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Ann Kull

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Regulating Religion in Southeast Asia and the Pacific

Azhar Ibrahim

Denial, Trivialization and Relegation of Pluralism: The Challenges of Managing Diversity in Multi–religious Malaysia and Indonesia

Abstract: *This article attempts to discuss the various societal responses to religious diversity and pluralism in Malaysia and Indonesia. Its focus is on the Muslim–majority nations of Indonesia and Malaysia, where the idea of religious pluralism among Muslims has taken various shapes. While the state's management of pluralism is so far characterized by politics of expediency and accommodation to ensure stability, law and order, and harmony, it is the societal or community responses that matter most. Advancing and nurturing the ideas of religious pluralism in social and religious discourse requires commitment in persistency and planning. This, in turn, calls for the need to know how the ideas of pluralism and religious diversity have been understood in society. The challenge of nurturing a substantive pluralism in society warrants recognition and support. This can be made in the realms of theological discourse, political will, educative approach, as well as institutional support.*

Key words: religious pluralism, theology, reformism, politics of contestation, state and religion.

Abstrak: *Artikel ini membahas beragam respons masyarakat terhadap keragaman agama dan pluralisme di Malaysia dan Indonesia. Fokus artikel ini adalah pada mayoritas Muslim di Indonesia dan Malaysia, di mana gagasan tentang pluralisme agama di kalangan Muslim mengambil bentuk yang beragam. Sementara pengelolaan negara terhadap pluralisme dibentuk oleh politik akomodasi untuk menjamin stabilitas, hukum dan ketertiban, serta harmoni, namun respons-respons dari masyarakatlah yang banyak berperan. Meningkatkan dan menjaga gagasan-gagasan pluralisme agama di dalam diskursus agama dan sosial membutuhkan komitmen yang gigih dan perencanaan. Hal ini pada gilirannya mengundang kebutuhan untuk mengetahui bagaimana ide-ide pluralisme dan keragaman agama dipahami dalam masyarakat. Tantangan mempertahankan pluralisme yang substantif dalam masyarakat menuntut adanya pengakuan dan dukungan, dan ini bisa diperoleh melalui diskursus teologis, kehendak politik, pendekatan edukatif, serta dukungan kelembagaan.*

Kata kunci: pluralisme agama, teologi, reformisme, politik kontestasi, negara dan agama.

الخلاصة: يبحث هذا المقال في مختلف الاستجابات التي يبديها المجتع إزاء تنوع الأديان وتعدديتها في ماليزيا واندونيسيا، وتكون الركيزة في الأكثرية للمسلمين باندونيسيا وماليزيا حيث ظهرت أفكار حول التعددية الدينية بين الأوساط المسلمين ما أخذت صورة متنوعة بينما كانت إدارة الدولة للتعددية تتم بناء على السياسة التسامحية لضمان الاستقرار، وسيادة القانون والحفاظ على النظام والانسجام، بيد أن استجابة المجتمع هي التي لعبت دورا أكبر ؛ إن الارتقاء بفكرة التعددية الدينية والحفاظ عليها في الكلام عن الشئون الدينية والاجتماعية ليحتاج إلى التزام كبير وخطط ؛ وهذا أمر يستدعي بدوره الحاجة إلى معرفة كيف تكون التعددية وتنوع الأديان مفهومة لدى المجتمع، إن تحديات الدفاع عن التعددية الجوهرية في المجتمع يحتاج إلى إقرار وتأييد، الأمر الذي يمكن تحقيقه من خلال الكلام اللاهوت والرغبة السياسية والمنهج التعليمي والتأييد المؤسساتي.

الكلمات الاسترشادية: تعددية الأديان، اللاهوت، الإصلاح، السياسة النزاعية، الدولة والدين.

This article aims to highlight, discuss and evaluate the discourses on cultural and religious pluralism that have emerged in Malaysia and Indonesia. Generally, cultural or political pluralism has been recognized as crucial in maintaining the harmony and integrity of these countries. However, the issue of religious pluralism remains one of the most challenging and contentious in both; cultural and political pluralism is fairly visible and recognizable, although the reception of the idea of religious pluralism remains contested. Despite this, some headway has been made in Indonesia in particular. In the context of discussing the cultural and political pluralism of these two countries, it is imperative for us to include discussion of the discourse on religious pluralism since this dimension has wider implications on the state and fate of pluralism. Some of the questions that will be raised in this discussion, among others, include the extent to which pluralism as a concept features prominently in the countries' Islamic discourse, the role of the state in forging discourse on pluralism and how much it can be a positive contributing factor in nurturing and enhancing religious pluralism, or otherwise.[1]

But it must be emphasized here that whether pluralism is embraced, resisted or ambivalently acknowledged, it is conditioned by a number of factors ranging from politics, socio–cultural, legal, educational, and the like. Pluralism is dependent on no single factor. This point is important to highlight so as to avoid the naivety that religion alone is responsible for pluralism's emergence or denial. Moreover, it must also be emphasized that religious pluralism — although a vital asset — cannot be simply reduced to an antidote for all ethno–religious conflicts, since contributing factors for these are often many and varied.[2]

Meaningful Pluralism

In a plural society, diversity as a lived and recognized phenomena may not necessarily mean the existence of pluralism. A plural society, in other words, may manifest plurality or diversity of its component but not necessarily embrace or entrench that pluralism. The latter can be defined as "a situation in which a variety of systems of thought, worldviews, or explanations of reality coexist without anyone of these having gained hegemony over the others".[3] While this definition focuses mainly on pluralism in the social, political and cultural domains, other definitions emphasize "the diversity of our understanding of religious

texts and the diversity of our interpretation of religious experiences".[4] This obviously deals with the issue in a more theological and philosophical plane. Pluralism can be seen in various realms inasmuch as its presence can be manifested in a variety of shades or spectrum of intensity. Pluralism as ideas and practices includes, among other things: (a) the recognition of the diversities in society; (b) the presence of common space to be shared, and not simply in the market place[5] but also in the social, cultural and political spheres; (c) the recognition of equal rights and duties as citizens.

