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Is Moderate Islam in Indonesia Under Threat?



Islam has often been associated with the Middle East since the religion originated from Arabia. Yet, the country with the highest number of followers is Indonesia. About 87 percent of its 255 million people professes Islam. In the past, observers regarded Indonesian Muslims as the “smiling face” of Islam as they uphold diversity of opinions, engage in inter-faith and intra-faith dialogues and allow local traditions and customs to continue. By contrast, scholars and observers today provide a different assessment, referring to the country as experiencing a “conservative turn”, writes stars alumnus Dr. **Norshahril SAAT**, Senior Fellow of Regional Social and Cultural Studies at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore.

Indonesia’s conservative turn

The presence of radical groups with some committing acts of terror strengthens this view. This so-called conservative turn occurred after the fall of President Suharto’s New Order government (1966-1998), which ran Indonesia as a military state. In 1998, the country underwent democratization and later decentralization, which ironically led to more openness. The outcome of democratization is mixed for it allowed conservative groups to flourish. In 2005, the conservative ulama institution MUI (Ulama Council of Indonesia) issued a fatwa (religious opinion) declaring the ideologies of secularism, pluralism and liberalism to be deviant. Earlier, it has also considered minority Muslim sects Ahmadiyah and Shiism to be un-Islamic. The fatwa indirectly gave conservative self-vigilante groups the ammunition to harass followers of these sects, which have long existed peacefully in the country. All this happened under the watch of Indonesia’s sixth president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY). Under the Joko Widodo (Jokowi) presidency (since 2014), the mass protests seeking to topple Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (or Ahok) in 2016 and 2017 are other recent examples demonstrating the country is tilting towards the right of the political spectrum. Ahok is a Christian-Chinese known for his straight-talking and hard-handed approach in tackling problems. In the run up to the 2017 Jakarta

gubernatorial election, Ahok gave a speech which was politicised by his opponents to mean insulting Islam. He lost the election and was later charged under the country's blasphemy law. The 212 movement, as it is called referring to the 2nd December protests, continues to be a hallmark of what the conservatives can do. These are examples of non-violent extremism in Indonesia, strengthening the view that the country is experiencing a conservative turn. There are certainly other examples that further cement this negative image of the country: such attempts by terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) to inflict mass damage on civilian population, as well as violent raids on churches in the name of religion. ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) has also recruited Indonesians to fight alongside them in the Middle East.

Besides growing conservatism, some Indonesian Muslims have also responded to global problems in a fatalistic way, particularly when facing the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite warnings from the government to suspend mass gatherings including Friday services, one group insisted on organizing a massive religious gathering of about 8000 people in Gowa, South Sulawesi. It was only cancelled in the last minute. Even then, the suspension of the Friday services was rather late considering that the virus transmission is already happening in Jakarta.

Indonesia remains the smiling face of Islam

However, the notion of a conservative turn in Indonesia is overstated. Indonesian society is diverse, not only between different faith groups, but within different faith groups. For example, dominant Islamic organizations in the country, such as NU (Nahdlatul Ulama or The Revival of the Ulama) and Muhammadiyah, have spoken against extremism and radicalism. They have also been active in promoting local interpretations of Islam, through Islam Nusantara (Archipelagic Islam) and Islam Berkemajuan (Developmental Islam). In essence, these ideas support that any interpretation of Islamic text must consider circumstances, context and history. The stand taken against the Covid-19 threat by the religious elite from these two organizations, and other independent ulama, is progressive. The prominent ulama agree to prioritize protection of human life over the performance of religious rituals, and for the community not to proceed with religious gatherings in mosques during times of crises. They argue that protecting human lives is also a God-fearing act. The conservatives, conversely, feel that they should fear God more than the virus.

Thus, progressive voices remain influential in Indonesia. Unfortunately, scholarship on Islam and Muslims today is predominantly infiltrated with issues on radicalism. And the selection of issues also tends to demonstrate a Middle East bias. It is time for us to examine the contribution of Southeast Asian scholars, especially local Indonesian Islamic thinkers, and to make their works accessible to a global audience. We can discern progressive ideas pertaining to politics and governance, culture and heritage, international relations, poverty and inequality, and climate change. Some of these thinkers are well versed in both religious and social science traditions, having received education from traditional Islamic schools and Western universities. These individuals include the late Nurcholis Majid (University of Chicago), Ahmad Syafii Maarif (Ohio University) and Amin Abdullah (McGill University). They are able to discuss contemporary problems by unlocking religious sources and understanding them through the social sciences and humanities lens. They have also gained the trust of the Muslim community. Regrettably, the contributions of these thinkers have been understated not only globally, but also by their neighbouring countries such as Malaysia and Singapore which have a sizeable Muslim community



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