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Cultural Pluralism In Indonesia: *Continuous Reinventing of Indonesian Islam in Local, National and Global Contexts*

Azyumardy Azra
Professor at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia is a country consisting of various ethnicities, religions, and races. Multicolored ethnic groups have inhabited for centuries in the country of Indonesia. The interaction between them for decades also gave birth to a pluralist concept, which is a respectful order among them. Pancasila which has become the basis of the Indonesian State proves the existence of cultural diversity as well as the recognition of Indonesian Islam towards the plurality of cultures in Indonesia. Therefore the revitalization of Pancasila with the life and daily reality of Indonesian society is a necessity. In the future, dialogue between cultures and religions that are more concerned with equality is very important.

Alamat Korespondensi:

Azyumardi Azra
UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta
Jl. Kertamukti No. 5 Pisangan, Ciputat
E-mail: azyumardizra1@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Cultural pluralism and diversity are striking realities in Indonesia. As the prominent American anthropologist Robert Hefner argues in his *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia*, 2001), few areas of the non-Western world illustrate the legacy and challenge of cultural pluralism in a manner more striking than in Southeast Asian countries of Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. J.S. Furnivall, a British administrator and political writer before World War II, in fact introduced in his *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy* (1939/1944) the concept of plural societies, and identified the country known today as Indonesia as one of its most striking examples.

According to Furnivall, a plural society is a society that comprises two or more elements of social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit. He further maintained that this situation is accompanied by a caste-like division of labor, in which ethno-religious groups play different economic roles. This social segregation in turn gives rise to what Furnivall regarded as these societies' most unsettling political trait: their lack of common social will. Facing this unfortunate situation, Furnival asserted that unless some kind of formula for pluralist federation could be devised, then Indonesia pluralism seemed doomed to a nightmarish anarchy.

Furnivall's 'doomed' scenario by and large fortunately failed to materialize itself. In contrast, a post-war Southeast Asia saw the establishment of independent Indonesia and other countries But, this national independence was assumed to paradoxically stimulated the rise of ethno-religious sentiment in the struggle for control and power of the new state. Indonesia saw outbreaks of communal violence in the late 1950s and 1965; more shocking yet, Indonesia was shaken by bitter, though intermittent, ethno-religious violence since

1996—the final years of President Soeharto in power—up to 2005, when all communal conflicts from Ambon (Maluku province) to Poso (Central Sulawesi province) and Aceh were finally peacefully resolved.

Competing Cultures

Indonesia is indeed one of the most pluralistic societies in terms of ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity. Age-old local traditions survived when Indonesia proclaimed its independence on 17 August, 1945. Since then the so-called 'Indonesian national culture' gained momentum, competing with and in some ways transcending local cultures and tradition. The state since the time of independence has been trying to strengthen and sometimes to impose a national culture' in the name of national unity and integrity through centralized political structure and leadership, legislation, and education—to name a few.

But, the expansion of Indonesian national culture has never able to replace local cultures up until today. Many Indonesians today still hold fast to their local cultures and

traditions. This is not surprising, since the young generation is initially brought up according to the values and decorum of their ethnicity, culture and tradition. So that, for instance, the idea of personhood in relation to the parents, families, and society is based on the 'traditional' norms, considered to be most appropriate for each group; 'communalism' or rather 'collectivism' is often much more important than individualism, for instance.

Therefore, when centralized-political power in Jakarta during the Soeharto regime through its mono-cultural policy had destroyed certain aspects of that 'traditional culture and tradition', there was a sense of loss**,** and violation of pluralism**;** now people are increasingly longing for and talking about 'local wisdom' possessed by local cultures and tradition. They believe that each of local ethnic cultures has its own geniuses that are instrumental in the maintenance of socio-cultural stability and harmony.

Indonesian national and local cultural diversity in the last few decades has been enriched by a more cosmopolitan culture resulting from increased globalization. At the same time, the introduction of various new cultural forms found their way into Indonesian society, created cultural confusion, disorientation and dislocation among young people in particular. Global lifestyles like individualism, liberalism, materialism and even hedonism are generally considered as incompatible with local and national culture. But, still since those kinds of lifestyles are so intrusive through instant communication, it is now a public discourse that Indonesian and local cultures are now under threat of global culture.

Language of Nationhood

The Indonesian archipelago—the largest one in the world, which consists of more than 17,800 island, isles, and islets—and its history make Indonesians an extremely pluralistic society. There are diverse ethnic groups—amounting to 656 ethnic groups, big and small—living in the country, having their respective cultures, traditions and customs. Up to the 1960s, there was little interaction among these different ethnic groups, but with the acceleration of economic development that brought about improvement in transportation and communication, greater contact, communication and exchanges were established. As a result, stereotypical perception and prejudices among various ethnic groups decreased significantly, strengthening the feeling of Indonesian nationhood.

Not least important, those different ethnic groups speak over 746 different local languages and dialects, even though 726 among them are now on the edge of extinction; but still, there are now 13 languages which survive, spoken by more than one million speakers at least. Considering these languages alone, Indonesia is very fortunate that Indonesian language was adopted as the sole national language during the 'Youth Pledge' on 28 October 1928, when the nationalist movements gained momentum under the Dutch colonialism. It is important to mention that the Indonesian language was originally spoken by a relatively small ethnic group, the Malay, who lived mostly in the Eastern and Central Sumatra. One should appreciate the tolerance of the Javanese or Sundanese who accepted the Malay-based Indonesian language, while their languages constituted the first and second largest language respectively in the archipelago.

