

ISLAM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: TOLERANCE AND RADICALISM

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Religious life is often colored by myths. In fact many religions have their roots in the myths, originating from enchantment with gods and nature. Revealed religions like Islam, Christianity and Judaism (the Abrahamic religions) are, however, generally opposed to the mythologising of their doctrine. As a strict monotheistic religion, Islam, in particular, strongly emphasizes the need to keep the faith free from any kind of myth. This is especially true of myths relating to God, since that could lead to “associationism” (*shirk*), which is one of cardinal sins in Islam.

Despite this, understandings of Islam among Muslims are often colored by misperception, if not, in fact, myths. There is also a great deal of misperception and mythologising among outside observers about Islam and Muslims. This is – in most cases – the result of complex historical, sociological and political factors that are beyond the scope of this lecture. Instead, today a few myths that specifically relate to Southeast Asian Islam will be mentioned and critically assessed.

The first myth – still strong among many Western scholars and observers – is what I call the “myth of *abangan*”, that is, that Southeast

Asian Islam is somehow not 'real' Islam. The very term "religion of Java" (1968) coined by the influential American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, to describe Islamic life among the Javanese, reflects a reluctance to recognize the 'Islamicity' of Islam in Java, or even in Southeast Asian in general. It is something 'Javanese' rather than something Islamic. Through his distinction between *santri* (strict and practicing Muslims) and *abangan* (nominal Muslims), Geertz argued that majority of Muslims in Java, and by extension in Indonesia in general, were *abangan*, that is, nominal, only.

As a result, Southeast Asian Islam historically, sociologically, culturally and politically has often been regarded as marginal and peripheral vis-à-vis Middle Eastern Islam. It is viewed as an obscure phenomenon and only a "thin veneer of symbols attached to a supposedly solid core of animistic and Hindu-Buddhist meaning". A consequence of this is that, Islam is thus regarded as having no significant impact on Southeast Asian culture.

It is true that Southeast Asian Islam is among the least Arabicized forms of Islam, largely as a result of a process of Islamization that was generally peaceful, and gradual; but one should not therefore be misled by the *abangan* "myth". The reality is that while pre-existing local beliefs and practices resisted the continued process of Islamization, a purer and orthodox form of Islam did, nevertheless, steadily penetrate deeper into parts of the region.

A number of scholars have observed this phenomenon. As early as 1950s, for example, Harry J. Benda maintained that the Islamic history of Indonesia [as elsewhere in Southeast Asia] is essentially a history of *santri* cultural expansion and its impact on Indonesian religious life and politics (Benda 1958:14). Two decades later, Howard Federspiel (1970:3) concluded

that over the past four hundred years, Indonesia [as well as Islam in Southeast Asia in general] has slowly been moving towards a more orthodox form of religion, while heterodox beliefs and practices have declined considerably over the same period. Later research by such scholars as Woodward (1989), Pranowo (1994), Ricklefs (1998) and others have confirmed further the strong tendencies towards Islamic orthodoxy and the blurring of real distinctions between *santri* and *abangan*. The process is also known in Indonesia as ‘santrinization’, a process that involves some indigenization or contextualization.

A move towards Islamic rejuvenation can be observed clearly among Muslims in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, in the last two decades. New tendencies in religious observance, new institutions, new Muslim groups and new Islamic life-styles have increasingly been adopted by many Muslims in this period. More and more new mosques with new architecture (usually derived from the Middle East) have been constructed – and they are full of congregations, mostly youthful. At the same time, more and more Muslims have gone on the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca. In fact the number of the pilgrims (some 225,000 Muslims per annum) from Southeast Asia is the largest compared to those coming from other areas of the Muslim world. At the same time, an increasingly large sum of religious alms and donations (*zakat*, *infaq* and *sadaqah*/ZIS) have been collected from well-to-do Muslims and distributed among the poor and deprived Muslims. New institutions for collecting ZIS have been formed, like the Dompot Dhua`fa Republika Indonesia, which has been phenomenally successful.

Changes in the policies of government towards more conciliatory approaches to Islam and Muslim groups in both Indonesia and Malaysia

since the 1990s have greatly contributed to the rise of new Islamic institutions, such as Islamic banks (also known in Indonesia as syari`ah banks, since they operate in accordance with the syari`ah/Islamic law), Islamic insurance (*takaful*), Islamic people's credit unions (BPR-Syari`ah, or Bank Perkreditan Rakyat Syari`ah, and BMT or Bait al-Mal wa al-Tamwil). Malaysia, of course, developed these Islamic institutions much earlier than Indonesia. But now in Indonesia, "conventional banks"—following the Malaysian example—also open Syari`ah divisions or branches.

In addition, new and high-quality Islamic educational institutions have been established in Malaysia and Indonesia, either by Muslim private foundations or by the state. In Malaysia, this includes the formation of International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) by the Malaysian government, followed by a number of other Islamic universities and colleges in Malaysia – the latest one being the College University Islam Malaysia (CUIM).