Engagement in pluralism discourse must be a concern in the academic and public spheres, as well as in the religious communities. Diana Eck sees pluralism as affirming the reality of difference and, in the case of cultural–political pluralism, as a reference to the "constitutional acceptance of various faiths…[it] can be justified in purely 'secular' terms as the most pragmatic way of creating a harmonious society where members of different religious faiths co-mingle."[6] But another equally important aspect of pluralism entails a more theological basis under which the adherent of the faith no longer sees the path of salvation and the 'truth' exclusively belonging to them. It is this sense of theological pluralism that has been one of the controversial points in contemporary religious discourse in the Christian–Judeo and Islamic faiths.

Equally important is the need to note the fact that religious pluralism must be distinguished from religious tolerance, inasmuch as it should not be confused with political and cultural pluralism. As noted by one scholar: "'Tolerance' implies evil within the Other…the Other is tolerated as much as the body 'tolerates' a small dose of strychnine." This is different from religious pluralism because the latter is "a set of beliefs that start from a very different set of premises; it acknowledges the salvatory value of various paths, dispensing with the idea of a single Path to God and a single way of understanding".[7] According to Richard K. Khuri: "True pluralism arises when those who care about the infinite (and the eternal) *simultaneously acknowledge* that the finite can never exhaust the infinite (nor the temporal, the eternal)".[8]

Muslim intellectuals like Abdolkarim Soroush embrace essentially an inclusive salvation position as opposed to the religious orthodoxy that maintains exclusive salvation for Muslims only, and he reiterates the need to make the distinction between positive and negative pluralism.

Positive pluralism itself is integral within the religious traditions, and this is manifested and interpreted in various dimensions. In religious pluralism, in spite of our own faith commitments, we are ready to acknowledge the divinity and soundness of other religious traditions. This is not to say that religious tolerance has no value at all, but it must be emphasized that, as Bassam Tibi correctly points out, "religious tolerance is meaningless if it is not coupled with acceptance of the equality of the other [which] is essential in relations among religions".

As noted earlier, a plural society does not necessarily suggest the presence of pluralism. But the creation of a pluralistic society is one of the aims of pluralism. Through pluralism we can attain the experience and the will to live together in the recognition and acceptance of human diversities. This willingness to learn from one another points toward a more significant step in the understanding of our own being. Firstly, pluralism is a reality that cannot be denied, and it becomes a duty and right for all of us to affirm and embrace it. Secondly, pluralism calls for the recognition that all human beings are equal, and the respecting of rights must be accorded without any exception. Thirdly, pluralism warrants the recognition of the 'particular', commonly inspired by the universal. Fourthly, the spirit of universal humanity or brotherhood becomes the basis of pluralism to nurture and deepen itself, and this is enhanced by enlightened thinking and religious traditions. Indeed, a meaningful pluralism is not only confined in terms of inter–religious and inter–ethnic relations, but also includes for our acceptance the diversities within our own religious traditions, alongside the pluralism in the realms of gender, class and sexuality.[9]

The State and Pluralism

As correctly pointed out by many scholars, the reality of many societies today is their plural nature. But a plural society does not necessarily mean the presence and deepening of pluralism. Recognizing plurality, in other words, is not the same as affirming pluralism, which can only be possible through an active discourse and engagement in and between the public and academic domains. There is little chance for pluralism to nurture or expand if the public discourse is insulated from the academic discourse on pluralism. This is further aggravated when political actors in a society mainly pay lip service to the need of pluralism, with the state acting as the guardian or overseer of the

plurality. Such a situation will not augur well for any substantial entrenchment of the idea of pluralism in society.

Pluralism as a discourse requires multi–dimensional support and initiatives. The affirmation of the idea of citizenship — and the fundamental rights and duties of a citizen — should enhance the efficacy of pluralism. This is the role that state leadership can take affirmatively. However, doing so may be not possible in a political environment in which ethnic classification becomes the mainstay of the state–people relationship, rather than the nexus of state–citizen rights and duties.[10] While the state's management of pluralism is normally characterized by politics of expediency and accommodation to ensure stability, law and order, and harmony, the responses from society are what matter most — or that bear the most lasting results and significant impacts. The so–called 'pragmatic pluralism' of the state here should not be confused with the substantive pluralism as advocated by the religious progressivist. Pluralism is not something that can be imposed politically by the state, though it can — especially through the political leadership — play an instrumental role in providing conditions and a basis for which pluralism can be recognized and affirmed. This means a genuine political will transcend sectarian impulses and group interests, in the name of a true nation and community building.

