In the 1970s, Indonesia’s Ministry of Religious Affairs announced that more post-graduate students of Islam were to be sent for post-graduate study to western universities, as opposed to the centres of Islamic learning such as Egypt’s Al-Azhar. The motivation behind this was to create Muslim graduates with ‘modern and critical attitudes’. The paper reflects on this decision, drawing on discussions with graduates about their study trajectories, and also on our reading of the (currently flourishing) genre of ‘Islamic study-travel literature’.

The Minister’s decision was a salient moment in the process whereby Indonesia’s Muslim sphere acquired the categories of public and counter-public. Graduates of western universities return, we find, prepared with ‘modern, critical attitudes’ shaped in high quality research centres dedicated to enhancing the individual’s potential as researcher. The paradigmatic career path for such graduates is that of researcher (university, survey company). Al-Azhar graduates return with the goal of giving service in the routines of everyday Islamic practice. The paradigmatic career path is preacher (Middle-East graduates far exceed western graduates in the ranks of successful preachers). The minister’s decision is useful, we argue, for understanding how the former religious subjectivity (‘modern and critical’) came to acquire such public approval, while the latter is frequently represented as retrograde and even subversive.

There is a substantial critique of the policy turn under examination here, produced through critical writings by academics affiliated with the Nahdlatul Ulama. Reflecting on the tension between the religious concepts preserved within NU settings and the purified notions of subjectivity shared by the state and Islamic modernists, NU scholars have been sensitive to the cultural specificity of the subjectivity the Minister was trying to create with this decision. For some NU thinkers, their rejection of the supremacy of the ‘modern and critical subject’ was sufficient reason to argue that religion should not become a normative basis of political participation in the Indonesian state.

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