In Indonesia, Islamic higher education now consists of 33 State Islamic Colleges (Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam/STAIN) which were established in 1997 in various cities throughout Indonesia. There are also 13 State Institutes for Islamic Studies (Institut Agama Islam Negeri/IAIN) established in the the 1960s and early 1970s. In the last three years, three IAINs and one STAIN, have been converted to full-fledged university (Universitas Islam Negeri/UIN). These include not only faculties of Islamic studies (religious sciences), but also faculties such as Economics and Social Sciences, Science and Technology, Psychology and Faculties of Medicine and Health Sciences.

These Islamic higher educational institutions undoubtedly play an important role in the modernization of Muslim society. Owing much to

“rational” and “non-denominational” approaches to Islam, graduates of IAINs, STAINs, and UINs in general have been recognized by Indonesian society in general as having progressive, inclusive, and tolerant views of Islam. In contrast, many students and graduates of “secular” universities such as the University of Indonesia (UI) or Bandung Institute of Technology (Institut Teknologi Bandung/ITB) tend to be more literal in their view and understanding of Islam. STAIN, IAIN and UIN graduates are instrumental in the building and spread of Islamic institutions such as the Islamic schools, *pesantrens* (traditional Islamic boarding educational institutions), *madrasahs* (Islamic religious schools), NGOs and Majelis Ta’lim (religious group discussions in offices and society at large: Jabali & Jamhari 2002).

In the meantime, new quality schools and *madrasahs*, such as the Sekolah Islam al-Azhar, SMU Madania, SMU al-Izhar, and the like have also been established in ever-increasing number since the late 1980s. These Islamic schools are known as “*sekolah Islam unggulan*” (quality Islamic schools) are attended mostly by children of the Muslim elite. As I have argued elsewhere, these schools play an important role in the “re-Islamization” or “santrinization” of Muslim parents.

At the same time, the *madrasahs*—now according to Indonesian Educational Law of 1989 equivalent to “secular schools”—and *pesantrens* or *pondok* (the Islamic boarding schools) have been modernized as well. They now employ the national curricula issued by the Ministries of National Education and of Religious Affairs. It is inaccurate to assume that in Indonesia the *madrasahs* and *pesantrens* have sufficient discretion in their curriculum to teach subjects according to the wish of their teachers or the foundations that own them. It is therefore wrong to regard them as the

“breeding ground” of Talibanism or extremism, as is the case for many *madrasah* in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

Pesantren are now also established in the urban areas. In the past, *pesantren* have been associated mostly with rural areas, and have thus been a symbol of Muslim backwardness. This is no longer true. Furthermore, in the past *pesantren* were generally located in Java, but now more and more have been founded also in Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi and other islands. *Pesantren* now play a number of roles. They are not only centers of Islamic education, but also centers of social development and empowerment. As centers of Islamic education, *pesantrens* now offer a variety of education, ranging from general schools to *madrasahs* to vocational training, up to university level studies. And, as centers of social development, *pesantren* conduct programs and activities related to economic development, social welfare, appropriate technology for rural areas and so forth.

All of these developments represent wider changes within Southeast Asian Muslim communities. Since the 1980s, a new Muslim middle class has developed. While there is no specific term used to denote them in Indonesia, in Malaysia the rising Muslim middle class is called the “new Malay” (cf Alatas 1996). Although this new Muslim middle class is heavily tied to, and dependent upon, the ruling regimes in the respective countries, there is little doubt that they have played a significant role in the construction of, and support for, the new Islamic institutions. Furthermore, they are instrumental in the spread of new life-styles, such as the widespread use of *jilbab* for women, or of “*baju koko*”, Muslim shirts – or even a new tradition of conducting religious discussions, seminars, and ceremonies in hotels and other prominent places.

Despite all of these new attachments to Islam, it is important to point out that, by and large, they have not led to significant changes in political attitude. The majority of Muslims in Southeast Asia continue to hold fast to the political arrangements achieved in the period of independence following World War II. It is true that after the fall of Soeharto, many Islamic parties have been established in Indonesia; but they have usually failed to win significant votes, including in the general elections of 1999 and 2004 (Azra 2000). Likewise, in Malaysia, although PAS (the Islamic Party) was able to increase its power in elections during the last years of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, it is clear that the secularist UMNO remains too strong to beat. In fact, the new Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, has been able to reverse the trends and UMNO once again won the last elections at the expense of PAS, which saw its power decline significantly. It seems that it is almost a myth that the Islamists would be able to wrestle political power in both Indonesia and Malaysia, therefore to exaggerate the strength and influence of the Islamists in the region is to contribute to another myth.

