


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Style on Trial: The Gendered Aesthetics of Appearance, Corruption, and Piety in Indonesia

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## Abstract

In the two decades since the end of Suharto regime in Indonesia, two apparently distinct public industries have emerged in tandem: gendered forms of religious style, glossed as modest fashion, and legal efforts to hold citizens accountable for theft, glossed as corruption. Many of the most high-profile anti-corruption cases in the past decade have brought these two fields into semiotic interaction, as female defendants increasingly deploy forms of facial cover associated with extreme religious piety to signal humility and shame when appearing in court, in the process complicating the relationship between religious semiotics and criminality. Analyzing how and why these two genres of political communication have intersected in the past decade, and to what effects, requires situating these shifts in the context of dense aesthetic archives in which the spectacularity inherent to fashion resonates with the unique impulses of a post-authoritarian political landscape in which uncovering secrets is especially alluring. I argue that the hermeneutic impulses motivating popular fascination with criminal style, often circulated via social media, open new analyses of the ethical relationship between beauty and justice. Building on the scholarship on transparency and on the human face, I argue that putting gendered religious style at the center of the analytical frame—from religious self-fashioning to court appearances, and as forms of political protest—reveals the ethical impulses behind seeing and being seen, and the faciality of scandal.

**Keywords:** corruption; fashion; face; gender; Indonesia; activism; semiotics; aesthetics; piety; appearance

On 22 August 2017, one of the highest-profile criminal indictments in recent Indonesian history was issued, involving a fashion designer, Anniesa Hasibuan. Together with her husband and her sister, she appeared on national news that day as a disgraced international figure who only months earlier had represented Indonesia with two widely lauded modest fashion collections shown in New York Fashion Week. Modest fashion—the genre of covered, stylish women’s wear typically associated with Muslim dress codes—was a rare genre for the Fashion Week, and the global media had celebrated her collections as proof that the fashion world was increasingly inclusive. However, as the indictments and following convictions made

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clear, Hasibuan's fashion business had been fraudulently funded by a parallel travel agency offering underpriced and undelivered *umroh* (lesser hajj) packages. The agency, First Travel, had funneled funds from sixty-three thousand customers, most of whom have yet to receive restitution, a loss amounting to US\$69 million. Strikingly, when the accused appeared at that first public hearing, they were presented to the public in a particular tableau. They were surrounded by boxes filled with evidence of their crimes: crystal adorned sunglasses, luxury handbags, and the passports of pilgrims who had never embarked on their trips. They also wore state-mandated clothing intended to signify criminality. For the two women, those signs involved not only the secular semiotics of crime—orange jumpsuits—but also face veils, which the press described as hiding their shameful tears.

The case proceeded for seven months, generating high media visibility even as both women were often hidden from public view. That visibility was due less to the total financial losses involved, although they were substantial, than to the fact that it was attuned with a popular perception in Indonesia that corruption is ubiquitous and criminality is hard to identify. "Corruption" in Indonesia refers to globally familiar violations, including loss of public or private funds, secrecy, later revelation in the media or the courts, and little in the way of restitution to those harmed. The First Travel case was captivating because it brought crime and style into the same popular analytic frame. Representations of corruption and punishment are often served in civic and aesthetic form in Indonesia, inviting the public to participate in the application of justice through scrutinizing and deciphering cues circulated via mass and social media. As a result, along with their juridical features, cases of corruption and fraud rely on aesthetic resonances as much as ethical ones, which are foundational to the way that Indonesians have come to recognize criminality and to experience justice in a politically vibrant post-authoritarian context. Detecting these aesthetic resonances requires being alert to signs of deceit in places where one might not expect them, including the most universal yet mysterious of zones, the human face.

In what follows, I argue that ethical evaluations of public life in contemporary Indonesia rest on lively, ongoing, dense aesthetic archives that have created a new focus on the female face, even, or especially, when it is covered. I contend that the political work of transparency undertaken by unveiling secrets also relies on acts of "facialization" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 170), in which faces are interpreted in a system of signs that make the category of woman unusually visible and which amplify demands that women be perpetually ready to be seen, especially on social media. Karen Strassler has described the longstanding fascination with the human face in Indonesian political style as a vibrant feature of the hyper-hermeneutic character of Indonesian political communication (2020). In dialogue with this, religious appearances articulate moral concepts about relationality and sociality, a theme that increasingly emerges in Indonesian conversations about greed, theft, and inequality. Putting gendered religious style—from religious self-fashioning to court appearances, and as forms of political protest—at the center of analysis reveals the ethical impulses behind seeing and being seen, the active ways in which Indonesian women navigate both, and the role of the face in scandal itself.

Despite popular fascination with corruption, Indonesia's democratic condition is not exceptionally crippled or ineffective. Yet given the semiotic capacities that style can activate, spectacularity has become a mode for evaluating ethical sociality. A common feature of the performance of legal transparency and the application of justice has been interpolated through signs of feminine piety, specifically face veils,

variously called *cadar*, *niqab*, or *khimar* in Indonesian (with meaningful distinctions across all three). Although the most extravagant cases of public theft have been linked to men, the public face of corruption in Indonesia has become increasingly feminine, hidden from view but marked as guilty by a face veil paired with a headscarf. Donned by female defendants exclusively for their court appearances, what has otherwise been religiously coded clothing is now used to signify humility and respectability, much as defendants in court cases in the United States might don formal business wear when in the presence of judge or jury. These modes of facial cover were previously associated with imported aesthetics from the Persian Gulf but their meaning has shifting over the past decade, from signifying extreme and alien religiosity, to signaling an elite and trendy piety, to now, increasingly, being a sign of potential criminality.

Tracing these shifting appearances as more “than the garb of meaning” (Keane 2005) begins with acknowledging the unique affordances of facial cover as a border fetish, an object that is hyper-visible in part because it forecloses being fully seen (Spyer 1998). Situated at the border of the self and the social, facial cover is part mask, part face, participating in a “shifting game ... with that most masked of entities, the state” (ibid.: 3). Faciality has become a site for navigating the intimate yet public border between the self, the state, and the divine. A managed face is therefore a unique aesthetic site through which to index virtue, by embodying idealized forms of beauty or piety, or to index criminality, by removing it from public view. In this sense, face veils are, as both matter and style, participants in what Jacques Rancière described as the “partition of the sensible,” a process that entails “the cutting up of the world, ... between what is visible and what is not” (2001: 8–9).

In the examples I analyze, I build on Indonesian conceptions of the face as a mask through media analysis and ethnography. As Michael Taussig has argued, the face is the ultimate “public secret,” simultaneously visible and yet mysterious (1998: 225). This view complicates what Emmanuel Levinas described as the ethical essence of the face (1980). For Levinas, because the face is a universal human feature, it is an infinite portal to seeing evil or demanding justice and should facilitate recognizing the other as equal (ibid.: 294). Considered in the Indonesian visual economy I outline, however, even when a face is visible it is not reliably knowable. The face might be better understood in a recursive loop, as both a window to an interior soul and as a barrier masking the soul. To paraphrase a beloved anthropological koan, it is masks all the way down. For example, naming hypocrisy and criminality by exposing defendants’ faces, even if those faces were splashed vividly in front-page news, generated *schadenfreude* that invited even more speculation about authenticity. Defendants of corruption charges were seen as masked, whether their faces were exposed or covered with fabric, cosmetics, or surgery. Savoring versions of the defendants’ faces could generate speculative pleasures around moments when the face could be both truth and lie. This terrain has transformed the semiotic options for Indonesians who demand more equitable and ethical lives, who link justice to the right to “look evil in the eye,” and who do so by presenting their own faces as recognizably ethical and beautiful.