In the case of Malaysia and Indonesia, the recognition for plurality of the nation is mentioned in the pronouncements of the state ideologies, Rukunegara[11] and Pancasila[12] respectively, which somehow have become less prominent in recent decades. But this is more a political vision of its founding fathers rather than a serious and consistent ideological outlook to build a nation on the basis of democracy, social justice and pluralism. The state policies of assimilation and asserting the cultural supremacy of one ethnic/religious group over the other are obviously a stumbling block to pluralism,[13] as demonstrated in the Malaysian and Indonesia experiences. The management of diversity by these states and the notion of pluralism advanced by their leaderships warrant closer scrutiny, with the aim of identifying some of the contradictions and constraints of the state in managing pluralism amiably.[14]

In other words, the mere advocating of pluralism is not suffice, especially if it is simply uttered in political slogans without serious reforms in the institutions and structures to support the space for pluralism to emerge and be sustained. Instead, advancing and

nurturing the ideas of religious pluralism in the social and religious discourses requires commitment in its persistency and planning. This in turn calls for the need to know how the ideas of pluralism and religious diversities have been understood in society. In summary, the state, with its political will and resources at its disposal, can manage religious diversity only to some extent. Legal and bureaucratic means may ensure stability and harmony in the multi–religious context, but this is altogether different from the religious pluralism that needs more than a political instrument to be accepted and nurtured in society. This requires us to look into the cultural, religious and intellectual domains where the very idea of pluralism can, on one hand, be developed and disseminated, or mutilated and rejected on the other. This is in fact the challenge of maintaining diversity and forging the idea of religious pluralism in society.

Pluralism in Islamic Scholarship and Reality

Today, pluralism has become one of the central themes in contemporary Islamic discourse — that is, it is not only crucial for Muslim relations with other faiths, but also how Muslims societies manage their own multi–religious and multi–ethnic nation states[15], plus the internal diversities within the Muslim community. Throughout the Sunni Muslim world the subject of pluralism is increasingly getting wider attention in the progressive and reformist circles.[16] Scholars and activists like Gamal-Al-Banna, Mahmut Aydin, Abdulaziz Sachedina, Asghar Ali Engineer, Reza Shah-Kazemi, Chandra Muzaffar, Sohail H. Hashim, Farid Esack, Abdou Filali-Ansary and many others, have been at the forefront in discussing pluralism.[17] In the West there is an active and productive discourse engaging and advocating pluralism, such as those initiated by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Hans Kung, John Hicks, George F. McLean, Leonard Swidler, Paul F. Knitter, Harold G. Coward, Ramundo Panikkar and few others.[18] Many of these scholars have also engaged with fellow Muslim intellectuals on the issues of religious pluralism. Mahmud Aydin, for instance, sees the need to emphasize the theological deliberations among Muslims that recognize the religious plurality from within and without.[19] Similarly, Gamal al-Banna notes a strong Quranic recognition and commitment to pluralism,[20] and Hasan Hanafi speaks of the need to reflect critically on our past civilization where pluralism once blossomed but now is

sterile and alien to Muslim societies. In this context, the idea and spirit of pluralism is best nurtured in Muslim society through its own religious traditions while being informed by the concrete realities of the present. But by simply invoking scriptural injunctions to validate a pluralism devoid of context and its sociological basis, it can only be a narcissistic enterprise for, in the end, its main interest is to show the 'enlightened' religious thought rather than seriously argue for pluralism to be nurtured and disseminated in the community.

The challenges of affirming and nurturing pluralism are, therefore, many — be it in the intellectual, theological, socio–cultural or political domains. The prospect for the emergence of pluralism is only possible if we are first able to identify some of the challenges and obstacles preventing it from taking root in society's imagination and practices. In the cultural and religious discourse in both countries there are those who deny and relegate pluralism just as there are those who champion its cause. Generally, Muslims' response to the notion of pluralism in Indonesian and Malaysia can be identified in three forms: (a) denial of pluralism; (b) trivialization of pluralism; (c) relegation of pluralism.

The *denial of pluralism* is evident in the response of ultra–religious traditionalists/exclusivists who see no necessity for the recognition, little more the embracement, of pluralism. The denial often recognizes plurality only as a social fact, and such plurality should remain so as to not disturb the balance of the status quo. Their interpretations of the religious scriptures are rather silent on the recognition and enjoinment for pluralism. Instead, their denial is often justified by scriptural sources, although other ideological interests can be attributed to. The obvious contradiction of the religious exclusivist can be seen when they insist on the universalism of Islam in bringing *raḥmatan li al-'ālamīn*. And yet, in the same breath they insist that Islam is the only true path, for all other religions are aberrant, wayward and corrupt.

The *trivialization of pluralism* can be seen in a more formal way, or simply as the giving of lip service to pluralism, especially in certain periods where such affirmation is needed in order to secure a certain political interest. This kind of response is not uncommon among the ruling establishment, especially in relation to its religious bureaucracy or organizations which have state support. This type of thinking accepts the reality of plurality in society. Living harmoniously and tolerating each other is to them the best way, while the inner contradiction — or

even doublespeak — is not seen as a problem, nor is it to be discussed openly for its sensitivities. Their main concern is to maintain the status quo, for all rethinking is disruptive. One important factor for this trivialization is caused by the misunderstanding or misconception of pluralism itself, thinking that by embracing it will undermine one's own tradition and identity. As a result, pluralism is seen more for its negative than its positive dimensions.

The *relegation of pluralism* can be seen among the slightly moderate religious revivalists — and even in some reformist circles — as their positions and attitudes about pluralism remain fairly ambivalent. These groups may be apologetic, but they do not fully grasp the importance of pluralism in the context of a multi–racial and multi–religious society. This type of thinking does not see the relevance of religious pluralism as the issue to be deliberated. Relegation may occur simply to avoid issues deemed sensitive or, simply, superfluous. Another form of relegation can also come from within academia, where, in an enthusiasm to address radicalism and fundamentalism, it has given little attention to religious pluralism as advocated by the progressive moderates in the public sphere.[21] Such a disinterested academia can have direct impacts on the public discourse, especially so in the case where civil society advocacy for pluralism is weak or absent.