One of the most obvious features of Islamic politics in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, is conflict and fragmentation among political elite. A great number of Islamic political parties have appeared, especially in Indonesia in the post-Soeharto period. These parties have been involved not only in gaining political power, but also in determining the meaning and interpretation of Islam. But, again this has not hindered the development of Indonesia's – long awaited – democracy. The surprisingly peaceful elections of 2004 only consolidated this democracy further. The new – and, once again, secularist – leadership of Indonesia under Presiden Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Vice President Muhammad Jusuf Kalla

now have popular mandate to deliver better political, economics, social and cultural conditions in Indonesia.

Transnational Connections

It is clear that in addition to the internal dynamics in Malaysia and Indonesia that contribute to the increased momentum of new attachment to Islam, transnational or global influences have also played an important role. As I argued elsewhere (Azra 2004), the tendency toward orthodoxy in Southeast Asia had its origins in the intense religio-intellectual transnational contacts and connections since the 16th century between Malay-Indonesian students and their co-religionists and *'ulama'* (religious scholars) in the Middle East, particularly in the *Haramayn* (Mecca and Medina). Returning students or scholars implanted a more *shari'ah*-oriented Islam in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, which forced the so-called “pantheistic” (or *wujudiyah mulhid*) Sufism to cede ground (Azra 2004). This was the beginning of the rise of a more scriptural Islam, or in Reid’s term, “scriptural orthodoxy” in Southeast Asia (Reid 1988) that we see today.

Intense contacts between Southeast Asian Islam with that of the Middle East continued in the 19th century and, by the end of that century, new transnational waves of Muslim discourse reached the shores of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. These were brought into the archipelago not only by returning students, but also by *haj* pilgrims who from the 1870s traveled in ever increasing numbers to the Holy Land. The most important discourse in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago arising from this wave was pan-Islamism, but other waves followed in the early 20th century, originating from Cairo, and categorized by many observers as “Islamic modernism”. The spread of this new discourse had led to the formation of such modernist

Muslim organization as the Muhammadiyah (1912), al-Irsyad (1913) and Persis (in the early 1920s) (Azra 2002a; Laffan 2003).

In contemporary times, the transnational waves that influenced Muslim discourse in Southeast Asia no longer stem only from the *Haramayn* or even from Cairo. In fact, the previously respected position of the *Haramayn* (or, indeed, Saudi Arabia as a whole), has been in decline for the last few decades, at least so far as the discourse of Southeast Asian Islam is concerned. In fact, *Wahhabism*, which originated from Arabia in the late 18th century and which is now the official religious ideology of Saudi Arabia, remains an anathema for many, if not most, Muslims in Southeast Asia. The traditions of Islam in Southeast Asia are, in the main, simply incompatible with Wahabi literalism, puritanism and radicalism. Therefore we should not overplay the influence of Saudi Arabian *Wahhabism* in Southeast Asia. There are, of course, traces of *Wahhabism* in the region, but they do not significantly influence the course of mainstream Southeast Asian Islam (Azra 2002a).

In recent times, other places in the Middle East, or elsewhere in the Muslim world, have begun to exert more influence and have, in turn, left their mark on Muslim discourse in Southeast Asia. Thus, since 1980s the discourse developed by such scholars as Abu al-A`la al-Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb, Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani and Middle Eastern movements like al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun (and its splinter groups), Hizb al-Tahrir and the like began to spread in Southeast Asia. The Iranian Islamic revolution of Ayatullah Khomeini in 1979 further inspired Islamists in the region to be more assertive.

At the same time, however, Muslim thinkers living in the Western hemisphere, such as Ismail al-Faruqi, Fazlur Rahman, Seyyed Hossein Nasr

and others, provide another stream of Islamic thought that is widely circulated in Southeast Asia. Through their books, which have been translated in Indonesian and Malaysian languages, they continue to exert a significant influence among Southeast Asian Muslim thinkers.

It is important here to point out that despite all the influences from the outside, Southeast Asian Muslim thinkers have also developed their own distinctive thought. This is no simple, uncritical adoption of thought from abroad. In fact, there are continued attempts among Southeast Asian Muslim thinkers and 'ulama' to formulate ideas that respond to modern Islamic thought elsewhere in the world but which has greater relevance for Southeast Asian historical, sociological, cultural and political contexts. This is apparent in the concepts introduced by Southeast Asian Muslim scholars such as "indigenization", or "contextualization" of Islam in Southeast Asia.

Continued "indigenization", makes it almost a cliché to say Southeast Asian Islam is distinctive, having a different expression compared with Islams in the Middle East or elsewhere in the Islamic world. In the 1990s Southeast Asian Islam was dubbed by leading international media such as *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines as "Islam with a smiling face". Islam in the region was generally regarded as a brand of peaceful and moderate Islam that has no problem with modernity, democracy, human rights and other tendencies of the modern world.

It is worth mentioning here that, according to a report entitled "Freedom in the World 2002: The Democracy Gap" released by the Freedom House in late December 2001, Indonesia was identified as one of the "bright spots" of democracy among dominant or pre-dominant Muslim countries. The 'democracy gap' is especially clear in the Islamic Arab

countries, but Indonesia, and – I would argue – Malaysia as well, show considerable democratic fervour.