### Genealogies of the Beautiful and the Spectacular

Situating Indonesian histories of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics requires asking about the relationship between the beautiful and the good. If, as Michael Lambek (2010) has argued, the condition of living with others involves

judging them, not against fixed criteria of virtue but as fellow practitioners of ethical ideals, then the spectacular quality of facial politics in Indonesia emphasizes the role of appearance. As Joseph Errington has argued, for Javanese elite *priyayi*, “ethical judgement and conduct are based in ‘aesthetic’ evaluations” of refinement and coarseness most recognizable as self-control (1984: 286). This Javanese conception has also fused the person with the political in ways that invest particular attention on reading public figures as both individuals and as types, what Terence Turner described as the combined internal, psychological, and macro-social categories which we produce when modifying skin and appearance, in part to avoid shame and to cultivate beauty (1980). It is in that context that dense aesthetic archives can become lively zones of dialogue in which styles refract and remake related conceptions of seeing and sensing which cannot be analyzed exclusively as artistic genres or traditions, nor simply as secrets and revelations. As Patricia Spyer argues, the aesthetic is always at minimum a doubled conception of how something *looks*, and the *modalities of seeing* that engage perceptions (2022: 19). In considering ethical engagements, these types reinforce the sense that ethical conduct can and should be beautiful. As Sylvia Tidey has argued, anti-corruption efforts in Indonesia often fail if they rely on global concepts of good governance in the absence of recognizing obligations of relationality and mutual care, obligations which can render ethical conduct that might be technically illegal (2022). The Indonesian concept of *adab*, borrowed from Arabic, illustrates how ethics and elegance can take on a specifically religious quality. Understood broadly as beautiful behavior, most perfectly embodied by the Prophet but an ideal for all humans, it is also the root word for the concept of civilization and just sociality. As a result, public discourse about social ills such as corruption or selfishness frequently take the form not only of technical revelation but of “mental” or “cultural” flaws expressed as a lack of civilization or an absence of beautiful behavior (*kurang berkeadaban*) (Rozeňnal 2019).

These concepts have informed the vibrant economic field in Indonesia associating ethical consumption with public religiosity. Among the most visible and substantial categories of consumer goods in the arena of *halal* consumption are banking, hajj travel, food, and fashion. Modest fashion’s spectacular growth since its emergence in the 1990s (see Jones 2010) has generated new debates about the intersection of the good and the beautiful. Modest fashion designers frequently reference the idea that “Allah loves beauty” to situate their creations as virtuous and attractive, explaining that vivid modesty enhances the divine creation of feminine beauty. Given the salience of beauty to ethical conduct, women’s pious appearances have therefore become increasingly charged, even as they have become ubiquitous, underscoring how the affective allure of beauty itself can generate cultural and financial capital (see Jarrin 2017). Indeed, the ubiquity of women’s fashionable piety itself is integral to the anxieties about spectacularity and ethics that it has generated. Popular perceptions of whether modest fashion can be simultaneously virtuous and beautiful, or beautiful but an illusory and therefore unreliable sign of the good, suggest that new communities of sensibility, with new codes of judgment, form out of that history. These communities of sensibility signal an intimate and potentially inverse relationship between the democratic rhetoric of transparency, which demands exposure as its salve, and a concomitant rise in forms of cover among women.

Fashion shows themselves are distinct if fleeting communities of spectacular sensibility. Expensive to mount and intended to be seen, fashion shows are crafted with a view to commanding attention through transporting audiences to another

world, even if only fleetingly. As such, they are exquisite illustrations of the “economy of appearances” (Tsing 2005: 57; Leshkovich 2014: 21) which are intended to entice investment or expenditure through dramatic spectacle by attaching the parallel conceptions of both being seen and of financial speculation through saturating feminine bodies with fantasy. The busy, rotating calendar of fashion shows in urban Indonesia does what fashion shows elsewhere do: the shows display commodities and the feminine form in performance-events that are about art, sociality, and distinction as much as they are about commerce. Invitations are hard to come by; fashion magazines cover them in close detail, and social media influencers document them in real time. Jakarta fashion shows also take on a uniquely Indonesian festivity, becoming sites for urban consumers to delight in each other’s company and to reinforce their cosmopolitanism through a shared appreciation for local designers, even as their own closets are filled with a mix of global and local brands. The growing middle and upper classes in major cities, especially Jakarta, treat consumption as scopic leisure, especially evident in the combined display of clothing on shoppers and in boutique windows.

Fashion shows and beauty pageants have also been a central feature of Indonesian national development movements, providing a stage (materially and metaphorically) for performing citizenship. Particularly for feminized subjects, including women, gay, and trans citizens, respect and access to national recognition has been facilitated through technical mastery of the skills for attractive self-presentation (Hegarty 2022a). The political economy of faciality and beauty have also been central to development institutions in Indonesia. For example, the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economies has invested heavily in promoting Indonesia as the global *kiblat* (Indonesian for the Arabic word *qibla* describing the orientation towards the Kaaba in Mecca for prayer) of modest fashion by emphasizing Indonesia’s wide array of textile traditions, both to differentiate it among other countries vying for this status in a competitive global garment sector, and as a way of emphasizing a particular message of unity and religious tolerance within Indonesia (see Hoesterey 2018; Slama 2020). By targeting fashion as a zone for economic growth, this initiative celebrated a national cultivation of creativity that requires rendering the non-technical into the technical, with the goal of moving Indonesia beyond low-wage mass garment production and to re-orient the higher-value production of fashion design beyond wealthy global style centers. Indeed, part of the Ministry’s portfolio has been the funding and logistical support necessary to allow Indonesian designers to show their collections in London, Paris, and New York (see figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

Presenting Indonesia as the largest majority Muslim country in the world, yet one where modestly attired women remain *anggun* or elegant, illustrates how women’s appearances have been summoned to serve as evidence of Indonesia’s religious moderation. Feminine beauty garbed in Indonesian textiles and taste implies an antidote to other genres of pious femininity, particularly Gulf-style *abayas* and face veils, which are presumably less friendly and less moderate (see figure 2).

<sup>1</sup>These initiatives are also in global dialogue with visible, and sometimes controversial, modest fashion genres elsewhere. For example, the public visibility of modest fashion styles in Turkey have emerged as a generational response to secular nationalism and European anxieties about Islam and have now become a ubiquitous style genre and valuable sector of the Turkish economy (e.g., Gökarıskel and Secor 2014; Göle 2015). By contrast, visible piety where Muslims are minorities can expose women in modest clothing to heightened scrutiny and surveillance (e.g., Lewis 2015; Moors and Tarlo 2013; Tarlo 2010).



**Figure 1.** Anniesa Hasibuan walking the runway at the end of her 14 February 2017 fashion show at New York Fashion Week. Photograph used with permission, Neilson Barnard, Getty Images.

## Corruption

If fashion, as a leader in the creative economic sector, is a key industry for Indonesian development, its spectacularity has emerged alongside another equally public industry: anti-corruption. In Indonesia and elsewhere, corruption is defined as the appropriation of public goods for private means.<sup>2</sup> This definition itself requires a sense of the border between the two zones, and classifications of certain acts as violations of that border are central to reproducing the sense that the border itself is self-evident and rooted in prior, apolitical spheres. Sarah Muir and Akhil Gupta situate this history in European and imperial projects, reminding us that concepts of corruption as deviance presume that a properly ordered public sphere is masculine

<sup>2</sup>The field of corruption is typically glossed as KKN, short for *korupsi, kolusi, dan nepotisme* (corruption, collusion, and nepotism), a framing which equates family and personal favors with other forms of theft.



Figure 2. Dian Pelangi following a celebration of her work hosted by the Indonesian Consul General, New York City, October 2017; @dianpelangi.

(2018: 11). Taken to its logical conclusion, the expression of private self-interest through claiming public goods, in secret, is itself feminized, even if men engage in that behavior. As the corruption cases I analyze illustrate, the defendants accused of spectacular, flagrant theft of public wealth deployed, either voluntarily or on legal advice, signs of religious piety that prevent the public from seeing their faces. This aesthetic move was combined with formal legal defenses that reinscribed the public/private border by reframing defendants' financial dealings as having been intended to provision dependent family members—the essence of ethical relationality—rather than as expressions of personal greed.

A mode of economic exchange that appears to be out of public view, conduct labeled as “corrupt” is recognizable to Indonesian citizens, the national corruption court, and global organizations like Transparency International alike as illegitimate exchange because of its secrecy. The Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, or Corruption Eradication Commission, is a unique part of the post-Suharto political landscape. Established in 2002, it has been charged with curtailing what many Indonesians perceive as a rise in corruption not only despite, but because of the atmosphere of reformist freedom that followed Suharto's resignation in 1998. The establishment of a formal governance structure to address corruption through exposure partially compensates for the limited regulatory capacity and oligarchic impulses which, as many scholars have noted, coexist with the circulation of “dirty money” in Southeast Asia, a phenomenon that is less an unintended effect than fundamental to the function of the state (see Baker and Milne 2015; Ford and Pepinsky 2014).