These three categories do not suggest that there is no alternative or positive response towards the idea of pluralism. On the contrary, we should — while maintaining a focus on the Malaysian and Indonesian experiences — highlight some of the emerging and intensifying calls for pluralism in recent years that have gained momentum in progressive circles. By highlighting the denial, the trivialization and the relegation of pluralism, we do not suggest that there is a monolithic tendency to deny and devalue pluralism; neither is there a kind of hopelessness for the current situation. The increasing tide of cultural Islamism and political radicalism in these two countries are often seen as the threat to pluralism,[22] though other factors at work cannot be overlooked. It will be wise to see these responses within a wide spectrum, where the total denial and the total embracement are at opposite ends. Moreover, there are various shades and levels of discourse about pluralism. In between the embracement and rejection of pluralism, there are purely academic discussions that are more textbook–like descriptions that fail to raise the real issues of pluralism and its challenges. Others seem to

romanticize the ideal pluralism as manifested in classical Islam while remaining seriously ambivalent to present challenges,[23] or attributing thematically from Islam in managing plural society. [24]

Debating Religious Pluralism in Malaysia

Malaysia is often depicted as a country where moderate Islam thrives. It is seen as a progressive Muslim country in the club of the newly industrializing economies. The country's relative stability is attributed to a stable political environment and developing economy, where state building accelerated or developed well in comparison to its pace in nation building. The consociational politics of power sharing among the ethnic groups means a relative stability is guaranteed.[25] But this may not tell us the breadth and depth of pluralism in Malaysia unless we look into the discourse. The issues of religious pluralism must be seen in the larger context of Malaysia's post–colonial experience of cultural reassertion, the increasing tide of religious revivalism, bureaucratic and cultural Islamisation, ethnic dynamics and the contestation of political Islam and the reactions of the ruling establishment.[26]

In the world of scholarship on Malaysia various aspects of plurality and pluralism have been widely discussed. Many scholars note Malaysia's highly diverse population and the precariousness of its ethnic and religious relations — especially in the recent years. Some point to the politics of maintaining the pluralism[27] and the dialogues emerging.[28] Some note the historical evolution of a plural Malaysian society,[29] while others look to the distribution of resources and justice.[30] Malaysia's plural society has been a subject of interest since its relative stability and economic advancement have been maintained despite the plural nature of society. Other studies, meanwhile, have noted how the increasing religious resurgence has exacerbated ethnic and religious tensions, made complicated by the competition for space and recognition of rights.[31] While there are Malaysian Muslim academics who have discussed the issue of pluralism, it has often been tackled within the framework of social sciences without much tenor of the reformist religious stance on pluralism[32] — not uncommon to the Indonesian experience.

Plurarity Yes, Pluralism No

In the Malaysian intellectual and public discourse we can see a relatively active discussion on *plurality* rather than pluralism, be it in

English or Malay medium discourse. Plurality is generally accepted as the basis of maintaining diversity of the nation without much openness to recognizing the deeper complexities that impede pluralism, which is integral for nation building. This can be seen in the number of published works on the theme of a plural Malaysia in managing its ethnic diversities, and the little discussion or advocating of pluralism as a concept to be ideally embraced by fellow Malaysians.[33] In recent years, *pluralisme* as a concept has carried negative connotations in the Malay discourse, invariably associated with the heretical ideas of liberal Islam and, even absurdly, linked as part of a Christianization conspiracy on the Malays.[34] Popular religious writings disseminated among the general Muslim public,[35] and even those written for academic audiences, lambasted pluralism as an attempt to undermine Muslims' faith. [36]

In the Malay medium discourse, it's interesting to note that the term *majmuk* — the meaning of plurality — is widely used in comparison to the term *pluralisme*, which suggests altogether a different level of semantic meaning and acceptance. This can be seen from the various books and articles in Malay that discussed the theme of *majmuk* in relation to ethnic relations,[37] religious diversities,[38] tolerance[39] and governance of a plural society[40] in the Malaysian context. All of these areas are generally more descriptive and bend towards maintaining the status quo,[41] rather than providing critical analysis about the issues and challenges of pluralism. In the increasing political contestation in Malaysia, religious issues have become ever more volatile, with the state being pressured to submit to the demands of the religious exclusivists, complicating its position on pluralism and agenda for national unity. Contradictions have not been uncommon in the state's pronouncements of the need for national unity; at the same time it has remained ambivalent or silent concerning the demands and assertions of vocal Muslim religious groups, including its own religious bureaucracies. The exclusivist position on pluralism can come from various groups, ranging from the conservative religious bureaucracy and the revivalist *dakwah* groups that now see themselves as non–government organizations (NGOs) defending Muslim interests and rights. Indeed the strong grip of religious traditionalism and the activism of the *dakwah* revivalist groups, including Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) and Jemaah Islam Malaysia (JIM), set the tone for the Malaysian Islamic community which has resisted the idea of pluralism. Pluralism is basically seen as a threat to Islam and it is often

correlated to challenging the Malays' position as the indigenous people of the country, with the right–wing Malay groups insisting on *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy). In the context of competing politics, the championing for an authentic Islam — free of any liberal influence — becomes an important scoring point for support among the Muslim community.[42]

