches in the post-Suharto era. This research

focuses on three aspects: (1). Examining the role of Banser of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in maintaining multiculturalism, (2) capturing relations between state and civil society in Indonesia's modern nation-state (3) explicating the complexity of the traditional and modern structure of Indonesian society dealing with civilian participation in the security system. These interrelated aspects become important guideline of discussion.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of Banser as a peace keeping force for minority groups has not been conducted yet by scholars of social and political sciences. Most of them focused on Banser's role dealing with violence on the eradication of Indonesian communist (G30SPKI) movement in 1960s and other Banser's role in an inhumane impression. One of scholars who critically

studied on Banser is Ihsan Ali-Fauzi (2008) in his article Religion, Politics and Violence in Indonesia: Learning From Banser's Experience' (Fauzi, 2008). By means of historical approach, he constructed the history of Banser as the paramilitary group using violence under the control of religious and political elite of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Fauzi ignored the role of Banser in the post Gus Dur's leadership which has seriously taken part in securing churches and having commitment to maintain multiculturalism. In the social and political movement of anti-communist killings, most researchers also do not pay attention to the political context and the serious efforts of *nahdliyyin* (NU people) to rehabilitate communist people regardless the stigma which is still attached to them.

Another research which pertains the role of Banser in the violence of anti-communist conducted by Hermawan Sulisty, *Palu Arit di Ladang Tebu* (History of forgotten mass-killings 1965-1966). (Sulisty, 2000) Although it does not specifically discuss the existence of Banser, the argument of Sulisty has similar standing point with other scholars who put Banser as one of important elements in the 1960s anti-communist killings. This historical study has thoroughly identified the role of Banser in the dark history of Indonesia political transition from the Old to New Order regime. However, it has a significant weakness particularly on the ignorance of changing ethos of Banser in the post-Gus Dur era.

The comprehensive research on Banser, fortunately, has been conducted by Hairus Salim under the title: '*Kelompok Paramiliter NU (Paramilitary group of NU)*' (Salim, 2004). By means of ethnographic method, Salim successfully describes the continuity and change of Banser in the changing social and political constellation. By the concept of 'memory' and 'imagination', Salim put Banser as organisation which perceives the importance of paramilitary group in the NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) organisation and pesantren to maintain their interest and purpose supported by selected, young, strong and militant actors. Although he does not sufficiently elaborate the concept of paramilitary, this research is important to reveal the formation period of Banser, its ideology, spirit of militerism and its complexity. The shifting paradigm of Banser has been captured eloquently in the research by his finding on the changing pattern of Banser's role from guarding the NU people to guarding Indonesia.

Research on similar security unit has been conducted by David Brown and Ian Wilson under the title '*Ethnicized Violence in Indonesia: The Betawi Brotherhood Forum in Jakarta,*' (Brown and Wilson, 2007). By focusing the case of Forum Betawi Rempug (FBR, The Betawi Brotherhood Forum), Brown and Wilson analyze how ethnic group in

Jakarta taking part in the local security issue which inclines to involve tension between conceptualization of violence as rational-individual interest and irrational fanaticism from anomic communities. Unlike the role of Banser who has serious concern on guarding minority groups, the FBR members tend to involve in the preman activism, security service and having role as the state proxy. However, this research is important to identify civil society groups which participate in the security issues and their relation to the state.

This research attempts to criticize the previous researches which describe Banser with the concept of paramilitary and violence which is attached to Banser. John Andrade, for example, argues that the concept of paramilitary is associated with military capability regardless it is a branch of an armed service or not (Andrade, 1985). By this concept, it is difficult to associate Banser with military capability while the security unit is only trained with traditional self-defense of pencak silat or kanuragan without armed by modern weapons. Instead of constructing Banser as the pro-violence unit, this study investigates the bright side of the unit as the peace keeping force which has important role in securing social and religious events, particularly worship places of minority groups.