The broad anti-corruption industry, both in Indonesia and globally, has a distinctly gendered quality. Much of the transnational policy research assumes that

women share a naturally communal and altruistic character as the “fairer sex,” which can be mobilized as moral filters on the unchecked selfish impulses that presumably motivate male criminals. Policy recommendations in this vein prescribe increasing female political representation as a way to reduce corruption (e.g., Sung 2003; Swamy et al. 2001). Similar rhetoric is heard in Indonesia, but in dialogue with an opposing perspective that explains male criminality as a response to feminine appetites for luxury goods, and therefore fundamentally a feminine problem (see Jones 2012).<sup>3</sup>

The Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi system has been intentionally kept separate from the federal court system in hopes of ensuring its independence, and it holds both corrupting private citizens and corrupted civil servants liable for actions that enrich themselves or cost the state. The logic of legal authority in corruption trials borrows from other technologies of justice, emphasizing kinds of evidence and measurement that appear to be neutral reflections, rather than productions, of power. Convicted citizens are sentenced to fines, reparations to the state, and terms in a white-collar prison system. A common phrase is that corrupt citizens are not afraid of prison, but they are afraid of poverty. Corruption trials emerged in the last decade in Jakarta as an appealing legal and cathartic solution to an atmosphere of democratic openness and a sense of decreased state control that also allowed corruption to flourish. Originally (but no longer) televised live on a dedicated channel, trials involve exquisite recounting of secret transactions, with the accused typically asked to describe the burner cellphones, secret codes, brown paper bags of cash, or ways they spent their wealth. Intense illustrations of what Karen Strassler has described as “image-events” (2020: 10–11) facilitating the “dream of transparency” (ibid.: 69), they were an effect of the newly corporate media landscape in Indonesia, agents in a thrilling dynamic that trafficked in the narrative that exposure was central to a more just political culture.<sup>4</sup> The accused almost always sat on a lone chair in front of a panel of judges while TV cameras captured every bead of sweat or expression of privileged indifference. In the first few years of these televised, spectacular cases, many of my friends and interlocutors would find it almost impossible to not watch them, since the promise of seeing and hearing about how much and how money was changing hands was just too much to resist. Visibility was enthralling not just for a glimpse into a world of wealth, but for a chance to sense whether defendants experienced shame when facing their crimes.

These anxieties have been especially palpable when considered in the context of public religion and gender. If women’s appearances have become essential components in a national sensibility about the exceptional quality of Indonesian Islam, and the portal to potentially securing a post-mineral-dependent and perhaps a more ethical economic future, tracing the feminization of corruption suggests that religiously spectacular styles border the fine line between both sensing piety and sensing scandal. Scandal cannot exist without exposure, and the movement of private conduct into public knowledge constitutes the scandal as much as the conduct itself. Within this semiotic ideology, Rosalind Morris has argued, transparency has become the idiom for our times. Transparency, she says, rests on the assumption that

<sup>3</sup>In this view, feminine appetites drive men to crime especially when the demands are made by a mistress (Pertiwi and Mulya 2022).

<sup>4</sup>James Siegel describes this feature of the *reformasi* movement as a concomitant impulse to open up economic and political events to view—seeing was essential to resolving injustice (1998a).



“moving things from the domain of the secret into that of the public” through mass media is an inherent social good (2004: 233).

Taking anti-corruption rhetoric seriously as an aesthetic and ethical field moves us swiftly beyond the narrow sphere of bureaucracy on which much corruption discourse and analysis focus and reveals the centrality of appearances. One popular complaint in Indonesia in 2013 demanded that white-collar criminals be required to wear marked clothing such as orange defendants’ vests in public, to prevent them from deceptively passing as ethical subjects when enjoying a common privilege, a medical day pass. Relatedly, popular perceptions about money laundering reproduced a feminized association of laundry with feminine labor, positing that the proliferation of luxury shopping malls and the visual and sensory pleasures they facilitate are investment vehicles for laundering ill-gotten capital (*mencuci uang*) and returning it into legitimate and invisible, although potentially still toxic, public circulation. These conceptions about open-ended circuits of speculation and crime indicate a much more complex spectrum of ethical evaluation about capital and conduct than the “visibility/opacity dyad” inherent in anti-corruption campaigns, initiatives that fail to capture the murkier features of democratic desires for justice (Ballesterro 2012: 161). The cases that follow illustrate the value of attending to the desire for ethical coexistence, a vision that requires acknowledging that states are neither exclusively caring nor exclusively corrupt (High 2014).

### Cover and Punishment

My friend Siti helped me see the complicated relationship between exposure and resolution over years of conversations beginning when she was a college student in Yogyakarta. We had been laughing and chatting one afternoon in late October 2015 when her mood shifted. Siti was twenty-five at the time, a confident graduate student and self-identified feminist activist, I had always appreciated her biting sense of humor and fearless attitude, and I was especially savoring catching up with her strong opinions that afternoon. We had been chuckling about media photos showing the dramatic appearance at a Jakarta courthouse the day before of Amel Alvi, an Indonesian celebrity accused of prostitution and corruption. Alvi was well known for her Instagrammed reputation as buxom, scantily clad, and sensational. Contrary to form, she had arrived at court in black *cadar*, her main accessories being her face veil and a *tasbih* color-coordinated to match her turquoise fingernails (see figures 3 and 4). We were laughing at Alvi’s sudden style change when Siti’s demeanor turned dour. She sighed and said, “We all knew there was corruption during the Suharto years, but with all these trials that expose the details of the lives of corruptors, honestly it hurts us more (*lebih menyakiti kita*). It just feels worse seeing it.”

Although she was too young to have participated in the 1998 protests, Siti expressed a sense that there was still a personal cost to seeing others’ crimes play out on a national stage.<sup>5</sup> She had been raised in West Java by pious parents, was active in the national religious community Muhammadiyah, and had begun wearing a headscarf and modest clothing at age fourteen. Her life course had overlapped with

<sup>5</sup>Mary Steedly observed a similar feature of post-authoritarian popular culture in Indonesia, in which the increased popularity of the horror film genre paralleled the thrill of exposure culture, in which seeing was pleasurable but also terrifying (2013).



Figure 3. Celebrity entertainer Amel Alvi in selfie taken the evening before her trial, 30 September 2015; @amelalvi28.



Figure 4. Amel Alvi arriving at court in Jakarta on 1 October 2015. Photo by Lamhot Aritonang, *detik.com*.

the emergence of pious femininity as a style. She frequently and proudly recounted how she had refused to remove her headscarf during a college study tour in the United States, even though she had experienced Islamophobic, racist, and sexist slurs during the trip. I was therefore surprised in 2017 to see that she had decided to stop covering her hair. In the intervening years since our conversation about Amel Alvi's appearance in court, Siti said that she had grown tired of the ways that religiously coded garments had come to be used in her social circles. Complaining about the growing fashionability of modest clothing, especially the gauzy face veil known as the *khimar*, she had decided to stop wearing any religiously coded clothing. After over a year of deep reflection, she had come to the opinion that headscarves and other visible signs of feminine religious piety in Indonesia were overly saturated tools in human-human social, rather than human-divine, relationships. Siti used English loanwords commonly deployed in Indonesian conversations about modest fashion, identifying the misplaced utility of clothing that facilitates human sociality as "*horizontal*," as opposed to the preferable, more sacred "*vertical*" (human-divine) relationship that modest clothing should ideally facilitate. Noting that the same decade in which anti-corruption culture had focused on punishing scandal through exposure, she decided that pious garb had also become a mode through which humans were performing for each other by overly relying on the mediating power of fabric. Although she sought what Erving Goffman described as "face-work," the capacity to confirm one's sense of self through affirmation from others (1963: 7), she felt that it should not come at the expense of her primary relationship with Allah. She described feeling awkward for several weeks after ceasing to cover her hair, but then embraced what felt like more "honest" relationships with her friends, and a less mediated relationship with Allah. For Siti, critiquing the atmosphere of hyper-exposure of the post-Suharto period powerfully meant, still, exposure.