In an article posted on the website of the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM), there is a clear rejection of multiculturalism, which is seen as undermining Islam in Malaysia. Strangely there is a conflation between multiculturalism and secularism. Firstly, multiculturalism is seen as an alien ideology originating from the liberal Western tradition, both anti–religious and secular in its origin. Secondly, it is erroneously associated with secularism — an anathema to Islam. Thirdly, multiculturalism robs the Malaysian (read Malay–Islamic) identity. The author claims that:

> Multiculturalism, as understood and propagated by its proponents in this country, is not based on diversity, but rather it strives to debunk Islam as a socio–political order. The ideological components of Malaysian multiculturalism can be summarized as a cultural relativism which finds the prominence of Islam in this country intolerable. It rests on the attitude that religion should not be allowed to 'interfere' in our social and political life. Hence, it is important that every Malaysian, especially the Muslims, be made to accept 'the fact' that Malaysia is a 'secular country'. The Malaysian multiculturalism's hostility towards Islam and its repudiation of an identifiable Malaysian culture (based upon Islam) is augmented by a radically new definition of community, one that deviates from the traditional/religious emphasis on family, neighbourhood, house of worship and school, towards an emphasis on race, gender, occupation and sexual preference.[43]

Indeed, the religious exclusivism that is gaining momentum among certain Malay Muslims circles has resulted in confrontations with Christian groups over the usage of the word *Allah*, which worsened the country's strained Muslim–Christian relations. The series of legal issues regarding conversions to Islam and the denouncement of Islamic faith by some individuals sparked the emotional moral panic on apostasy among the Malay population.[44] The objection of certain Muslim groups toward the active evangelism of Christian groups and the use of *Allah* in the Bible and during church services in Bahasa Malaysia, worsened the situation and pointed to precarious multi–religious relations also pitted along ethnic and linguistic lines.[45] They insisted

that non–Muslims should use the term *Tuhan* to refer to God and that *Allah* was reserved exclusively for Muslims — an insistence which has no scriptural injunction whatsoever. In the recent past these groups' concern was about the translation of the Bible into Bahasa Malaysia, seen as an attempt to Christianize the Malays. The controversy over the use of *Allah* culminated, unfortunately, in the burning of several churches in the country. This alarmed the nation to the brink of an open ethnic and religious violence, although political motivation by certain interest groups cannot be discounted.[46]

Similarly, the high–handed policies of religious and municipal authorities have further strained relations with the ethnic Chinese Buddhist and ethnic Tamil Hindu communities over contested temple sites.[47] Moreover, a series of conversion controversies in Malaysia have complicated matters, putting the religious authorities on the defensive. They have slammed those who call for pluralism, considering it a challenge to Islam as the official religion in Malaysia.[48] Many other issues have cropped up in recent years that have pitted the religious authorities against the non–Muslim communities, complicating the attempt towards forging a discourse based on cultural and religious pluralism.[49]

The objection of religious conservatives toward the formation of an inter–religious council by the government is an example of how this group is exerting great pressure on the government. This is especially so as the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) remains in the precarious position of trying to gain Malay support, in the face of growing opposition from the Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliane) party. Several Muslim groups have expressed their fear of demands of equal rights by other religious communities, as this would infringe on the special status of Islam as the official religion of Malaysia. This extreme exclusivist and supremacist stand demonstrates the power of religious conservatives to the point where it is pressuring the government to relent to their demands. When 'Islam Hadhari' was enunciated by the Abdullah Badawi administration as a concept for governance, many expected its progressive and moderate Islamic views to usher in a more inclusive and moderate Islam.[50] A critical analysis of its agenda, however, speaks nowhere of the ideas of religious pluralism in the context of a multi–religious Malaysia. This is further aggravated when the dominant political interests tolerate such exclusivist ethno–religious sentiments in

the name of defending Islam and Malay rights. The emergence of the rightist 'nationalist' Malay groups, such as PERKASA[51] and Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Warisan Ketuanan Melayu Malaysia,[52] which have many views and sentiments with strong racial overtones, has been tolerated by ruling circles — although, not in an overt way.[53] This, along with the religious exclusivists and conservatives, poses a serious challenge for any substantive pluralism to take root in Malaysia, be it at the ideational or practical level.

Strong and open advocation of pluralism is yet to emerge in a significant way in the Malaysian discourse. While a few progressive Malaysian Muslim intellectuals speak of pluralism and emphasize its validity, these are mostly found in the English medium targeting a particular urban middle–class audience. The heartland rural Malays have very little exposure to such discourse, given that their engagement in religious and intellectual discourse takes place in their mother tongue. It is an important point to highlight that the idea of pluralism within the English discourse is not paralleled in the Malay medium. This linguistic factor is a crucial dimension in determining the socialization of certain ideas and concepts in the Malay intellectual, religious and cultural imagination.