3 THE BANSER AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

Started from Boy Scouts Division, Banser is initially erected in 1937 in the second congress of Ansor Nahdlatul Ulama (ANU) which is later known as Gerakan Pemuda Ansor (Ansor Youth Movement). Its name has changed from BANU (Barisan Ansor Nahdlatul Ulama, Ansor Unit of Nahdlatul Ulama) to Banser (Barisan Ansor Serbaguna, Ansor Multipurpose Unit) following the changing social and political constellation. (S., *Kelompok paramiliter NU*, 2004) The current uniform and function which resembles military in securing social and religious events can deceive people who do not know of Indonesian mass organizations to assume such uniformed civilian as the special force of government. They were often seen guarding the pengajian (religious gathering), cultural performances and churches. (S., *Kelompok paramiliter NU*, 2004) Instead of expressing military ethos with strict discipline and special skill, they tend to escort kyais, managing traffic and parking lot casually.

The current fact of Banser outnumbering Indonesia's military and national police reflects civil society force emulating state's apparatus which has

authority to overcome security issues. According to the chief of Ansor Youth Movement, Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, Banser has 5 million members throughout Indonesia, (Lobubun, 2017) while the national army is 600,000 and national police is 430,000 members. (Jaya, 2016) However, Banser is not facilitated with weapon and security equipment as military and police. They are merely trained with marching, saluting, security technique and traditional martial arts which are known as pencak silat or kanuragan skill. (S., Kelompok paramiliter NU, 2004) Some people are believed having a technique of skill of invulnerable from a sharp weapon. Those traditional skills certainly cannot be compared with modern and sophisticated military and police unit in handling social disorder.

Some anecdotes on Banser can describe how this youth is not as violent and strict as the concept of paramilitary by some scholars. (Sulistyo, 2000) Instead, Banser undertakes their duties based on the principle of obedience to kyais and responsibility to the community under voluntarism and relaxing ways. It has been known among nahdliyyin how Banser dedicates their life to support the community regarding security. However, it is funny that a member of Banser reported to local police for his stolen pocket. In a police station, he came and reported that last night his pocket was stolen when he was escorting the cultural performance. The police certainly can not hold his laughter. (Al-Zastrouw, 2017) Another story also shows how fluid Banser is. In the wedding party which stages dangdut (popular music and dance), Banser was frequently seen to be involved in the music performance and intermittently taking part in dancing with the crowd. (S. H. S., 2004)

The important change happened to Banser in conjunction with the wave of change of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) elite's perspective to the social and political realities. While the NU's inclination was conservative and inclined to be an exclusive community, Banser and its organizational platform tended to focus on the NU's events and gatherings. However, since Abdurrahman Wahid's thoughts have influenced the nahdliyyin people, the policy of Banser is no longer exclusively securing their community, but also concern on other communities. In its development, Banser did not only escorting the pengajian and kyai but also helping to secure cultural performance, social or interpersonal conflict and later on churches. According to Hairus Salim, Banser's concern has expanded from guarding the NU to guarding Indonesia. (S. H. S., Kelompok paramiliter NU, 2004)

Criticism to Banser in handling provocative and radical preachers has emerged in the last few years, particularly since the growing puritan groups and pro-khilafah factions. The emergence of Muslim preachers who condemn cultural practices of traditional Muslims has disturbed the pillar of their religious framework. Some preachers even took part in the campaign for *khilafah* system which contravenes the commitment of Indonesian Muslims to the Pancasila state beyond the exclusive theocratic system. Banser's role in the intervention of religious forum delivered by Khalid Basalamah (04/03/2017), for example, has been a criticism of intolerant approach to different opinion and distinct group. In fact, according to Rizza Ali Faizin (local leader of Ansor), Banser did not stop the religious forum which was held by puritan Muslim community. They merely conveyed the rejection to the potential hate speech of the preacher who habitually delivers a hate speech and provocative contents. The *pengajian* remained, but the preacher was replaced by the more moderate figure. (Nuonline, 2017)

The current dilemma of Banser to be a peace keeping force or conflict trigger seemingly become a difficult option in the more democratic atmosphere and the war of radicalism (idea of khilafah state) at the same time. It is obvious that commitment of Banser to protect minority groups and maintain diversity as the credo of Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (unity in diversity), however, their position in the field should consider the limit of intervention and control of the situation. It is certainly not easy to maintain peace and prevent conflict, but in the democratic system which dignifies the rule of law, Banser agents should understand the rule of the game. It is important to stay in moderate way and apply anti-violence concept by prioritizing dialogue and persuasive approaches.