Siti's response was perhaps unsurprising, as she was commenting on an aesthetic and political genre that had shifted over her lifetime. When headscarves were first adopted by urban, middle-class college students in the late 1980s as modes of social protest, they were both novel and perceived to be threats to proper sociality as critiques of elders and as unfriendly (Brenner 1996; Smith-Hefner 2007). As they became more ubiquitous and elaborated—in other words, fashionable—alongside the normalization of the religious reform movement itself, they also came to facilitate full membership in a new majority of pious urbanites.<sup>6</sup> That period witnessed a new form, the emergence of the face veil as a feature of urban piety, shifting from being at first anti-social and intimidating to facilitating membership in a distinct social group that claims luxurious, ethical comportment (Nisa 2023). Diana Nurliana, a thirty-six-year-old entrepreneur who sells a popular and luxurious line of gauzy *khimar* under the Instagram brand *Taqiya: Piety Smart Simple*, illustrates this balance. Her public image is widely available on her social media and brand websites, and she regularly gives public interviews in support of her company. Throughout, she consistently and obviously smiles despite her covered face. Her "brand story" emphasizes a particular origin narrative about her decision to start wearing a *khimar* in 2014. She relates that her greatest worry about pursuing her dream of developing a closer relationship with

<sup>6</sup>Some estimates of headscarf use among urban, educated, middle-class women indicate that at least 70 percent of Muslim women in Indonesian cities wear headscarves and that pious dress styles are widely associated with upward mobility (Shofia 2020).

Allah was that a face veil would foreclose her capacity for sincere relationships with fellow humans. She strives to be visually warm and considers herself an ambassador for making people understand that a covered face can still be a friendly face. In a March 2018 interview with the national women's magazine *Femina*, she narrated her sense of responsibility to not "damage" her religion by allowing her face veil to create "distance" between herself and others. Instead, she feels "fortunate" that her happy, affectionate family and her friendly fan base realize that her face veil facilitates her sociality.

Perhaps the most spectacular example of the shifting semiotic dynamic which frustrated Siti was the First Travel case. Following Anniesa Hasibuan's two triumphant New York Fashion Week shows over the previous year, she and her husband were arrested on 10 August 2017 during a visit to the Ministry of Religious Affairs. First Travel had been known for offering the most affordable pilgrimage packages in the country of roughly \$900, undercutting the once-lowest prices by \$400. Like most pyramid schemes, the couple's strategy had worked so long as they delivered some services to some customers. Two weeks after their arrests, Surachman, Hasibuan, and her sister Kiki were arraigned in a public display of state authority. Almost overnight, Hasibuan had transmogrified into what Joshua Barker, Erik Harms, and Johan Lindquist have described as a "figure," individuals who are both real people and symbols of a social type and a historical moment (2014: 1). She had gone from being a recognizable *wanita sholehah*, or pious woman, to a *koruptor*, or a corrupting citizen. Her dramatic rise to fame as a modest fashion designer, and then her arrest and trial, were part of her biography of suspect success, seemingly confirming the sense that post-reform Indonesia is a site where capital circulates magically and that only a few fortunate citizens can successfully seize it, what Doreen Lee describes as a climate of "parasitic financial predation and injustice" (2021).

Hasibuan's transformation from poverty to fame to criminal had been swift. She had gone from being a SIM card seller in a minor Bandung mall in the early 2000s to representing Indonesia in New York City as a figure of religious tolerance.<sup>7</sup> In a national context where modest fashion designers and entrepreneurs are prevalent, Hasibuan stood out. Launching from obscurity to the epicenter of the global fashion industry with little experience in the domestic modest fashion field, she won acclaim for her 12 September 2016 show and was heralded as the first designer to present a modest fashion collection at New York Fashion Week, and the first Indonesian.<sup>8</sup> She presented a second collection on 14 February 2017. Each show cost a rumored \$600,000 to produce and each was styled to promote diversity and immigrant beauty in a charged U.S. political climate. The production company she hired for the 2017 show hired first-generation immigrant models of color (none of them Indonesian), each carrying an Indonesian flag during the final walk. The historic and symbolic tones moved her into American media celebrity, and Americans

<sup>7</sup>A popular genre of before and after photos of Hasibuan's ascent and fall emphasized her dark skin in her pre-fame days, whereas when seen in full, professional makeup, such as at her fashion shows or in her social media images, her skin tone was notably fairer. For more on the role of race in Indonesian conceptions of beauty, see Saraswati (2013).

<sup>8</sup>This claim was only partially accurate. Hasibuan's show was the first to have all of the models wear headscarves. Modest fashion collections had been presented at New York Fashion Week frequently, including by Indonesian designers such as Dian Pelangi in 2015. Nonetheless, media coverage reproduced the appealing narrative of Hasibuan as a "glory" (Blumberg 2016).

concerned about the recent election of Donald Trump and the month-old ban on Muslim immigrants to the United States hoped it displayed that Americans were still tolerant, multicultural consumers. Hasibuan's statements to the press after each of the shows explicitly linked beauty to Islam and multicultural tolerance. "We have this vision and mission of bringing peace, and fashion is one of the means we can use to spread these beautiful values to the world" (Rodulfo 2017). The shows placed her on the 2017 Forbes list of Influential Women, from which she was subsequently removed on 26 August.

The fashion shows alarmed another friend of mine, Aisyah, a forty-five-year-old professor of Islamic studies, who recounted her personal experience with First Travel. In mid-2018, she told me how she had almost been swindled by the company, and she alternated between expressing relief over having pursued and received restitution and embarrassment for receiving what others had not. "You know, I almost became one of their victims! Once I saw the media coverage of that luxury New York fashion show, I knew something was amiss. It just didn't feel right. I feel so lucky to have gotten my money back. So many people didn't." The day after Hasibuan's 14 February 2017 show, Aisyah called an attorney in Jakarta to formally demand a refund of her deposit on a scheduled package for the next year. Aisyah, who herself dresses modestly, did not believe that a company selling low-priced *umroh* packages could plausibly participate in the spectacular and speculative arena of global fashion.

In late May of 2018, Anniesa Hasibuan and her husband were sentenced to twenty (Surachman) and eighteen (Hasibuan) years in prison. As the prosecution detailed, the funding for Hasibuan's two New York shows had been directly stolen from pilgrims' deposits (Erdianto 2017; Beech 2018). Their conversions from celebrity Muslims to celebrity criminals were particularly easy to trace because of Hasibuan's active use of social media. Her Instagram feed featured a steady stream of two types of images: their luxury travels, which promoted their travel agency services, and images of her wearing or showing her fashions. The two genres overlapped and amplified each other, each displaying *nouveaux riches*' vulgarity at every turn. Aesthetically, they telegraphed wealth through bold use of gold lamé fabrics, crystals, and furs, often displayed in settings outside of Indonesia. Yet as soon as the news of their arrest broke, public empathy was scarce; social media depictions focused on her extravagance, her apathy for the betrayed pilgrims, and especially, her appearance. These portrayals insinuated that she had violated class and status boundaries for respectability. In a political environment in which, as Doreen Lee (2016: 21) has described, Indonesian political movements have generated "new ways of looking, seeing and being, turning style into the conduit and currency for political identity," Hasibuan embodied in distinct form the possibility that aesthetic statements might not be believable. Neither she nor her sister had worn *cadars* prior to their trial (although Anniesa had posted two glamorous selfies wearing *khimar*), and their mugshots excluded headscarves, per government mandate. Their appearance at their trials seemed to communicate humility and shame, along with criminality, simply by removing their faces from public view by way of religious cover (see figure 5).

