INDONESIAN ISLAM, MAINSTREAM MUSLIMS AND POLITICS

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Indonesian Islam—or to a great degree, Southeast Asian Islam in general—has a number of distinctive characters vis-à-vis Middle Eastern Islam. Indonesian Islam, by and large, is a moderate, acommodative kind of Islam, and the least Arabicized Islam. Therefore, Indonesian Islam is much less rigid compared to Middle Eastern Islam.

For that reason, *Newsweek* magazine not long time ago call Indonesian Islam as "Islam with a smiling face"; Islam which in many ways is compatible with modernity, democracy, and plurality. Despite these distinctions, Indonesian Islam is not less Islamic compared to Islam somewhere else. Geographically, Islamic Indonesia is far away from the Middle East, but that does not mean that Indonesian Islam is religiously peripheral.

The *Pancasila* State

With its distinctive characters, it is not surprising, therefore, if Indonesia—the largest Muslim nation in the world—according to a report entitled "Freedom in the World 2002: The Democracy Gap" released by Freedom House New York is one of "bright spots" of democracy together with other pre-dominant least Arabicized Muslim countries such as Bangladesh, Nigeria, and Iran. Freedom House found that while there is an obvious democracy deficit in the Islamic Arab world—which is called as Arabic core—democratic ferment is considerable in countries which have predominant or significant Muslim population such as Albania, Bangladesh, Djibouti, the Gambia, **Indonesia**, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra

Leone, and Turkey.

The fact that democratic ferment is considerable in Indonesia can be clearly seen in the success of Indonesia to conduct general elections in 1999 and 2004. The two elections have shown that Indonesian Muslims do not have any problem with democracy; in fact, Islam is compatible with democracy. The peaceful general elections of 2004, which included direct presidential elections that eventually won by Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Muhammad Jusuf Kalla, the current President and Vice President of the Republic of Indonesia respectively, has consolidated democracy in the country even further. Indonesia is now not only the largest Muslim country, but also the third largest democracy in the world, after India and USA.

It is important to point out that as the third largest democracy and the largest Muslim country in the world, neither is Indonesia an Islamic state, nor is Islam the official religion of the Indonesian state. Despite the fact that almost 90 per cent of Indonesian total population (more than 220 million) is Muslim, Indonesia since its independence on August 17, 1945, is the Pancasila state. Pancasila (Five Pillars) consists of; first, belief in One Supreme God; second, just and civilized humanity; third, Indonesian unity; fourth, people democracy led by wisdom through deliberation and representation; and fifth, social justice for all Indonesian people.

Pancasila, accepted by virtually all Muslim, secular and non-Muslim leaders, is the common ideological platform (*kalimatun sawa*) of the Indonesian state that is has a lot of diversity and plurality, not only in terms of ethnicity and culture, but also in terms of religion. For mainstream Muslims, however, the Pancasila is already Islamic enough; all pillars of Pancasila are basically in conformity with the fundamental teachings of Islam. There were (and still are) splinter groups that wished to established an Islamic state in Indonesia both through constitutional and illegal means—like rebellion in the late 1950s—but they all failed, particularly because mainstream Muslims did not support the idea.

The adoption of Pancasila makes Indonesia is neither theocratic nor secular state. Even though some foreign observers love to call Indonesia as a secular state, Indonesian state is not secular in a strict sense of the very term 'secular'. Indonesia is founded—as stated in the Preamble of the 1945 Constitution and Pancasila—on the basis of the belief in One Supreme God. As a consequence on this, religion is not fully separated from political and public life. In fact, the Indonesian state since its independence, has the Ministry of Religious Affairs as a part and parcel of the state bureaucracy. The Ministry is responsible for the administration of social and political aspects of the believers; it does not intervene in theological and doctrinal

matters of any religion.

The fact that Indonesia is ideologically not a secular state, makes those who aspire to create an Islamic state in this country lost their raison d'etre. Since the Indonesian state with Pancasila ideology is already Islamic enough, there is no strong reason for mainstream Muslims to transform Indonesia into an Islamic state. That is why any attempt to create an Islamic state Indonesia fails to attract the interest of mainstream Muslims.

Role of Women

The formation of those distinctive characters of Indonesian Islam mentioned above has a lot to do with two factors at least; firstly, peaceful spread of Islam, which is called by TW Arnold in his classic book, *The Preaching of Islam*, as "penetration pacifique". The spread of Islam was not through the use of force coming from Arabia, for instance, but rather by way of slow penetration through centuries involving accommodation of local belief and cultures. This process can be also called as the "indigenization" or "vernacularization" of Islam. Secondly, structure of Indonesian society which is very different from Middle Eastern society. To take one example, while Islamic Middle Eastern society is a male-dominated society where women are confined to domestic sphere, Islamic Indonesian society is basically more loosely structured, where women enjoy much greater freedom.

The election of Vice President Megawati Soekarnoputri to replace the embattled President Abdurrahman Wahid on July 23, 2001, represents freedom that women enjoy in Islamic Indonesia. Indonesian Muslim women since the early spread of Islam in the archipelago from the 12th century onwards in fact played an important role in public life. In the seventeenth century there were already four successive queens (*sultanah*s) in the Acehnese sultanate. Therefore, the election of Megawati Soekarnoputri to the presidency is not without historical precedence.