However, although democracy is strong in post-Soeharto Indonesia, its relationship with Islam is not always so clear. Discussion and debate on this issue is now at the forefront, as both discourse and reality, in Indonesian politics. The conflicting political trends that emerged with Indonesian democratisation from the interregnum of President B.J. Habibie until today has also created much confusion in this regard but the success of the peaceful general elections of 1999 and 2004 has shown that Islam and democracy in Indonesia are not inherently opposed and can, in fact, work well together.

Looking again at religious, sociological and political realities of Southeast Asian Muslim, I would argue that there is only very limited room for radical discourses and movements in Southeast Asia in general. It is therefore simply wrong to assert that Muslim radicalism in the Middle East will find a fertile ground in Southeast Asia.

Radicalization of Militant Groups

In the last several years, however, some foreign observers as well international media have asserted that the face of Southeast Asian Islam is undergoing significant change. Increasingly, Islam in the region is regarded as experiencing a rapid process of radicalization - worse still, the Muslim region of Southeast Asia is now perceived by some as a potential “hotbed of terrorism”. This perception, I would argue, is another popular ‘myth’ about Islam. There is – of course – the potential for radicalism among Southeast Asian Muslims, as there is in most communities, but it is going too far to view the region as becoming a “hotbed”.

This must be explained carefully. The rapid political changes that have been taking place at the national, regional and international levels, especially after the September 11, 2002 tragedy in the US, have indeed witnessed a rise in Muslim radicalism in the region. The arrest of individuals and groups in Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, and Indonesia has increasingly indicated that they have regional links with each other and probably with international terrorist groups as well.

The investigation by the Indonesian police of the Bali bombings on October 12, 2002, for instance, seems to disclose complex connections between the individuals and groups that carried violent and terrorist activities including the Marriot (2003) and Australian Embassy (2004) bombings. A clearer picture of the radical networks appears and there are at least two conspicuous patterns uncovered from police investigation of the Bali bombings. Firstly, some of the perpetrators of the bombings are alumni of the Ngruki Pesantren, the chief of which is Abu Bakar Baasyir, widely regarded as the spiritual leader of Jama'ah Islamiyyah, the core of Islamic radical groups in Southeast Asia. Secondly, some of the perpetrators had been living in Malaysia in the period of Abu Bakar Baasyir's self-exile to escape President Soeharto's harsh measures against him. (Azra, 2003b; ICG August 2002; ICG December 2002; Nursalim 2001).

This perception of the rise of radicalism among Southeast Asian Muslims appeared rapidly after the September 11, 2001 tragedy in New York and Washington DC. The perception grew stronger in the light of successive events in the aftermath of "9-11", especially the Bali bombings that left two hundred innocent people dead. The bombings at a McDonald's outlet and the Haji Kalla car show room in Makasar, South Sulawesi, on the

eve of `Id al-Fitr (December 5) the following year, confirmed this perception of a tendency towards terrorism among certain radical individuals and groups in Indonesia.

Certainly, there can be little doubt that the September 11, 2001 tragedy did rapidly radicalize certain individuals and groups among Muslims in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia. The American military operations in Afghanistan following the attacks on World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC has, unfortunately, given real momentum for the radicals to assert themselves. The Bush administration's attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq has fuelled bitter resentment among the radicals. The arrests of suspected radicals in Malaysia, Singapore, and Philippines has added fuel to their anger and bitterness toward the US and symbols that they consider as symbolizing American imperialist arrogance, such as McDonald's, or Kentucky Fried Chicken, outlets.

In addition, political realities in Indonesia have also contributed to radicalization of certain individuals and groups. The breakdown of law and order and the relative weakness of central government authority after the fall of President Soeharto provided room for the radicals to assert themselves. In fact, they attempted in a number of ways to destabilize the President Megawati, whom they had opposed since her PDI-P won the 1999 general elections (Azra 2003a).

One should not be misled, however, with these complex developments. In fact, radicalism among certain groups of Indonesian Muslims in particular is not new. Although Southeast Asian Islam in general has been viewed as moderate and peaceful form of Islam, the history of Islam in the region shows that radicalism among Muslims has existed for at

least two centuries. In West Sumatra in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, for example, the Wahhabi-like Padri movement led other Muslims in the area to subscribe to their literal and puritanical understanding of Islam. This violent, armed movement aimed at spreading a pure and pristine Islam it presented as the Islam practiced by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (the *salaf*). The Padri, however, failed to gain support from majority of Muslims and, as a result, their movement, which ultimately failed, became isolated as the only precedent for Wahhabi-like radicalism in the Southeast Asia region.