### The Affordances of Facial Cover

How did modest dress become such a charged agent in debates about criminality and religiosity? Religious commitment or rediscovery is a familiar feature of narratives of criminality in Indonesia and elsewhere. Arguably, a component of contemporary



Figure 5. Anniesha Hasibuan at police press conference announcing indictment, 22 August 2017. Photo by Rengga Sancaya, *detik.com*.

religious celebrity in Indonesia reanimates a deep history of conversion as moral transformation associated with the nine founding saints of Islam in the region. The *wali songo*, revered historical figures whose graves are important pilgrimage sites, are adored for their piety, humanity, and frailty, as figures whose lives before discovering and sharing Islam involved decadent if not criminal escapades. In the past decade, popular male preachers have utilized their conversion status, even if they were raised Muslim, to gain broad appeal. Preachers such as Abdullah Gymnastiar, Arifin Ilham, Jefri al-Bukhari, Yusuf Mansur, and Felix Siauw have each presented their personal biographies as conversion narratives. Repeatedly retellings of these stories have at least two effects: they highlight the transformative potential of Islam (even in the absence of traditional religious training), and they emphasize the preachers' outsider status by holding their sinful pasts in permanent relief with the present (Burhani 2020; Howell 2008). Stories and styles of this genre are familiar features of anti-corruption movements as well, even as they may also be perceived, as Daniel Smith has described for Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria, as providing "cover for continued corruption," in part because they emphasize personal solutions rather than classed or structural ones (2010: 220).<sup>9</sup>

Rather than focus on religiosity as solution, I argue that tracing the journey of public punishment through denying feminine criminals and the viewing public access to their faces intersects with scholarship on the face more broadly, as well as with specifically Indonesian histories of the role of the human face as a portal to

<sup>9</sup>Ethnographers of prosperity-oriented religiosity note this quality in many settings and faith traditions, including in the United States. Susan Harding argues that the American cultural and political claim to secular nationalism in fact rests on a strong moral fusion of morality, modernity, and wealth (2001).

recognition and sociality. Synonyms for the word “veil” appear frequently in both Indonesian and scholarly analyses of crime, and religiously marked facial cover for women has been both indexical and iconic, in the Piercean sense, over the last two decades. Their iconicity has been precisely what has made their indexicality mutable and contested. As Siti’s commentary intimated, a truly virtuous woman should not pursue increased religiosity for self-interest but as a medium through which to improve her relationships with both Allah and therefore with other humans. Her complicated feelings tell us that forms of religious cover have dense and contradictory valences, not just as symbols of piety but as instruments to conceal deception or telegraph shame. To be clear, I am not arguing, as so many Orientalist descriptions of pious clothing continue to claim, that it is inherently oppressive for women because they cover out of “shame.” That widely critiqued perspective fails to understand the residential, ethical, and aesthetic features of sociality in the regions where modest dress is closely tied to embodied systems of honor (e.g., Abu-Lughod 2002; Ahmed 1982; Mahmood 2005). Although the forms of kinship and residential marriage patterns that were most associated with Arab genres of modest clothing, for men and women, have no parallels in Indonesia, the emergence of urban, stylish, youthful modest clothing was equally disconnected from associations with women’s subjugation to the domestic sphere, or any sense of embarrassment.<sup>10</sup> In fact, most Muslim women in Indonesia follow the Shafi’i branch of Islamic law, which explicitly excludes the face from the category of *aurat*, or bodily zones that require modesty.

We might more profitably consider how the affordances of facial cover illustrate the vulnerability of semiotic ideologies through the complexity of faciality itself. To do so invites us to think about how Indonesian political style involves the flow of affects in dialogue with those things, particularly shame. As both a public and private affect, shame has placed gender, appearance, and appetites center stage. Much of the recent religious reform movement in Indonesia has focused on the intersection of appearance and shame as sites for political action. Perhaps most notably, activist demands from religious organizations were central to the passage in 2008 of a national anti-pornography bill that banned the distribution of images defined as “man-made sexual materials in the form of drawings, sketches, illustrations, photographs, text, voice, sound, moving pictures, animation, cartoons, poetry, conversations and gestures” (Gelling 2008). In the absence of popular support, the movement promoting the ban relied on the power of shame to hail and elicit state action (Hoesterey 2016). Addressing the secular state as a person, religious activists framed it as figure that could be “morally threatened” (Asad 2003: 205).<sup>11</sup> By contrast, morally upright figures should not need such pressure and should be, as Ayu

<sup>10</sup>The persistence of Muslim modesty as a threat to liberalism is perhaps most evident in contemporary European contexts where immigrant minority populations are regulated through dress codes, foremost among them the face veil. As Annelies Moors and Linda Herrera have argued, the array of legal anxieties about religious facial covering underscores the configuration of the face as a liberal category (2003).

<sup>11</sup>Shame has been a recurring feature of periods of public anxiety about religious appearances in the past decade in Indonesia. A social media movement in 2014 and 2015 focused on the social problem of covered women whose clothing was too tight to conform with *syar’i* criteria for modesty, describing them as endangering the genre of the headscarf and of being effectively nude, “*berjilbab tapi telanjang*,” or “covered but still naked.” A parallel phrase in English might be the descriptor “skintight,” which also alludes to the wearer’s shamelessness.

Saraswati has argued, knowable in part because of the public's ability to sense their beauty, which in turn reinforces their ethical standing (2013: 23).

To situate this genre of hyper-visible, but facially foreclosed, female defendants in Indonesia, I will trace three especially notorious cases with which the First Travel case coexisted. These cases illustrate how, even when women accused of crimes attempt to signal their piety through facial cover, their performances of face-work often fail. I choose these three because they generated the most response from my interlocutors over a decade of ethnographic fieldwork, and because they also call to mind multiple cases of famous female defendants, many of whom also adopted pious looks for their trials.<sup>12</sup> The earliest case of *cadar* court style, from 2011, was that of a Javanese businesswoman named Dharnawati, who was accused of offering US\$166,500 (what she was told would be a "commitment fee") to two officials from the Ministry of Transmigration to win infrastructure projects in West Papua. Ultimately sentenced to two and a half years in jail, and obliged to repay the state roughly US\$100,000, her trial was a gripping drama of retelling her secret transactions. Dharnawati wept frequently, especially during her testimony, and was photographed each day arriving in a black *abaya* style outfit and a black face veil. She had regularly worn pious clothing prior to her trial, but she added the *cadar*, sometimes pulled down to her chin, for the trial. The male defendants, both civil servants, were later charged but appeared in court in white collared shirts and the mandatory orange defendant's vest. She did not discuss her wardrobe during her comments to the press or the court, yet her appearance nonetheless prompted commentary from my fascinated friends. Dewi, a close friend in Yogyakarta who was roughly Dharnawati's age alternated between feeling sympathy for her and accepting her courthouse attire as evidence that she was pursuing religious devotion in response to the pain and embarrassment of guilt.

Dewi felt differently the next time this styling appeared on the national stage, in the even higher-profile case of Neneng Sri Wahyuni, in 2012–2013. Neneng was the wife of the notorious National Democrats ruling party treasurer Muhammad Nazaruddin. Together, their cases captivated national attention in 2011 when they fled the country to escape arrest on suspicion of corruption. Nazaruddin was accused, and later convicted, of accepting US\$3 million in bribes from a construction company hoping to win the right to build athletes' dormitories for the upcoming Southeast Asia Games in Palembang. Although he repeatedly refused to respond to court summons, he was not out of sight. To the contrary, from May through August he frequently appeared on nightly national news broadcasts via Skype, expansively responding to reporters' questions and accusing other party colleagues of corruption (especially regarding a parallel project for a national electronic ID card which, notably, involved deploying facial recognition technology). Yet he refused to disclose his location. Enthralled audiences treated his media appearances as opportunities to divine his location by reading the scenes behind him, the sweat on his forehead, the local time and weather, and his clothing. He was arrested by Interpol on 9 August in Cartagena, Colombia and extradited to stand trial in Jakarta.

<sup>12</sup>To list but a few: Malinda Dee, sentenced in 2012 for stealing client funds while employed by Citibank; Nunun Nurbaeti, sentenced in 2012 for bribing the governor of Bank Indonesia; Angelina Sondakh, a former beauty queen sentenced in 2015 for corruption cases in the Ministries of Education and Sports; and perhaps most notoriously, the former governor of the province of Banten, Atut Chosiyah, who was tried and sentenced twice, in 2012 and in 2017, for procurement and election schemes. Her cases allowed repeated media focus on her dramatically transformed face following extensive plastic surgeries.