4 THE GUARDIAN OF MULTICULTURALISM

The most heroic incident of Banser's role in maintaining multiculturalism can be referred to Riyanto's sacrifice when he tried to save congregation of a Javanese church from a bomb explosion in Mojokerto, East Java. It was started when Riyanto was participating to escorting Ebeneheizer's church in the Christmas Eve of 24 December 2000. The 25 year old member of Banser found a black plastic bag under the bench of the church which was cover of a bomb. He held the bomb

and took away quickly from the church to prevent the explosion from impinging the congregation. Unfortunately, it was exploded before it was tamed by disposal unit. His body was torn apart, and he died suddenly. (Pos, 2017) To document and memorize this epic story, it has been filmed in 2011 by a prominent director, Hanung Brahmantyo, under the title 'Tanda Tanya' (Question Mark). (Tempo.co, 2011)

The chairperson of GP Ansor argued that "For us, Riyanto is a hero for humanity. To save many people, he sincerely sacrificed his life without considering the religious background. This action suits our faith as conveyed by Ali bin Abi Thalib that those who are not your brother in faith is your brother in humanity." Still, according to Qoumas, Banser is ready to guard the celebration of holy days of other religions including Buddha and Hindu. "For Banser, there is no Indonesia without diversity of religions. All citizens who embrace Islam, Christian, Hindu, and Budha, have taken an important part in fighting for Indonesia Independence. That is why there should be no any group can disturb people who undertake his/her religious rituals. Muslim has obligatory to protect those who are small in number (minority). However, the Banser cannot do this forever. We will stop guarding churches and temple until the threat has gone," said Qoumas. (Indonesia, 2017)

Although there are some security units in other mass organizations, it seems that Banser who has serious concern on maintaining multiculturalism. Many scholars use the concept of paramilitary to describe the security units or squad who have similar performance with Banser. Under the New Order regime, for example, there are two paramilitaries which were used by the ruling regime, such as Pemuda Pancasila and Pemuda Pancamarga. As they were recruited from gangs and the street criminal of preman (thugs), these groups tend to use physical, psychological intimidation to execute various kinds of the ruling regime policy. (Wilson, 2006) Ethnic-based paramilitary of Forum Betawi Rempug (FBR, Forum for Betawi Solidarity) also tends to show a similar role with the two security units. (Brown & Wilson, 2007) Militant Islamist groups even incline to record notorious reputations such as raiding cafes, discotheques, casinos, brothels and also worship places. (Hasan, 2008)

The idea of maintaining non-Muslim worship places for Banser, interestingly, has been started since the idea of multiculturalism of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) promulgated and serious threat to churches escalated in the 2000s. It is well-known that Abdurrahman Wahid has progressive, humanist and

cosmopolitan ideas since his activism in NGO, being the chairperson of Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU) and Indonesian president until his decent of presidential position. Believing the importance of guarantee of freedom of religion and freedom of thinking, Gus Dur seriously fights for the two basic of human rights under the principle of democratic society. (Arif, 2013) At the level of practice, Gus Dur also showed his advocacy to minority groups whose existence often being threatened by more powerful groups. According to Greg Barton, Abdurrahmad Wahid soundly interpreted Pancasila into enlightening values such as democracy, accountable governance and protection to freedom of belief for the individual. (Burton, 2013) Once a member of Banser doubted his duty to secure the church, Gus Dur convinced him with an awe-inspiring word. "If there is still doubt in your heart to guard the church, consider that what you guard is not a church, but Indonesia. At least, consider that you guard your city. You guard your hometown. Imagine if anything happened to your hometown, it must take effect to you, said Gus Dur. (NU Online, 2017)

5 STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

In the national constitution, the participation of the citizen in maintaining security is guaranteed as the supporting pillar beyond the main force of Indonesia National Military (TNI) and State Police of Republic Indonesia (Polri). It is stipulated in the article 30 of the 1945 Constitution that every citizen has right and obliges to take part in the defense and security of the nation. It is further explained that the implementation is undertaken through what is technically known as the Sishankamrata (Sistem Pertahanan dan Keamanan Rakyat Semesta/Defense and Security System of Whole Citizen) where Indonesia National Military (TNI) and State Police of Republic Indonesia (Polri) as the backbone of defense and security system, while citizen is expected to take part as the proponent. (National Constitution 1945, 1945) Participation of citizen in maintaining security can be referred to the concept of Siskamling (Sistem Keamanan Lingkungan/ Neighborhood Security System) which relies on the people participation to guard their circumstance from any disturbance. (Sistem Keamanan Lingkungan, 2007) It is known as the swakarsa-based system of security or the grass-root-based idea of the security system.