Instead of finding such a progressive discourse, the Malay religious and cultural discourse is now flooded with criticisms of pluralism as part of the growing denunciation of liberal Islam throughout the region.[54] Recently, we have seen many Indonesian works against liberal Islam movements, and these ideas have entered into the Malaysian discourse and book market[55]. At the same time one can easily note, however, the absence of those works from Indonesia advocating pluralism. This is partly due to the bureaucratic monitoring by religious authorities in allowing books from neighboring Indonesia to be imported and distributed. Such a practice, in itself, may tell us something about the ideology of the group. Indonesian writers such as Adian Husaini and Jaiz Hartono Ahmad, who lambasted the liberal Islam circles, are becoming the 'intellectual heroes' among the conservative religious circles in Malaysia for their denouncement of secularism and pluralism, including scathing criticism against its promoters. A few Malaysian writers have taken up these themes with full force in recent years, asserting the danger of liberal Islam with its idea of pluralism.[56] Prominent religious leaders have spoken against it in public,[57] while

public forums were organized to forewarn Muslims of its dangers and heresy.[58] While the Indonesian discourse has engaged deeply with many issues of pluralism and even religious inclusivism,[59] including its positive appraisal in the academia,[60] the Malaysian discourse remains dominated with scathing denunciation against pluralism and academic scrutiny in some universities toward the emergence of pluralism and liberalism in Indonesia and Malaysia.[61]

It is also interesting to note that even if pluralism and plurality is recognized in certain religious discourse, the level of discussion remains quite a formal one, and it is not uncommon that we find the repeated claims on the role of Islam in forging pluralism,[62] or simply an apologetic tone that Islam has already promoted and practiced pluralism. Interestingly, many have made inflated claims that Islam could solve all problems and challenges of pluralism in society.[63] These have included an assertion that the implementation of Islamic law would in no way burden non–Muslims or infringe on their rights.[64] In such thinking it is not pluralism that becomes a point of departure for engagement but the assertion of the superiority of Islam as a comprehensive total ideology for Muslims and, even, the nation.

Religious exclusivism and conservatism is not only manifested in the relations with non–Muslim communities, but also in intolerance towards Muslim groups and personalities whom are considered to have deviated from the true teachings of Islam. The religious authorities have, over the years, accused Sisters in Islam (SIS) activists as having deviated from true Islamic teachings, as their activism only served the interest of the religion's enemy. The intolerance of religious authorities can be seen in their strong judgment against dissenters like Kassim Ahmad concerning the Ḥadīth issues, Muhammad Asyhari of the Al-Arqam congregation and many other groups deemed to have deviated from the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* orthodoxy — considered the only authentic path of Islam. Such action against non–conformists clearly shows how plurality is neither tolerated nor recognized in Malaysia.

The challenge in Malaysia is not only from religious exclusivists but also parochial nationalistic Malay rightist groups, vocal in asserting Malay supremacy (*ketuanan Melayu*). In the name of national unity and to prevent polarization among the ethnic groups divided by religious and linguistic categories, the government's call for the *bangsa Malaysia* or '1Malaysia' is more symbolic than real.[65] Indeed, pluralism cannot

develop in a society where there is no recognition of equality among its citizens. Privileging one group over another and, at the same time, calling for the respect of plurality is a contradiction by itself. Strangely, this is not uncommon when pluralism is conflated not only as a threat to undermine the Islamic faith, but also to question the supremacy of the Malays as the country's indigenous people.[66]

Malaysia's progressive Muslim circles — although not part of the dominant establishment — are active in advocating the notion of pluralism to fellow Malaysians, particularly focusing on a Malaysian–Muslim audience**.** The mainstream academic discourse does not cover the subject of pluralism critically; nor does it problematise recent trends for fear being labeled as enemies of Islam or for fear of insulting Islam (*menghina* Islam). Any debate on Islam or Malay rights (*bumiputra*) policies is deemed as politically provocative, and even religiously insensitive.[67] Nevertheless, NGOs such as Just World, Aliran and SIS are some of the leading organizations deliberating and advocating for the wider acceptance of the idea of pluralism. Their views are made in public through lectures, publications and forums in the mass media. Indeed the test — and prospect — of pluralism in Malaysia lies in the resilience of progressive intellectuals and the intelligentsia.

Scholar–activists such as Chandra Muzaffar is in a small circle of Malaysian Muslim intellectuals at the forefront in championing the idea of pluralism[68] — although this is mainly articulated in the English medium. In the dominant Malaysian Malay Islamic discourse, however, pluralism is yet to have a significant impact on religious circles and the intelligentsia. There are, of course, critical academic observers who have deliberated on pluralism and religion, but that has not been enough to encourage a wider discourse on pluralism in the religious, social and cultural domains.[69] The push for genuine pluralism has been approached in a number of ways, one of which has been a critical revaluation of the ethnic relations and the prejudices harbored against others.[70]

Interestingly, amid the mounting challenge of religious conservatism, recognition has emerged gradually among some young Malaysian Muslim intellectuals who affirm the importance of religious pluralism, and disseminate their arguments in the public sphere. The publication of a reader entitled *Islam dan Pluralisme* (Al-Mustaqeem M. Radhi & K. Anam Che Mentri, 2006) is a case in point. Combined with the

continued of a vigorous discourse on religious pluralism in Indonesia, this could engender a positive trend for Malaysia's near future. As has occurred in the past, cultural and intellectual trends in Indonesia could very well exert influence in Malaysia.

Affirming Religious Pluralism in Indonesia

The recognition of the need for pluralism has been recognized for quite some time in the Indonesian Islamic discourse. Pluralism, as a conceptual category in the Indonesian public, religious and academic discourses, has gained tremendous attention and recognition. Activists and scholars from Muhamadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama (NU) for instance, the two largest Muslim organizations in the country, are among the groups at the forefront in championing the idea of pluralism, alongs with democracy, social justice and civil society groups.[71] Among leading Muslim intellectuals, such as Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurahman Wahid, the issue of pluralism has been part of their discourse repertoire.[72] In recent years, Ahmad Syafii Maarif and Moeslim Abdurrahman have been among the leading Muslim intellectuals who have consistently spoken about the significance of pluralism in relation to nation building, religious conscience and community empowerment via democracy, social justice and civil society. Equally active in advancing pluralism have been leading Indonesian academics and activists[73] who have commanded respect among the country's youthful intelligentsias.