During the months when Nazaruddin's nightly TV appearances became a Jakarta pastime, my middle-class friends would drive around wealthy neighborhoods in what could only be described as corruption voyeurism. Many of the grandest houses in Jakarta are accented with gold gilt flourishes and baroque details yet are hidden from view by walls and gates that are intentionally plain on the exterior but elaborate on the in-facing side. As one unemployed college graduate explained to me as he pointed out what he believed was Nazaruddin's home, it was simply fun to drive past the houses of *koruptors*, to imagine or perhaps even glimpse what was behind deceptively modest gates.

Less visible during those summer months in 2011 was Nazaruddin's wife, Neneng, who was ultimately arrested and extradited from Malaysia. She was convicted of enriching herself and of causing state losses through bribing a minister to hire her company for solar energy projects across the country. She was ultimately sentenced to six years in prison. While the amounts she was accused of embezzling were typical of many such cases (US\$2.7 million), her case became notorious for her use of a variety of modes of cover. Just before her trial began, Neneng suddenly adopted branded, expensive pious dress and vividly coordinated face veils for her hearings. The style she crafted was exceptional and original, converting loquacious luxury scarves into *cadars* and creating the visual effect of an elaborate canvas of color and brands, a swath of cover hiding her face and sunglasses covering her eyes. Her look was unprecedented in the modest fashion aesthetic (see [figure 6](#)).

Neneng had not worn pious clothing of any kind prior to her arrest. In effect, at the moment she became a public figure she transformed from, as her lawyer described her, "just a simple housewife concerned for her three children," to the masked face of corruption (Detik.com 2013). Unlike her loquacious husband, Neneng refused to speak during her trial or comment to the press, instead arriving and departing from court in a blaze of media coverage, her muteness amplifying the power of her as pure image, yet an image apparently removed from public view. Her shielded face was extensively photographed by banks of photographers, giving her arrivals each morning the air of a red-carpet event in which she was a coquettish celebrity. Photographers competed to capture the fleeting moments when she had to remove



Figure 6. Neneng Sri Wahyuni being transported to court, 16 June 2012. Photo by Seta Wardhana, [tempo.co](#).

her face veil each day for the court to confirm her identity. Her change in appearance was widely read, not as a sudden turn to religious devotion, but as the semiotic equivalent of a criminal ski mask, indexing not modesty but guilt. Intense online curiosity about her “true” face led to the recirculation of official wanted posters, which relied on her government ID card photo. Google image searches of Neneng auto-filled with the word *cantik*, or beautiful, from which we can take that curiosity about her true appearance was an effect of a legal case that promised legibility but in the event only increased her mystique.<sup>13</sup> Popular image research of this sort indicated an analog version of facial recognition undertaken by a motivated public. From trial photographs that captured her smiling or at ease, we can gather that, despite her silence, she enjoyed the playful, dialogic opportunity for visual communication.

A third case that captured Indonesian media attention during the COVID-19 pandemic was that of Pinangki Sirna Malasari, also known as the “pretty prosecutor” (*jaksa cantik*). She was arrested, tried, and convicted of accepting bribes, money laundering, and conspiracy to interfere with the execution of justice. While serving as a prosecutor in the Attorney General’s office, she was found to have conspired to quash the prison terms of Joko Soegiarto Tjandra, a financier convicted and sentenced to two years in jail for involvement in a 1999 scandal involving Bank Bali, at that time the largest corruption scandal to date. When activists associated with the anti-corruption organization Masyarakat Antikorupsi Indonesia (Indonesian People’s Anticorruption Community) discovered a photo of Pinangki and Tjandra in August 2020, they reported her for investigation, which exposed evidence that she had accepted US\$500,000 as part of a broader US\$10 million scheme to clear Tjandra’s name. The trial revealed that after receiving the bribe she had purchased a BMW, rented two luxury apartments, and visited the United States nine times for extensive facial plastic surgery, though she was at the time under a strict ban that limited her international travel. Her face swiftly became the focus of intense public scrutiny, with commentary on her Instagram pages, and photos of her before and after the surgery were widely shared (see figure 7). The before-and-after narratives included not only the facial transformation but, during the trial, an apparent religious transformation, including *syar’i*-styled headscarves (which extend from the head to the knees), vivid pink prisoners’ vests, and surgical masks doubling as *cadar* and pandemic protection (see figure 8). Commentary on her Instagram posts described her pious appearance in court as “cosplay” and her disposable income as *duit haram*, or sinful money. Although her legal defense held that her luxurious lifestyle had been funded by her late husband’s wealth, she ultimately confessed to the crimes with which she was charged. In August of 2021 her ten-year prison sentence was reduced to four on the grounds that she was a woman and a mother to a young child (Detik.com 2021).

The legal defenses for each of these four cases involved emphasizing the femininity of the defendants, often their status as mothers of young children, and that they had committed their crimes entirely in the pursuit of provisioning their dependents. Hasibuan similarly reframed the terms of her crime, claiming that she had been a victim of fraud herself and that she merited sympathetic sentencing to care for her

<sup>13</sup>Popular fascination with ID cards has only proliferated with widespread internet access in Indonesia, suggesting that state and corporate promises around the world that they will ensure data are distinct from individuals cannot be trusted (see Cool 2019).



Figure 7. Pinangki Sirna Malasari photographed in New York City in January 2020. Comments accused her of enjoying a luxurious lifestyle with sinful money (duit haram) and of being a “KORUPTOR”; @pinangkit.



Figure 8. Pinangki Sirna Malasari appearing in court in Jakarta on 30 November 2020. Photograph used with permission, Sigid Kurniawan, AntaraFoto.

infant daughter born a month before her arrest. These defense strategies reanimated biographies justifying public theft as moral because it served the private family unit. As Kanti Pertiwi and Teguh Wijaya Mulya have argued, this is not only a legal tactic (2022) but is consistent with national rhetoric in which women are charged with familial care and motherhood (see Brenner 1999).

All four cases featured intense public curiosity about the defendants' true faces, arguably because secrecy and revelation were also ways for citizens to theorize authenticity and claims to an ethical life. Media coverage and social media communication provided multiple comparisons of each woman's face with and without a *cadar*, with and without makeup, and before and after plastic surgery. Collages of photos compared selfies with official ID cards, a genre of portrait tasked with making citizens visible to the state—"a bundle of appearances, face, body, kin relations, and name" (Hegarty 2022b). The dynamic afterlives of images of these defendants' faces were less about consensual consideration of the face than an active remaking of the face through the endless circulation of images. This playfulness is best understood in the rich aesthetic history of the idea of the face as a mask in Indonesian political style, what Karen Strassler has described as the inherent ambiguity of surfaces in political communication (2009: 76). As she argues, the lively official and unofficial dissemination of the faces of Presidents Suharto and Sukarno in photos, media, and especially on the material and semiotic sign of both the state and wealth itself—money—should be considered in the broader context of Javanese conceptions of personhood and appearance. Indonesians came to think of the human face, not as a direct reflection of an interior state, but as an aesthetic site for the public to decipher in enthusiastic detail for signs of backstage tactics. This perspective builds on Benedict Anderson's argument that Javanese conceptions of the face view it as already a mask to be deciphered (1990: 129) much as one might a traditional dance with physical masks. During his rule, Suharto's consistently smiling face came to be sensed as a tool for deciphering off-stage actions even as it could not be trusted as a reliable sign of his character. In the reformist atmosphere following his resignation and the removal of his face from official signs, it unofficially reappeared in public life in forms such as street art and stickers summoning nostalgia for the New Order, particularly addressed to *koruptors*. A familiar smile that had once hidden authoritarian cruelty was converted into that of an openly satisfied father figure (Strassler 2020: 5).