The Padri movement did, however, mark a shift in the continued influence of Middle Eastern Islam on the course of Southeast Asian Islam. As I have argued elsewhere (Azra 2003b), from the 16th century to the 18th century, Islam in the Middle East exerted very strong influence on Islamic intellectualism and religious life in Southeast Asia, mainly through complex networks of Middle Eastern and Malay-Indonesian '*ulama*' who, as mentioned earlier, played a crucial role in the peaceful reform of Islamic intellectualism and life in Southeast Asia over the centuries. I should mention, however, that toward the end of the 18th century, discourse on *jihad* (holy war) was introduced by such prominent Malay-Indonesian scholars as 'Abd al-Samad al-Palimbani and Daud ibn 'Abd Allah al-Patani, as a response to the increased encroachment of European colonialism in Southeast Asia. This version of *Jihad* was usually not directed against other Muslims. In West Sumatra, however, it was. It is thus the Padri of West Sumatra who set a precedent for radicalism among Southeast Asian Muslims by launching *jihad* against their fellow Muslims.

Politico-Religious Roots of Radicalism

The root causes of radicalism among Muslims have always been very complex. The complexity is even greater now, because of a broad range of factors that are working to influence the course of Muslim societies as a whole. In the past, before the modern period, the driver of radicalism were mainly internal, that is, radicalism was usually a response to internal problems faced by the Muslims, such as the rapid decline of Muslim political entities and continued conflict among Muslim communities.

Many Muslims in the colonial time strongly believed that the sorry situation of the Muslim world – dominated by Western Christians or atheists – had a lot to do with the socio-moral decay of Muslims themselves, resulting from wrong religious beliefs and practices. According to this argument, they had simply abandoned the original and real teachings of Islam and were thus being punished.

As a result, some Muslims felt it necessary to conduct *tajdid* (renewal) or *islah* (reform) not only through peaceful means, but also by force and other radical means they considered to be more effective. This, of course, included declaring *jihad* (holy war) against Muslims who were regarded as being have gone astray. Islam of course emphasizes the need for Muslims to renew their beliefs and practices. In fact, in one of his *hadith* (traditions of the prophet), the prophet Muhammad states that there would be a reformer or renewer (*mujaddid*) of Islam, coming at the end of every century to renew and revitalize Islam. At the same time, however, it is clear that the same *hadith* prohibits the use of radical and violent means in the efforts to renew and reform Islam.

One of the strongest tendencies in the discourses and movements of Islamic renewal and reforms is a tendency towards what is seen as the pure

and pristine Islam practiced by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (the *salafs*). That is why most of the Islamic renewal movements are identified as *Salafiyyah* (or *Salafi*, or *Salafism*). There is a very wide spectrum of Islamic discourse and movements that can be included as *Salafiyyah* (Cf ICG 2004; Jamhari & Jahroni 2004). So much so, that I can make a distinction between “classic *Salafiyyah*” and “neo-*Salafiyyah*”; or “peaceful *Salafiyyah*” and “radical *Salafiyyah*”. The Wahhabi movement in the Arabian Peninsula that gained momentum in the late 18th century can, for example, be categorized as both ‘classic’ and ‘radical’ *Salafiyyah*. This is also true of the Wahhabi-like Padri movement in West Sumatra in the 19th century, described briefly earlier, which was “classic *Salafism*”, where internal factors with the Muslim *ummah* or community were its driving force.

The spectrum of “neo *Salafiyyah*” discourses and movements is certainly very complex. The term “neo” in the first instance refers to the period of the modern period, beginning with the harsh encounters between Muslim societies and Western colonial powers from the 16th century onwards. During this period, the external factors—associated mostly with the Western world—that could incite radicalism became increasingly more and more dominant. In fact, the West has been accused by many Muslims as being responsible for many, if not most, of the problems that Muslims have faced in the last several centuries. Confronting continued Western political, economic and cultural domination and hegemony, many Muslims were afflicted by a kind of defensive psychology that led to, among others, a belief in “conspiracy theories”.

There were of course outbursts of Muslim radicalism in Southeast Asia in the period of the 19th century and up to World War II, during the

heyday of European colonialism in the region. These were a different kind of radicalism. They were in fact *jihads* to liberate Muslim lands (*dar al-Islam*) from the occupation of the hostile infidel European coming from the lands of war (*dar al-harb*). According to classical Islamic doctrines, *Jihad* against hostile infidels may be justified and can, in fact, be considered as just war; *Jihads* of this kind are believed to be wars in the way of God (*Jihad fi sabil Allah*).

Looking at the whole history of radicalism among Muslims, I would, however, argue that radicalism among Muslims is more political rather than religious. In some instances, the original motive could be religious, but the movements soon become very political. Political developments in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia after World War II were important factors in the rise of new kind of radicalism among Muslims. For instance, disappointed with the Indonesian military policies of rationalization of paramilitary groups following Indonesian independence on August 17, 1945, the Muslim militia leader, Kartosuwirjo rebelled against the embattled Republic in the name of Islam. This was the origin of the Dar al-Islam (DI, or Islamic State) or Negara Islam Indonesia (NII, Islamic State of Indonesia) and the Indonesian Islamic Army (Tentera Islam Indonesia/TII), organisations that aimed to establish an Islamic state, *dawlah al-Islamiyah*, in Indonesia. Even though this rebellion spread to South Sulawesi and Aceh in the 1950s, it failed to gain support from the majority of Indonesian Muslims, who, after a bitter ideological struggle in the last year of Japanese occupation, had accepted Pancasila (“five pillars”) as the national ideology, a doctrine that enshrined religious plurality and rejected an Islamic state. As a result, the Indonesian army was able to muster sufficient support and crush these radical movements.