President Megawati gained uncontested support not only from the MPR (Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat, or Peoples' Consultative Assembly) but also from the bulk majority of Indonesian Muslims. She was accepted by Islamic or Muslim-based parties like the PPP (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, or United Development Party), PBB (Partai Bulan Bintang, Star and Crescent Party), PK (Partai Keadilan, Justice Party), PKB (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, Nation Awakening Party), and PAN (Partai Amanat Nasional, National Mandate Party). The PPP which staunchly had opposed Megawati on religious ground in the pre- and post-general election of 1999,

also accepted Megawati as president; and in fact the national chairman of PPP, Hamzah Haz, was elected during the special session of MPR in July 24, 2001, as Vice President creating a duet of leadership that consisted of secular nationalist represented by Megawati and religious nationalist represented by Hamzah Haz.

It is important to make it clear that mainstream Muslim organizations such as the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah—each of which claims a membership of 40 and 35 million followers respectively—did not have any objection on religious reason to Megawati being a female as the president.

Indonesian Muslim women are now occupying various sectors of public life, ranging from cabinet ministers, government bureaucracy, legislature bodies, NGO activists to education and business. Despite that, there is a lot to do in order for Indonesian Muslim women to achieve a much better position in public life.

Mainstream Organizations

The existence of the NU, Muhammadiyah and many other mainstream Muslim organizations throughout Indonesia is again another distinctive feature of Indonesian Islam. These Muslim organizations are non-political, operating not only as religious organizations, but also as social, cultural, and educational organizations. These organizations own thousand of schools,and *madrasah*s from elementary to university levels, *pesantren*s (traditional Islamic boarding schools), health centers, co-operatives, peoples' credit unions, environmental preservation centers, and many others.

Furthermore, they are a perfect representation of civil society since they are 'voluntary, independent from the state, and self-regulating, working for the better ordering of society. Most of these Islamic-based civil society organizations were founded in the colonial period; Muhammadiyah—inspired by the reformist movement in Egypt in the early 20th century—was established in 1912. And since then, Muhammadiyah is known as a modernist Muslim movement. The NU—the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia—was founded in 1926, and since then is known as a 'traditionalist' Muslim organization.

As civil society organizations, these Muslim organizations play an important role as mediating and bridging forces between society on the one hand, and the state on the other. In much of their history they are not involved in practical and day-to-day politics, called as 'low politics'. Rather, they are involved in the so-called 'high politics', that is, politics of morality and ethics. There is little doubt that they have strong political leverage in

Indonesian political processes. In this respect, they also play an important role as actors of governance, influencing the decision making processes.

Islamic-based civil society organizations have been instrumental in the democratization process, even during the period of the autocratic Soeharto regime. The leaders of these Muslim organizations were involved in the democracy movement throughout the period; in fact they were at the forefront of the opposition movement against the regime.

The role of Islamic-based civil society organizations in the consolidation and deepening of democracy in Indonesia is also instrumental. With a strong emphasis on the role of civil society in democratic process, they are expected to able not only to consolidate their own organizations in order to be able to function more effectively, but also to disseminate the ideals of democracy; building civic culture and civility in the public in general. For that purpose, they have been involved in such programs as voters' education, civic education, gender equity and the like. In addition, they also conduct a number of programs to combat corruption and create good governance.

Radical Groups

There is a number of hardliner Muslim groups who came to the forefront in more visible, vocal, and militant manner in the aftermath of the terrorists' attacks on the WTC New York and the Pentagon Washington DC on September 11, 2001. Even though these groups, like the Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Islamic Defense Front), Lasykar Jihad, Hizb al-Tahrir (Party of Liberation) and Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI, Indonesian Council of Jihad Fighters), exerted only a limited influence among Indonesian Muslims as a whole, they tried to make use any possible issue related to Islam and Muslims for their own purposes.

The existence of hardliner, militant, radical, or even "fundamentalist" Muslims within Indonesian Islam, so obvious recently, is actually not new. There were radical groups during the period of both Presidents Soekarno and Soeharto that attempted to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia. These groups had been known as the DI/TII (Dar al-Islam/Tentera Islam Indonesia, or Islamic State/the Army of Islam in Indonesia) in the 1950s. Later, during Soeharto period, there were also radical groups like the NII (Negara Islam Indonesia, Islamic State of Indonesia) and "Komando Jihad" (Jihad Command) groups that, again, attempted to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia. Some of these radical groups during Soeharto period were believed to have been engineered by certain army generals in order to

discredit Islam.

The fall of President Soeharto from his long-held power of more than three decades, followed by political liberalization, has brought momentum for the new Muslim radical groups. Many of them are unknown before, such as the Front Komunikasi Ahlu-Sunnah Wal-Jama`ah (FKASWJ) with its better known paramilitary group, the Lasykar Jihad (Jihad Troops), the Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defense Group), the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (Indonesian Council of Jihad Fighters), the Jamaah al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin Indonesia (JAMI), and some other smaller groups. It is conspicuously clear that these groups are led by figures of Arab—particularly Yemeni—origin; the leader of FPI is Habib Rizq Shihab, the Lasykar Jihad is Ja'far Umar Thalib; the MMI is Abu Bakar Baasyir; the Ikhwan al-Muslimin Indonesia is Habib Husen al-Habsyi.