Where the Malaysian discourse on pluralism has been timid in Muslim circles and suffocated by religious conservatism, the Indonesian experience has been quite the opposite. This active discourse has enticed strong opposition from religious conservatives in Indonesia,[74] and these criticisms have, in particular, had much influence on conservative counterparts in Malaysia. Today, the Indonesian Islamic discourse has witnessed a plethora of publications on the theme of pluralism, linking it to scriptural injunction,[75] ethics,[76] theology,[77] religious law (*fiqh*), philosophy, education and the like. These recent publications by Indonesian Muslim scholars on the subject denote a positive trend moving beyond the modernist religious concerns. This is further buttressed by various translations of works on the theme of pluralism written by Muslim intellectuals elsewhere. These have contributed to the wider acceptance of the idea of pluralism in the Indonesian Muslim's semantic domain.[78] More interestingly, the call for

religious pluralism comes from some of the leading *santri* circles, as well as various Christian circles. A growing number of books and articles on the themes of pluralism are available for the general public.[79]

The conducive intellectual climate that speaks favorably and affirmatively on pluralism augurs well for pluralism to gain a firm foothold in society, going beyond the state–imposed pluralism of the Pancasila ideology as initiated by the previous New Order regime.[80] Leading Muslim and non–Muslim academics are active, both within and without the campus, in the discourse on the efficacy and legitimacy of pluralism. Some view education as being of utmost importance in forging pluralism, so as to mitigate ethnic and religious conflicts. This is a view argued vigorously by both Muslim and Christian groups.[81] The domain of religious education, therefore, can be the most important site where the idea of pluralism can be introduced and enhanced for the Indonesian public.

Today, not only are there regular interfaith dialogues, but the discourse takes place at a deeper level where there is a readiness to deliberate on dialogue of religious pluralism.[82] Pluralism is advocated strongly so as to go beyond the level of tolerance and harmony among the religious communities.[83] Not only is there an active discourse on affirming Islam in support of pluralism, but there is also a healthy revisiting of some of the ideas on pluralism formulated and advocated by the earlier progressive circles.[84] The formation of the International Center for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP)[85] is one example of the attention given by progressive activists in their attempt to promote and enhance the idea of — and support for — pluralism.[86] ICIP has been active in initiating intellectual and activist engagement in the public sphere, promoting its agenda via publications, translations and forums.[87] There are, of course, other Muslim NGOs active in promoting pluralism. Among some 'scholar activists', the way to forge pluralism is through grass–roots empowerment and religious education. Pluralism, therefore, is seen as the foundation of a plural Indonesian nation and the antidote to religious and ethnic conflicts in the highly diversified archipelagic nation.[88]

Some of the ideas advocated among progressive groups are deemed as radical, if not heretical, by religious conservatives. Their position on inter–religious marriages — departing from the conventional orthodox position that prohibited Muslims from marrying non–Muslims unless the other spouse converts to Islam — is one example. To the

conservatives, these 'liberal' practices, endorsed by some progressive Muslim figures, are a threat to the Muslim community itself.[89] In short, the concern, interest for and intellectual commitment to pluralism reflects a progressive and mature side of the Indonesian religious discourse. In the context of a plural Indonesian society, with diverse religious, ethnic and linguistic cultures, the championing of pluralism is expected inasmuch as it is necessary.

The ardent calls coming from various Muslim intellectuals committed to the idea — disseminated via publications, seminars and the establishment of specific organizations — of promoting pluralism and tolerance in such multi–religious and multicultural society is commendable. It is significant that the agenda has been actively pushed forward by Muslim intellectuals, activists and organizations. Their stand and commitment to pluralism stems from their: (a) realistic consideration of the fragile ethno–religious relations in a country which has witnessed much bloodshed and violence; (b) theological conviction of the legitimacy and efficacy of pluralism as a religious command; (c) the moral and intellectual challenge of the fundamentalist and extremist groups that have asserted their exclusivist and extreme views on non–Muslims, especially in matters of Christian–Muslim relations.[90] What is most significant is that the call for and justification of pluralism is now deliberated at the theological level. Previously, it was in many places confined primarily to the social, cultural and political domains. The idea of pluralism in neighboring Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore is mainly confined to the notion of plurality — that is, the recognition for the need to live harmoniously and tolerate differences in plural context — while religious pluralism is simply seen as a heresy and threat undermining Islam or mutilating Muslims' faith.

Apart from the call for a reinterpretation and reformulation of the methods and vision of Islamic law, the progressive circle also highlights and advocates how Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) can itself give a boost to the notion of inclusivism within Islam[91] in the world's most populous Muslim nation which is also home to millions of Christians, Catholics, Buddhists, Hindus and other indigenous religions. The progressive circles' call for inter–religious dialogue has gone beyond the ceremonial and diplomatic gestures; evident is a gradual advocacy to solve some of the precarious ethnic and religious relationship throughout the country. The progressivists' clamor for pluralism bears the ethical commitment

to protect the disadvantaged or those at the mercy of groups that are ready to use force against those they find aberrant, heretic or insulting their religion.