The idea of the establishment of Islamic state (*dawlah al-Islamiyyah*) is, however, one of the most significant issues that has continually arisen as an aspiration among certain groups of Muslims in Indonesia. Groups among the moderates, such as the Masjumi party under the leadership of Mohammad Natsir, for instance, also sought to transform Indonesia into a *dawlah al-Islamiyyah*. It is important to point out that – by contrast to DI – these attempts were carried out through legal and constitutional ways, more precisely, through parliament. But they consistently failed, mainly because Islamic parties were involved in quarrels and conflicts among themselves and, therefore, failed to gain a majority in national election of 1955, thus, also in the parliament. This has been the pattern ever since, at all subsequent elections.

It is important to note here that despite this failure, moderate Muslim leaders in Indonesia have never resorted to illegal means, such as armed rebellion, to transform Indonesia into an Islamic state. In contrast, there has been growing tendency among them to accept Pancasila as a final political reality, as the common platform for a plural Indonesia that includes a majority Muslim population. At the same time, however, there remain individuals and Muslim groups who keep the idea of establishing an Islamic state in Indonesia alive. Depending on the political situation, these people operate underground or openly in achieving their goals. They may also collaborate with disgruntled elements of the military or even with other radical groups which, in terms of ideology, are incompatible.

The Soeharto New Order regime was not on good terms with Muslim political forces in general – at least not in the period of 1970s and 1980s. In fact there much mutual suspicion and hostilities between the two sides and President Soeharto took very harsh measures against any expression of

Islamic extremism. But at the same time, it is widely believed that certain military generals such as Ali Murtopo and Benny Moerdani recruited ex Darul Islam/TII members to form *Komando Jihad* (Jihad Command), to conduct subversive activities in order to discredit Islam and Muslims (Ausop 2003).

This is a “marriage of convenience”, or in Islamic terms *nikah mut`ah*. We must therefore be very careful in analysis of radical groups. Some could be genuine, motivated mostly by religion, but others could be “engineered” radicals sponsored by certain individuals and groups of people for their own political ends.

Contemporary Muslim Radical Groups

The fall of President Soeharto after more than three decades in power unleashed idle Muslim radicals. The euphoria of newly-found democracy and lifting of the “anti-subversion law” by President BJ Habibie, provided a basis for radicals to express extremist and radical discourses and to conduct their activities in a more visible manner. The lack of law enforcement because of demoralization of the police and military (TNI) has created a kind of legal vacuum that has been exploited by the radical groups to take law into their own hands.

Some of the most important radical groups should be mentioned. These include are the Lasykar Jihad (LJ), formed by the Forum Komunikasi Ahlussunnah Wa al-Jamaah (FKAWJ) under the leadership of Ja`far Umar Thalib; the Front Pembela Islam (FPI/Islamic Defence Front) led by Habib Rizq Shihab; the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI/Council of Indonesian Jihad Fighters) led by Abu Bakar Baasyir; the Jamaah Ikhwan al-Muslimin Indonesia (JAMI) led by Habib Husein al-Habsyi; and the Hizb al-Tahrir

Indonesia (HTI/Indonesian Party of Liberation) (Bamualim et al 2001; Azra 2003a; Fananie et al 2002). Some of these groups have been either disbanded by their own leaders—like the Lasykar Jihad—or have been laying low following the arrests and trial of the perpetrators of the Bali and Marriot Hotel bombings.

It is also clear that these radical groups are independent and do not have any connection with established, mainstream Islamic organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) or Muhammadiyah, etc. Nor are they affiliated with Islamic political parties. This is because the radical groups do not trust other established Muslim organizations, whether socio-religious or political in nature. This is mainly because, in the view of these radical groups, established Muslim organizations are too accommodative and too compromising in their political and religious attitude vis-a-vis Indonesian political and religious realities. Political struggles and conflicts among fragmented political groups, as well among the pro- and anti-status quo groups involving also circles in the Indonesian military (TNI) in the aftermath of President Soeharto's fall, provide another impetus for the radical to asserts themselves.

I would suggest that there are at least two categories of these radical groups. The first group includes radical groups that are basically home-grown, such as the Lasykar Jihad, FPI and some other smaller groups. The second group includes Middle Eastern affiliated- or oriented groups, like the JAMI—which has its origin in the al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun in Egypt—and Hizb al-Tahrir, which was initially founded in Jordan by Syaikh Taqi al-Din Nabhani in the 1950s. All of these radical groups do, however, share very strong Middle Eastern-oriented ideology. In religious terms, they subscribe to the ideology of radical Salafism; and in terms of politics, they are

believers in the ideology of *khilafatism* which aims for the establishment of a single, universal *khilafah* (caliphate) for all Muslims in the world.