These groups tend to adopt a literal interpretation and understanding of Islam. They insist that Muslims should practice only what they call as the "pure" and "pristine" Islam as practiced by the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions (*Sahabah*, or the *Salaf*). In terms of this, they can be included among the Salafi movements. Based on their literal understanding of Islam and Salafi's activism, they attacked discotheques, bars, and other places they considered as the "places of vices".

In addition, there are older groups that have been in existence since Soeharto time, but escaped the regime's harsh measures. The most important of such groups is the Hizb al-Tahrir (Party of Liberation), which was originally established in Lebanon by Shaykh Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, and firstly introduced to Indonesia in the 1970s. The main objectives of the Hizb al-Tahrir are to perpetuate what they regarded as the true Islamic way of life globally and, most importantly, to re-establish the *khilafah* (caliphate), a universal Islamic political entity. The Hizb Tahrir is quite popular among disenchanted students and young people, not only in the Middle East, but also among Muslim students pursuing their degrees in Western countries. After the fall of Soeharto the Indonesian Hizb al-Tahrir becomes more visible, assertive, and vocal to voice their ideals' Despite that, its does not seem to increase in any significant way.

There is little doubt that all radical groups have in one way or another certain connections at either theological or organizational levels or both with particular groups in the Middle East or elsewhere in the Muslim world. It is difficult, however, to ascertain their possible connection with Usamah bin Laden or al-Qaidah. The leaders of FPI, Lasykar Jihad and JAMI have denied any connection with Usamah bin Laden or al-Qaidah. In fact many leaders of these groups are very critical of Usamah bin Laden whom they

accuse of being "*Khariji*" (*Khawarij* or the seceders), that is those Muslims who seceded from the *ummah* (Muslim nation).

Radical groups by and large have been lying low following the arrest and trial of perpetrators of bombings in Denpasar, Bali (2002), Marriot Hotel, Jakarta (2003), and at the front of Australian Embassy, Jakarta (2004), and again in Bali (2005). Some of the perpetrators of these bombing have been sentenced to death or life-imprisonment or other heavy sentences. A good number of suspects that linked in violent and terrorist act one another have been in police custody. There is no doubt that resoluteness of the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono administration to uproot terrorist groups is a key factor to resolve the matter.

Empowerment of the Moderates

The increased radicalism of the groups mentioned above undoubtedly has a lot to do with the government failure to enforce the law and solve a number of acute social ills such as continued ethno-religious conflicts, marked increase of crimes, rampant corruption at every level of society, more widespread drug abuse, and the like. The decline of government authority coupled with the demoralization of the police force are the most important raison factors for these groups to take law into their own hands. Therefore, one important key to solve the rise of radicalism is restoring government authority and re-strengthening law enforcement agencies.

With the seeming continued rise of radical groups, the two largest mainstream Muslim organizations—the NU and Muhammadiyah—have voiced their objection to radical ways. But their voices seem to have been not strong enough, or have tended to be overlooked by mass-media, which is more interested in the voices and action of radical groups. But since November 2002, the two organizations began to take a more serious attention to the impacts of Muslim hardliners upon the image of Indonesian Islam.

Therefore, leaders of both organizations have agreed that they will again project a calm image of Islam that protects people of other religions. The national leaders of the NU and Muhammadiyah state that the image of Islam has been politicized by certain radical groups for vested interests; such radicalism demonstrated by the groups represents the political influences and not the Islamic way of thinking. Both organizations will carry out a series of activities to tackle extremism through open dialogues, joint-programs and the like. Both also appeal to Indonesian government to take harsh measures against groups that transgress the law. Should the law enforcers be afraid to take stern measures against radical groups, they could pave the way for the

increased radicalism. With the stronger position held by mainstream Muslim organizations, the influence of radical groups can be contained and, therefore, they will fail to have any significant impact that could change the peaceful nature of Indonesian Islam.

Further strengthening and empowerment of democratic elements within mainstream Indonesian Muslims are one of the ways to address radicalism. It is responsibility of all of us to enhance Indonesian nascent democracy; and given Muslim numerical majority, this could be done through mainstream Islamic institutions and organizations that have committed themselves to the ideals and building of Islamic civility, democracy, plurality, tolerance and peaceful co-existence among various groups, and respect for human rights.

To take an example, sponsored by the Asia Foundation (TAF) in Jakarta, the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University (UIN) Jakarta has launched a new required course in 2000 on "Civic Education" for its new students and student leaders. Through the "Civic Education" course, students are introduced to the idea and practice of Islamic civility in relations to democracy, plurality, gender equity and other related subjects. The program has been implemented nation-wide by involving other 6 UINs 14 State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAINs), 32 State Islamic colleges (STAINs), and other public and private universities. We hope that through this kind and other similar programs, Indonesia as a bright spot of democracy is able to make democracy as the "only game in town".

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