In affirming pluralism, the progressivists have not only emphasized the fact that pluralism is a sociological reality that cannot be denied, but they have taken serious efforts in elaborating on the theological justifications for pluralism. The conservative and revivalist blocs have rejected the notion of pluralism, concerned that it would put Islam on par with other religions despite Islam being the only path of salvation, which to them has been commanded by God through the Messenger and the Holy Book. The *fatwa* issued by Majlis Ulama Indonesian (MUI) in 2005 demonstrates the conservative religious authority over issues that have direct implications on pluralism in Indonesia. These include *fatwa* on: (a) common prayers made during inter–religious meeting; (b) Muslim marriages with non–Muslim; (c) the inheritance and the custody of children from such marriages; (d) pluralism, liberalism and secularism; (e) the Ahmadiya sect, regarded as outside the fold of Islam.[92] The *fatwa* against Ahmadiya communities is one example where the progressive groups stood firm in lashing out at MUI's decision, which implicitly sanctioned the use of force against Ahmadiya followers. This controversy was a serious test of Indonesian Muslims' position of pluralism. If this sect is not tolerated, it could spell serious disaster for Indonesian multi–religious realities. [93]

In response to this, former president Abdurrahman Wahid (known as Gus Dur), although not having condoned the beliefs of Ahmadis, nevertheless stressed the importance to protect them from any forms of violence, both as citizens or believers. This was not unlike his positions on the rights of ethnic Chinese and even leftist groups whose rights were brutally denied during the Soeharto era.[94] He objected to MUI's *fatwa*, fearing that if Muslims accepted the banning of Gerakan Ahmadiya Indonesia (Indonesian Ahmadiya Movement, GAI) then more trouble would ensue.[95] In fact, Gus Dur's Wahid Institute is today active in advocating pluralism by extending its voice to protecting indigenous religions

The rising tide of political Islamism[96] and the radicalism that sanctioned violence against those regarded as enemies of Islam, is seen as the danger to Indonesian religious pluralism.[97] Without underestimating the potential destabilizing threat from this radical section of society, one should also note that, although vocal in pronouncing extremist

views, this group has never been supported by a majority of Indonesian Muslims. This group is, in fact, challenged by the mainstream Muslim discourse, led by the younger members of NU and Muhammadiyah who oppose religious extremism. Generally, the majority of Indonesians reject such extremism[98] and believe that religious and cultural pluralism is the only way to ensure the unity of their diverse nation.[99]

Conclusion

Today, we are increasingly seeing Muslim scholars of various ideological bends forthcoming in deliberating and justifying religious pluralism from an Islamic standpoint, all affirming that Islamic teachings are in agreement with ideas of religious pluralism.[100] While the Malaysian case is still grappling with the basic recognition for religious pluralism, the Indonesian case, albeit facing a strong opposition from the religious conservatives and political Islamism, is witness to a steadily growing justification for religious pluralism at the theological level. While some Indonesian Muslim scholars are at the forefront in formulating and theologizing religious pluralism by providing alternative interpretations, there are also general critiques of the dissenters of pluralism in the Indonesian public, which is no less efficacious.

The thrust of Muslim intellectuals today is to scrutinize and mitigate the tendencies of exclusivism, moral exclusion, moralistic panic, prejudicial essentialism, gendered patriachialism, doctrinal absolutism and indifference of or tolerance for violence in the name of religion. The certainty for finality — be it values or ideas — must be challenged with intellectual responsiveness and resoluteness. How Muslims in these two countries deal with the issues of religious and ethnic pluralism will determine also the momentum towards democratization in their respective societies.[101] It is hoped that an active engagement in the discourse on Islam and pluralism in Indonesia will have a positive ripple effect on neighboring Muslim communities in Asia, especially in Malaysia. With the continuance of reformist social theology in Indonesia, further discourse, a widening in acceptance of religious pluralism and consistent and persistent implementation of inter–religious dialogue and multicultural education,[102] prospects will be greater for the emergence of a pluralistic society in Muslim Southeast Asia.

Endnotes

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هيئة التحرير:
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ستوديا إسلاميكا (ISSN: 0215-0492) هي مجلة دورية يصدرها مركز البحوث الإسلامية والإجتماعية (PPIM) جامعة شريف هداية الله الإسلامية الحكومية جاكرتا (STT/DEPPEN NO 129/DITJEN/PPG/STT/1976)، وترتكز للدراسات الإسلامية فى إندونيسيا خاصة وآسيا جانوبى شرقي إجمالا. تقبل هذه المجلة على إرسال مقالات المثقفين والباحثين التى تتعلق بمنهج المجلة. والمقالات المنشورة على صفحات هذه المجلة لا تعبر عن هيئة التحرير أو أي جمعية التى تتعلق بها. لكنها مرتبطة ومنسوبة إلى آراء الكاتبين. والمقالات المحتوية فى هذه المجلة قد استعرضتها هيئة التحرير. وهذه المجلة قد أقرتها وزارة التعليم والثقافة أنها مجلة علمية (SK Dirjen Dikti No. 56/DIKTI/ Kep/2012).

ستوديا اسلاميا

ستودي اسلاميكا

مجلة **إندونيسية** للدراسات الإسلامية

السنة التاسعة عشر، العدد ٣، ٢٠١٢

السياسة القانونية لحزب العدالة والرفاهية في الفترة ١٩٩٨–٢٠٠٤ الميلادي: دراسة لقضية قانون إدارة الزكاة

اسماعيل مرزوقي

[*Kitab Rahasia Hari dan Bintang*]: علم النجوم عند المسلمين من قبيلة الساساك

سوبرابتو