Yet, although these radical groups aim to establish a *dawlah Islamiyah* of *khilafah* in the region, they can be differentiated from the old Darul Islam/NII movement in Indonesia. Due to conflicts and splits among the ex-Darul Islam/NII members resulting from Soeharto-era Indonesian intelligence operations, as mentioned above, radical groups tend to operate independently from older groups (Ausop 2003).

It is important also to point out that the *khilafah* and *dawlah Islamiyyah* are conspicuously absent in the discourse of mainstream Muslim organizations such as NU, Muhammadiyah and other major organizations throughout the country. In fact, leaders of these organizations believe that concepts such as *dawlah Islamiyyah* are simply a new invention among certain Muslim thinkers and groups resulting from Muslim encounter with Western modern concepts of the nation-state. They conclude that the Indonesian model of the Pancasila state is already in conformity with Islam.

Looking at the whole phenomenon of radicalism among Muslims in Southeast Asia, or in Indonesia in particular, it is clear that it has a long and complex history. The history of radicalism among certain Muslim groups also shows that there are many causes for radicalism and that there is a strong tendency that their motives are political rather than religious. It is also conspicuous that their radicalism has a lot to do with the disruption of political and social systems as a whole. The absence of law enforcement, or its weakness, is certainly an important factor in this regard, as radicals take the law into their own hands in the name of their own vision of Islam.

‘Blessing in Disguise’?

The terrorist bombing in Bali on October 2002 is certainly a tragedy for contemporary Indonesia. In fact, the bombing reflects a new phase of violence and terror in the country. This can be seen not only in the relatively large number of the victims, but also in the use of so lethal a weapon by the terrorists to achieve the greatest possible psychological impact, both domestically and internationally. Worse still, there is suspicion that one of the perpetrators was a suicide bomber, reminding one of the Palestinian suicide bombers. It is difficult for Indonesian people in general to accept that individuals among them can be so ruthless and inhumane.

But now, after intensive police investigation, the Bali bombing can, for several reasons, could be seen in some ways as a ‘blessing in disguise’. This is because, first, the police have been able to catch the alleged perpetrators of the bombing, and second, because, by doing so, they have uncovered fresh evidence of networks of radicals in Indonesia and Southeast Asia in the general. The revelation of the existence of these networks has been crucial for establishing the fact that the radicals have been working in Southeast Asia, or in Indonesia in particular, in the last several years to achieve their ends, the most important of which is supposedly an “Islamic State of Nusantara” that would consist of Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Singapore and, probably, also the Muslim area of South Philippines (Azra 2003b).

A great deal of credit, then, must be given to the police who have worked tirelessly to investigate the case and have been successful in uncovering links between one perpetrator and another.

These events are important in Indonesia because the revelation of the networks of the radicals by the police has silenced many of the skeptics, who

from the very day of the Bali blast had maintained that the bombing was simply a US or Western plot to discredit Islam and destroy the image of Muslims in the country. The skeptics, some of whom are prominent Muslim leaders, who seemed to believe in the so-called “conspiracy theory”, in fact accused the Megawati government of slavishly surrendering to the wishes of President Bush of the US in particular. This kind of accusation was also made against Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono during Presidential elections of 2004 but it failed to make much impact on the public and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono won the elections regardless.

The disclosure of the networks of the radicals also shows that the “conspiracy theory” does not ring true. The statements of Amrozi, Imam Samudra and their accomplices, allegedly involved in the Bali and other bombings, make it clear that the bombings have been motivated by both “genuine” radicalism and hatred against the US and other Western powers. The fact that the perpetrators show no remorse for the innocent victims has also shown that they have been more strongly motivated by their own violent ideology than by anything else and has done much to lessen even tacit tolerance of radicalism.

Finally, the revelation of the networks of radicals points to the fact that there are indeed terrorists among Indonesians who happen to be Muslims and who are more than happy to use violent means to achieve their ends, even against fellow Muslims. Before the police disclosures, there was a widespread reluctance among leaders of Indonesian Islam to admit that there are terrorists among Indonesian Muslims who have misused the teachings of Islam to justify their terrorist activities. In fact some prominent Muslim leaders have, in the past, issued statements that create an impression

not only of defending the radicals, but even of condoning violence and terrorist acts.