Considering this crowded field of political style, we might now have a clearer sense of why the affordances of facial cover, particularly for women, have become such a saturated site, and why the form and performance of covering the face has become salient. These forms resonate with what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call "faciality," the process by which bodies become gendered or raced through converting faces into "loci of resonance" within the dominant semiotic system (1987: 168). Rosalind Morris has argued that it is precisely the mediation of criminality that has amplified the public authority of religious potency, allowing criminals to appear out of nowhere and for the state to heroically vanquish them behind "a veil ... of cultural intimacy" (2004: 234). As James Siegel has described, during Suharto's New Order, the face of the criminal became recognizable as such in Indonesian media for its shielded eyes paired with an exposed face, usually with a black bar printed over the accused's eyes (1998b). The image ostensibly protected the accused's identity while doubling as an image that had been blinded. Describing the criminalization of political resistance and petty theft alike, Siegel observed: "Criminals appear in *Pos Kota* in small photographs, usually with a black bar

across their eyes.... One sees behind this photographically imposed *mask or veil* only the face of ordinary Indonesians.... The face of the criminal is familiar, not strange, or, rather strange in its familiarity” (ibid.: 6–7, my emphasis).

Emphasizing the pleasure that traveled with images of female defendants might suggest that there was only delight in identifying hypocrisy. But to the contrary, Siti’s comment about the sadness these trials generated tells us that seeing these cases unfold was not purely therapeutic. As the cases built on each other and contributed to the sense of a genre of cover and criminality, my friend Dewi’s feelings also shifted. Once a faithful watcher of corruption trials in the early years of the Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, now she no longer watched at all. Instead, she insisted that it made her, too, feel sad. As she said one afternoon while asking her granddaughter to change the channel away from a broadcast on the Neneng trial, she said, “These broadcasts used to make me feel excited. Now they make me want to cry. Plus, dressing like that denies us, the people, the chance to look evil (*kejahatan*) in the eye.” Dewi’s extended family had been suspicious of the First Travel business model because the low prices seemed implausible. Like Aisyah, they had demanded and received refunds of their deposits through intense effort and access to a good lawyer. Dewi felt fortunate that they had recovered their funds, but even more, that she and her husband had completed the hajj several years earlier. Their planned *umroh* with family was to have been a “refreshing” getaway rather than a major religious transformation. Yet, when the First Travel news broke in August 2017, and each day brought more revelations about cheated pilgrims, her sadness grew. She said to me with tears in her eyes, “You know, that is the most evil kind of sin, to steal from people who are fulfilling a religious obligation and a lifelong dream.”

Siti and Dewi were not alone in their exhaustion. Some of the most vocal public critiques of the pairing of religious cover with criminal exposure came from religious organizations. Commentary used terms like “evil” (*kejahatan*) and accused the defendants of damaging the name and “face” of Islam by exploiting signs of piety. After Neneng’s first appearance in court, the spokesperson for Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders Front), one of the more aggressive and masculine organizations asserting a Muslim identity in Indonesian politics, accused Neneng of denying citizens the right to look evil in the face, while asking, “We protest this while also asking about this practice. Every woman who faces trial, including Neneng, appears in a *jilbab*.... However, these are women who did not wear it before their trials.... Muslim clothing is just being used as a way to cover up conduct” (Tribunnews.com 2012). In response to the FPI statement, a journalist at Kompasiana expressed such frustration slightly differently, “This writer turns on the TV wanting to watch news about NSW’s arrest. What does the face of a person accused of stealing 2.2 billion Rupiah, on the lam for 10 months, look like? Well, it turns out that beautiful face is closed off (*ditutupi*) by a *jilbab* and facial cover to the point that it is not visible at all. For a public wanting corruption suspects to face social sanctions, this is annoying” (Kompasiana.com 2012). The article nonetheless concluded by acknowledging that protecting one’s face is a human right, much like the right to remain silent at trial, and that a mature democratic public must respect this protected right.

Similar sentiments were shared during Pinangki’s trial, including a concern that the strategy of covering the face in court was problematic because it involved a superficial transformation instead of a profound, personal religious reform. In an interview with the newspaper *Sindonews* describing Pinangki’s court style as purely *modifikasi visual*, or “visual modification,” Farida Patittingi, Secretary the Indonesian

Association of Muslim Intellectuals (Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia, ICMI) and Dean of the School of Law at Hasannudin University, submitted that because women may be even more sensitive to public shaming than men, they might seek solutions to soothe accusations of evil that involve closing off access to public knowledge about their appearance, and by extension, about their conduct. This, he said, explains why many of them convert modest clothing into “just camouflage” (Sindonews.com 2020). Similarly, in May 2022, Cholil Nafis, a legal head of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Clerical Council), commented via Twitter that the use of *symbol agama* (clothing symbolic of the Muslim *ummat*) by *koruptors* made pious observers feel uncomfortable, since it bolstered the semiotic association of religion with evil (@cholinafis, 13 May 2022).

Much of the critical commentary repeatedly returned to the question of motivation and sincerity, a common theme in anxieties about the commodification and, in this genre, the mishandling of religious signs (see Keane 2018). Farida raised a concern frequently voiced by religious figures, and expressed respect for the rare instances in which convicted criminals continue to wear religious clothing after being released from prison, denoting that the religious transformation was authentic, ethical, and consistent with *keadaban*. In Pinangki’s case, news and social media breathlessly reported the moment when she reported for her prison sentence on 2 August 2021, no longer wearing a headscarf.

### Reclaiming Faces, Reclaiming Ethics

Siti found a way to resolve some of her sadness in late 2019. During the final weeks of a lame-duck session of the parliament Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, elected representatives considered two late additions to the legislative slate. At first glance, the two bills appeared disconnected. They were promoted by distinct constituencies and political factions, but taken together, to Siti and many of her fellow students they were an example of the state exceeding its bounds in regulating private and public conduct. In the last week of the month she helped coordinate the Yogyakarta branch of the largest student protests the country had seen since the May 1998 public resistance that had led to Suharto’s resignation.

One bill, Law 30/2002, aimed to revise the 2002 law establishing the scope and authority of the Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi. It proposed to convert the commission into a regular government body, subject to an oversight committee and influence by the military and the police, thereby undermining its independence and rendering it less able to investigate high-profile figures. Public opinion viewed its passage as evidence of the weakening of the commission’s power in the face of President Joko Widodo’s own increased attempts to concentrate the power of his office. It was signed into law on 17 September 2019, following an unusually brief review period of twelve days.

The second bill, the draft Rancangan Kitab Undang-undang Hukum Pidana (RKUHP) was meant to rush through longstanding discussions about revising the criminal code to update its Dutch-era provisions. New additions hastily added in September focused on regulating sexual activity, specifically banning extramarital sex, cohabitation outside of marriage, and all abortions. It also required gaining police permission to organize public protests. The bill was widely interpreted within Indonesia as a concession to religious conservatives seeking a mechanism to make homosexuality illegal, and also as a direct attempt to regulate female sexuality.

International media attention focused primarily on the protests against legislating private sexual conduct, as a way of asking the common media question of whether Indonesia is becoming more conservative by way of religious influence on civil law. A final version of the law, with 624 articles, was passed into law on 6 December 2022.

Over six days of coordinated protests across the country, from 24–30 September (the last week of the parliamentary session), students tied their resistance, their demands, and their humor to the laws as a pair. By highlighting the hypocrisy of making private sexual life subject to state surveillance while making theft of public goods potentially more private and safer, protesters' aesthetics included consistent themes in their posters and dress styles. Their posters pointedly asked, "If extramarital sex results in imprisonment, who will be left to serve in the legislature?" "Making corruption easier while making love harder." "Sex gets you jailed. Corruption just gets you a vacation," and "Brokenhearted but still protesting." Many of the same phrases appeared at multiple protest sites, conveying the coordinated, viral strategy of what was also a national resistance movement known as Aliansi Rakyat Bergerak (People's Movement Alliance), (see figure 9).



Figure 9. Collage of protesters' signs that circulated widely via WhatsApp in September and October of 2019.