The fact that Indonesia has a large territory and huge population, but limited resources of security apparatus, the function of security services has been frequently strengthened and even taken over by

society. In many churches which frequently encounter threats from unknown people, the police are usually prepared to escort the neighborhood of church and accompanied by the Banser. After the bombing of churches in Surabaya in the middle of May 2018, for example, the East Java Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (PWNU) encouraged Police to enhance security in every church of East Java which will be backed-up by Banser. (Liputan6.com, 2018) However, on certain occasion Banser took over the responsibility of securing events replacing the position of official apparatus. The police have once come to pick up the envelope (with money inside) and then gone immediately. There is the impression to some extent that police is less influential than Banser in maintaining security. (S. H. S., Kelompok paramiliter NU, 2004)

The strengthening role of Banser in securing churches shows people rather than state apparatus have trusted its reputation. At this point, civil society has emulated state apparatus regarding a commitment to maintain multiculturalism in the Pancasila-based state. The trust granted by society would be an important social capital to encourage and ensure the principle of mutual respect among different citizens. Moreover, the reputation of NU and its agents in advocating multiculturalism and multiculturalism has been acknowledged in the last few decades. In the framework of democratization, NU has shown serious support to social inclusion of minority groups either based on ethnic, religion and gender. (Mathema, 2015)

Nevertheless, the Banser's role in securing places and events has been recently criticized by certain groups who perceive the youth organization has emulated their duty and broken the Indonesian law on the freedom of speech. The ban of religious gathering (*pengajian*) which invites a puritan preacher, Khalid Basalamah, in Sidoarjo (East Java), radical preacher, Felix Siau, in Bangil (East Java), and political gathering in Surabaya which is known as #2019gantipresiden (get rid of the president movement) are some current examples of how Banser has been assumed as the "troublemaker" of people's religious and political gathering. Mahfud MD, for example, argues that it is not allowed for a mass organization to preclude or dismiss events or religious gatherings. "Please respect the law," said the senior lawyer. (mohmahfudmd, 2018) However, according to the NU's secretary general, Yahya Cholil Staquf, what NU's agents do is anticipating any harmful effect to the nation. "We must fight them before they cause more damage. We will fight this to the end," said him convincingly. (The Strait Times, 2017)

According to human right activist, Ahmad Suaedy, the inclination of Banser as security unit has significant difference in the post Gus Dur era. The

Gus Dur's non-violence ideology has inspired them as peace keeper rather than law breaker like the FPI (Front Pembela Islam/Islamic Defender Front) and other hardliner groups. Even in the efforts to secure the provocative preachers who instigated social restlessness and radical views, Banser tend to report and brought state apparatus to overcome the situation rather than taking action. "In other words, there has been a shifting paradigm of Banser role before and after Gus Dur's era," said Suaedy. (Suaedy, 2018)

6 SWADAYA SOCIETY

Characteristic of Indonesian society who inclines to mutual help in many aspects of life has been manifested through the concept of *gotong royong*. This concept has been practiced by many ethnic of culture throughout the archipelago of Nusantara which relies on the collective support and the principle of social solidarity to achieve certain goals. As part of the traditional ethos of villagers, the *gotong royong* becomes a basis of social, economic and political activities, either in the agriculture or coastal communities. (Suseno, 1996) In Javanese culture, it has been known as "*rukun*" which is the implementation of one of the important values for Javanese people to help each other and to build harmony with their neighborhood. (Kartodirdjo, 1980) The main feature of this concept is based on the primordial bond such as family, geographical proximity and religious bond. It comprises various kind of works depending on the habit of people encompassing domestic, formal or collective works, religious ritual, wedding, and death ceremony and many kinds of works. (Kartodirdjo, 1980)