Empowerment of the Moderate

It is now the right time for Southeast Asian Muslim leaders – the bulk of whom are moderates – to sincerely admit that there is a serious problem of radicalism among certain Muslim individuals and groups. This problem should be directly addressed by moderate Muslim leaders, hand in hand with law enforcement agencies, for the sake of the image of Islam as a peaceful religion and of Southeast Asian Muslim followers as “Islam with a smiling face”. The problems of the radicals should be seen at two levels; first, the abuse and manipulation of certain Islamic doctrines to justify radicalism and terrorism. This abuse undoubtedly comes from literal, Wahhabi-inspired, interpretation of Islam. The second problem is more basic and it relates to the use of violence and terrorism, which, in itself, undoubtedly runs contrary to Islam.

Therefore, it is time now for moderate Muslim leaders to speak more clearly and loudly that literal and puritanical interpretations of Islam will only lead to extremism that is unacceptable to Islam, and that Islam can not condone, let alone justify, any kind of violent or terrorist act. There is absolutely no valid reason for any Muslim to conduct activities that harm or kill other people, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Any kind of resentment and deprivation felt by any individual or group of Muslims cannot, and must not, be used to justify any kind of desperate and inhuman act of this sort.

Furthermore, moderate Muslim leaders should not be misled by the claims and assertion of the radicals. The radicals are shrewd not only in abusing Islamic doctrines for their own ends, but also in manipulating

Muslim sentiment through the manipulation of mass media, particularly television. Claims that the arrest of certain radical leaders means the suppression of Islam and the *'ulama'* are very misleading. Similarly, claims that the police investigations in Indonesia of certain *pesantren* in the search for the perpetrators of the bombings, is a first step towards hostility and suspicion against the whole *pesantren* system is even more misleading.

The simplistic identification of radical leaders and groups with Islam and *'ulama'* is likewise very misleading. In fact the radicals are only a very small fraction of the ocean of moderate Muslims in Indonesia who from their sheer number can be fairly regarded as the representation of the peaceful nature of Southeast Asian Islam. Therefore, the moderates should be very careful not to support any impression that could lead to the identification of the radicals with Islam and Muslims at large in the region.

Some have argued that the defensive attitude of certain moderate Muslim leaders, particularly in Indonesia, originates from the trauma of political engineering and abuses by the police and military of the Muslims during the Soeharto period. This argument, I believe, seems irrelevant to the political situation in contemporary Indonesia. There is no evidence that the Megawati Soekarnoputri government was hostile to Islam and Muslims. In fact, President Megawati seemed very sensitive on Muslim issues compared to her predecessor, President Abdurrahman Wahid, despite the fact that he comes from the *pesantren* milieu. Lacking Islamic credentials, President Megawati in fact carefully avoided making statements, let alone policies, that could spark opposition from Muslims in general. This also seems true for President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who is close to some Muslim groups and, in fact, made political alliances with Islamic parties like the Crescent and Star Party (PBB) and the Justice and Welfare Party (PKS).

There has, of course, been a lot of criticism of President Megawati Soekarnoputri who was regarded as very hesitant and indecisive and wary of taking harsh measures against the radicals, because she was worried—it is argued—of possible backlash from Muslim public. It appears that she did not realize that the moderate Muslim leaders and organizations were more than willing to rally behind her in opposition to any kind of religious extremism and radicalism. This was made clear by statements of Hasyim Muzadi (national chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama/NU) and Syafii Maarif (national chairman of Muhammadiyah) in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 tragedy in the US that Indonesian Islam cannot accept any kind of religious extremism. Furthermore, the two largest Muslim organizations, representing some 70 million Indonesian Muslims, have reached an accord to tackle religious radicalism through their various policies and programs.

As for the police force, it has become increasingly difficult for them to abuse human rights to the extent they did in the past. The fall of Soeharto's authoritarian regime and the rise of democracy in Indonesia have forced police to be more sensitive to human rights issues and to the protection of the rights of the alleged perpetrators of any kind of violence and terrorism. But this is, however, not to suggest that the police are free from heavy-handedness and insensitivity, but rather that it is becoming harder for them to get away with it. It is the duty of the public to control and watch the police closely in their investigations in order not only to prevent possible wrongdoings and mishandlings of the suspected criminals by the police, but also to establish credible procedures and support the due process of law.

Therefore, moderate Muslim leaders while maintaining a watchful eye regarding police efforts against perpetrators of violent and terrorist acts,

should also support police in their investigations. I suggest that one of the most important root causes of violence and terrorism in present day Indonesia is the almost total absence of law enforcement and, worse still, the persistence of impunity for state officials. In fact the vacuum of law enforcement and of decisive actions by the police have been important *raison d'être* for certain radical groups who have decided to take the law into their own hands through unlawful activities, such as the raids on discotheques, nightclubs, and other places the radicals believe to be sources of social ills.

Above all, the future of moderate and peaceful Southeast Asian Islam is dependent on a fair, objective, pro-active attitude on the part of the moderate majority in responding to developments among Muslims in the region. Reactionary and defensive attitudes are not going to help in efforts to show to the world that Islam is a peaceful religion and that Muslims are peace loving people. Again, it is time for the moderates to be more assertive in leading the way to reestablish the peaceful nature of Southeast Asian Islam.

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