The genre of protest itself had a powerful aesthetic quality that spoke nearly as loudly as the posters. Since the public protests of 1998, demonstrations in key sites, typically freeways or busy intersections, had become a public and social way to express group solidarity and even festivity, eventful not only during their execution but in the vibrant circulation of images afterward. Depending on one's sympathy with the cause in question, activists are variously admired for their communal zeal or mocked for being a mass of undifferentiated vulgar others. In the preceding three years, as President Joko Widodo had tightened rules on opposition political parties and citizens groups, protest culture developed a creative quality that blended wit and critique. Collages of the funniest posters from the September protests began appearing on WhatsApp chats almost immediately, making overnight celebrities of some of the protesters, who were in multiple cities but whose faces were juxtaposed into photo grids. Some grids showed different people holding signs bearing nearly identical phrases. In one of the most widely shared series, considered evidence that women were joining the hot, dusty streets in equal numbers to men, a young woman addressed the abstract figure of a male politician saying, "Mister, my skincare is expensive. Wearing it out here is hot. But NKRI is worth that and more, #Indonesiaglowing, #tolakpasalngawur (Javanese, for #refusesuperficiallaws) (see figure 10)." Harnessing the popular makeup and skincare trend of "glowing," an aesthetic inspired by Korean beauty genres and a common hashtag for social media tips for how to create a glowing face (a feature also used to describe the face of the Prophet), protesters attached the specific style of a normatively beautiful face with the affective pleasure of



**Figure 10.** Collages of young women that circulated with versions of the phrase, "Mister, my skincare is expensive. Wearing it just makes me hotter. But I don't mind because NKRI is even more valuable"; or "I don't mind if my makeup wears off, as long justice never wears off," September 2019; @popbela.



supporting the idea of an ethical and just Indonesia.<sup>14</sup> The statements and images reintroduced the importance of the face, reanimating the idea that a key role for women in social justice movements, even those critiquing “superficial” laws, required that they transform their faces through treating their skin and appearance for display, particularly on social media. Notably, the protests relied in part on deploying skills at beauty and appearance central to the gay and trans communities in Indonesia, which have long provided cisgender women with expertise on appearance.

Siti, along with many of the protesters in 2019, chose to cover her face with a surgical style mask that week. These protests took place several months before the COVID-19 outbreak, and by covering their faces, Siti and her friends were adopting neither pandemic nor religious style. Instead, she told me, the masks were worn for other reasons, including to avoid breathing smoke caused by the annual palm oil plantation fires in Sumatra and Kalimantan, and to protect personal identities from state surveillance, much as protesters in Hong Kong had done earlier that year. Other protesters covered their faces with hand-held masks depicting national heroes such as former Presidents Abdurrahman Wahid, Megawati Sukarnoputri, and BJ Habibie, as well as the revolutionary heroine Raden Ajeng Kartini, and the country’s first vice-president, Mohammad Hatta. Demanding to be seen, by the nation if not by the state, protesters layered heroes’ faces on their own while shielding their identities. In addition to sociality and enthusiasm, Aliansi Rakyat Bergerak presented a formal series of demands, including that arrests of activists cease, that citizens affiliated with generating environmental damage be tried in court, and, significantly, that parliament pass a long-delayed bill outlawing sexual violence against women, which had been under discussion since 2016.<sup>15</sup>

Protesters in some cities (Jakarta, Bandung, Kendari, and Padang) faced police repression. The marches on Gejayan Street in Yogyakarta that Siti experienced were orderly and non-confrontational, consistent with the city’s image as refined and friendly. The student groups spanned a range of ideologies, from anarchist to Islamist, which Siti particularly enjoyed. She savored the collective enthusiasm of marching together and being part of a protest community. Importantly, in the years since, counter-protesters opposed to the law outlawing sexual violence have marched against it on religious grounds, arguing that it encourages individualist, anti-social orientations by criminalizing rape within marriage, increased acceptance of homosexuality, and expanding the authority of “feminism” to threaten the family and a singular entity known as “Islam.”

Dewi and Aisyah chose not to participate in the 2019 protests. They felt too old due to the protests’ youthful, student quality. However, Dewi’s adult daughter Tika chose instead to contribute to a nascent group organized under the name SPAK, an acronym for *Saya Perempuan Anti-Korupsi!* (I am an anti-corruption woman!), a movement built on the assertion that women are central to the anti-corruption struggle, which

<sup>14</sup>NKRI, the acronym for the political principle of Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia, or the National Unity of Indonesia, is not uniformly considered a sign of political or religious moderation. It is the legal and ideological foundation of state repression of any affiliation considered “extreme,” such as the banning of Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia in 2017, and the ongoing suppression of the independence movement in Papua (see Kusumaryati 2021). The final version of the criminal code also authorized quashing protest in support of national unity.

<sup>15</sup>Law 12/2022 RUU Penghapusan Kekerasan Seksual was passed on 12 April 2022, after eight years of deliberation.

emphasizes its inclusivity through the abstracted profile of women's faces. The SPAK aesthetic, ranging from short to long hair and fitted to loose headscarves, played with the possibility of anonymous but diverse female forms as outlined portraits, profiled as national heroes (see figure 11). Tika argued that her work in the SPAK movement was an expression of her commitment to social rather than personal justice. She explained to me why she wanted a national alliance: "For me, this is what it means to embody *adab*, truly beautiful manners are ethical manners." She added her face to the abstract profile that best suited her head and hairstyle.

Dewi, for her part, in the months following the protests began to regularly cover her hair. This was the first time she had ever done so, except for several months following her completion of the hajj decades earlier. She enjoyed it for approximately six months. She found it a relief to finally join the majority of Muslim women her age by covering and becoming less visible in her age cohort. Those months overlapped with the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which she also experienced heightened anxiety about infection and mortality. Yet, after a year, she decided that the pleasures of being in a social majority no longer corresponded with her desire to prioritize her relationship with Allah. Like Siti, she chose to remove her headscarf to honor her religious practice.



**Figure 11.** A selection of profiles of women's heads in profile designed to invite everyday Indonesian women to recognize themselves as participants in efforts to fight corruption. At <http://www.spakindonesia.org> (accessed 3 July 2022, but it is no longer online).

### Conclusion: Styles on Trial

Aisyah, Dewi, Siti, and Tika each illustrate how navigating the shifting terrain of ethical sociality with kin, friends, strangers, and even things can change. As they made sense of the national news during the period I have described, their humor and heartbreak were simultaneously theorizations and ethical evaluations of their lives and of others (see McGranahan 2022). In the process, their suspicion of certain forms of beauty and their pursuit of other kinds underscored the fundamentally aesthetic nature of ethical life. In a sense, their perceptions of their own lives, their friends' lives, and each other were small-scale trials, neither as spectacular as global fashion shows nor as punishing as national corruption cases, but nonetheless attuned to the intersection of beauty and justice. Rather than therapeutic closure, the popular appeal of exposure had created its own cycle in which women's faces were intensely read for evidence of social progress or regress, constraining and reopening the semiotic forms available for political critique. Their responses to national and transnational escapades underscored the intersection of corruption as financial, ethical, and aesthetic fields. In dialogue with media coverage (both as cover and as media documents), modest styles therefore came to feel like an omen of some future scandal as much as a sign of a religious conversion. The desires these hermeneutic impulses indexed should remind us of the persistent attachments to the boundaries of public and private, and the cathected investment in using women's bodies in the service of those boundaries. Altering and evaluating their own dress, their political participation, and their religious practices, the small choices my friends made invite us to reconsider the role of revelation in creating collaborative life. By questioning the pleasures of seeing and of being seen, they each proposed slightly different versions of coexistence. Neither proselytizing nor secular, they articulated what Kenneth George described as an orientation with the divine by eliciting ethical, ideal, calming relations with fellow humans by means of care for the sacred (2010).

The actions my friends have taken over the years also entail personal pleasures and risks, thrilling in part because they may involve approaching the edges of transgressive conduct, as Claire-Marie Hefner has argued of young pious women finding ways to socialize with the opposite sex or safely use fashion or cellphones (2019). Yet, in considering the conditions that framed the women I have described here, I have shown how the combination of political, economic, semiotic, and feminist perspectives embedded in the fascination with women's faces, covered and not, reveals that their paths to living together are as important to the processes of political life as are formal electoral processes or judicial actions. Activist appeals to naming evil or demanding justice called upon their own pieties, which were tempting but often still totalizing. Neither were their choices exclusively private conduct undertaken as individuals, given that they were only meaningful in correspondence with the communities of sensibility in which women's appearances are intensely scrutinized for signs of communal affiliation and personal morality. Instead, they were their own attempts at creating simultaneously ethical and beautiful lives, a value that is neither exclusively Muslim nor Indonesian. To the contrary, the dynamic, affective convergence of personal conduct and shared futures can, if we allow it to, capture the attention of anyone who is open to sensing it.

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