The *gotong royong* has been practiced by Indonesian people which is handed down from one generation to the next generation. It is arisen from the awareness and spirit to do collective works without considering or prioritizing personal benefit, except for the public good. The *gotong royong* is commonly based on various principle such as sincerity, voluntarism, solidarity, tolerance and trust. Since it has been practiced among many ethnic for a long period of time, it is later on claimed by scholars as the original culture of Indonesian people. (Effendi, 2013) At the same time, it is also claimed by the Indonesian founding father as the basis of all principle of Pancasila (Five Principle of State Ideology) comprising divinity, internationalism, unity, democracy and welfare. (Latif, 2011)

Social participation in the *gotong royong* value idealizes the ability and awareness of citizen to fulfill their needs based on the self-reliance and self-responsibility either for short or long term of

achievement which is conceptualized by people with the *swadaya* (self-fulfillment) society. The sense of belonging and sense of responsibility of the citizen in the *swadaya* society certainly does not repudiate the initiative of government (state) to support the idea or program of the citizen. The relation between citizen and state, in this case, tends to be fluid and, to a certain extent, glorifies an autonomous position of people. The limit of government often creates an initiative of the citizen to overcome their social and economic problems such as garbage management, fire brigade, health services, religious celebration, and security management. The community participation of citizen to provide firefighters in Banjarmasin (Lestari, Pramono, & Tirton, 2017) and involvement of South Lampung people in maintaining security through the Siskamling (Sistem Keamanan Lingkungan/Neighborhood Security System) (Setiawan, 2017) are some relevant examples.

The existence of Banser in the NU organization can be put as the self-reliance and self-responsibility of the big community who has serious vision and platform to protect minority groups from any threat and terror. Although the official apparatus in securing churches have been intensely involved, the second track guardian which is played by Banser becomes an important part of social participation in the national system of Hankamrata (total people of defense and security). It is impossible for the NU community to entirely rely on the security issues to the state, while relations between NU and the state has lasted in the dynamic situations where it can be a good partner or opponent some other time. Moreover, the great potency of NU with a vast network and human resources throughout Indonesia can be used to achieve many purposes, including security management. It can be a real manifestation of NU's responsibility not only to protect and defend themselves from any disturbance but also benefit for humanity.

The nature of membership, recruitment and assignment of Banser which is based on sincerity and voluntary principles become the important aspects in the social organisation. In particular, the concept of *ikhlas* (sincerity) still dominate the framework of Banser as the practice of *santri* (student in pesantren) in undertaking their duties. Regardless the rate of payment, Banser with or without the escort of police secures churches and *pengajian* (religious forum) in special days. One of Banser's member admits that he does not expect "fee" if the instruction is given by *kyai* (cleric). Even he has to pay the cost of public transportation from his own pocket. However, for the non-NU held events, he often gets "tips" or "*uang trasport*" (fee for transportation) although it is still under the standard payment of security duty. (Salim,

2004) It is different with the nature of paramilitary groups which require certain standards and characters, such as rate of payment, compulsory basis and relatively tight discipline. (Andrade, 1985)

7 CONCLUSION

In the *swadaya* society which idealizes the ability and awareness of citizen to fulfill their needs based on the self-reliance and self-responsibility, the existence of Banser in securing religious rituals of minority groups reflects an important role of the youth organization of NU community in maintaining diversity and coexistence. While some scholars described the Banser with the paramilitary ethos and violent inclination, the track record of Banser in the post-New Order regime shows inclusive and protective ethos not only to their community but also to another element of the nation. The existence of NU's elite, particularly Abdurrahman Wahid, has played a significant role in changing the face and performance of Banser as security unit in the NU organization and important element of civil society. Although Banser has a relaxed style in managing security, their commitment to guard churches has been acknowledged by society, particularly referring to the sacrifice of Riyanto in saving congregation of Ebenheizer in Mojokerto, East Java. However, criticism to Banser in handling current situation frequently presents a dual face of youth organisation. On the one hand, it has a peaceful and responsible face of traditional agents in guarding the nation, but it has also prompted a conflict with other groups which disagree with the intervention and imagined as the "police actions". In other words, the non-violence approaches which have been taught by Gus Dur should be a credo for Banser to dedicate their life for peace and humanity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Author I am grateful to all colleagues of Graduate Program of UNUSIA Jakarta who support this research. I also thank civitas academics of the Faculty of Social and Politics (FISIP) UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta who has facilitated and encouraged me to complete this research. May Allah swt awards those people with great virtue and blessing with a more noble reward.

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