The adoption of the Malay-based Indonesian language as the national language was a good example of socio-cultural exchanges among different ethnic groups in the area. The Malay language had much earlier been adopted as the *lingua franca,* since it was thevehicle in the spread of Islam in the archipelago from the late twelfth century onwards. The Malay language was been considered as a more egalitarian language compared

with both Javanese and Sundanese languages. That is why it was easier for non-Malay Indonesian to adopt the Malay language as the national language.

The Indonesian language, no doubt, plays an instrumental role in strengthening the feeling and sentiment of nationhood. This national language continued to expand particularly in the post-independence period when education increasingly became available for young generation at the cost of many local languages; many people are now worried that more and more local languages are losing their speakers. It might be interesting to note that Indonesia has two parallel systems of education: About two-thirds is 'general' or 'secular' education, under the Ministry of National Education. Another third is conducted in *madrasah*s under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Affairs; here, national curriculum is obligatory, but there are more Islamic religious subjects than in the other schools.

At the same time, English continues to gain momentum to become a third or second language of the people. The first language in many cases is an ethnic language, then comes the Indonesian language, and then English. But with the increased dominance of Indonesian language and also with the ever increasing inter-ethnic marriages, the national language becomes the mother tongue of many young people, and English becomes the second.

Again, the perceptions of the self in these languages are different from each other. In local and national languages, all people are expected to use vocabularies appropriate to the age they address; but this is not always in line with English.

Religion as an Identity

Religion is no doubt also an important part of Indonesian culture; and diversity is clearly reflected in the religious life as well. According to some latest estimates, the total population of Indonesia is about 235 million people of which 88.2 % are Muslims, 5.87 % Protestants, 3.05 % Catholics, 1.81 % Hindus, 0.84 % Buddhists and the remaining 0.20 are of other religions and spiritual groups. The Indonesian government officially recognizes the six world religions of Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Hinduism and Confucianism.

It is important to point out that although the population of the archipelago converted mostly to Islam, the region is known as the one of the least Arabicized areas throughout the Muslim world. Geographically, it is also the farthest from the Arabian Peninsula, or more precisely Mecca and Medina, where Islam was originally revealed and developed. Furthermore, Islam was introduced by Sufi wandering teachers who accommodated local beliefs and practices. Therefore, Islam in the archipelago was regarded by many outsiders as 'marginal' or 'peripheral' Islam, as 'impure' or 'syncretic' Islam. Moreover, Islam in the archipelago was regarded as having little to do with Islamic orthodoxy attributed to Islam in Arabia, or the region now known as the Middle East.

The most important proponent of this perception is the influential American anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Having a great reluctance to recognize the deep influence of Islam in Java in particular, he called his work ―*The Religion of Java*‖ (1960) rather than, for instance, ―The Religion of Islam in Java,‖ or even 'Javanese Islam'. In this seminal work, he proposed that there are three variants of Islam in Java particularly and, by extension, in the archipelago generally. The three variants were; *priyayi* (aristocrat Muslims), *santri* (strict and practicing Muslims), and *abangan* (nominal or ID card Muslims). According to Geertz, the *priyayi* variant was heavily influenced by Indic-Sanskrit culture, whereas the *abangan* variant was too indigenous, syncretic, and even animistic. Therefore, in his judgment, it is only the *santri* variant, with its heavy orientation to Middle Eastern Islam, which is the real Islam; and members of this variant are numerically few amongst the population. With that, Geertz implies that the majority of Javanese or Indonesian is not real Muslims, and Islam is adhered to only by a small fraction of the population.

One of Geertz's fiercest critics is Marshall G.S. Hodgson, a prominent expert of Islamic civilizations from the University of Chicago. In his celebrated work *The Venture of Islam* (Vol. 2, 1974) he admits the importance of Geertz's *Religion of Java*; at the same time he criticizes Geertz for identifying Islam in Java with only the modernist Muslims and ascribing everything else to an aboriginal or a 'Hindu-Buddhist' background. In Hodgson's sharp criticism, Geertz made a wrong conclusion that 'Javanese Islam' has long been cut off from the centers of Islamic orthodoxy in Mecca, Medina, and even Cairo.

Recent studies have further refuted much of Geertz's assertion. As has been shown by Azyumardi Azra in *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia* (2004) for the period of the 17th to 18th centuries and beyond, and also by Michael Laffan in *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma below the Wind* (2003), Islam in the archipelago has never been cut off from that one in the Middle East. In fact there are a great many intense connections, networks and religious-cultural exchanges among Muslims in the two regions. All these in turn have influenced the course of Islam in the archipelago, including in Java. Islam in fact forms an obvious layer of Javanese and, by extension, Indonesian cultures.

In the last two decades at least, Islam is gaining momentum due to the increased attachment to religion; more and more the so-called '*abangan*' (nominal) Muslims become practicing believers. This can be seen in the steady growth of the number of Muslims attending rituals in mosques and performing pilgrimage to Mecca; and more widespread use of *jilbab* (*hijab*, 'headscarf'). Islam is getting stronger to become one of the personal and collective identities beside ethnic and Indonesian national identities.

Islam thus is a part and parcel of ethnic and Indonesian national cultures. In most cases there is no conflict between the three. This is due mostly to the nature of Indonesian Islam which is very accommodative and tolerant to local cultures; and at the same time Indonesian Muslims in general love to practice what I call as 'colorful Islam', or even 'flowery Islam'–that is, Islam which draws much on local cultures, and particular interpretations of doctrine. So, Islam is also an integrated part of 'inner lives' of Indonesian Muslims, reflected in many aspects of daily life.

Pancasila: *Politics and Culture*

Even though, Indonesia is also the largest Muslim nation in the world, it is not an Islamic state, nor is it a 'secular' one. Politically and ideologically, Indonesia is a state based on Pancasila (five principles): 1.Belief in One Supreme God; 2.Just and Civilized Humanism; 3.the Unity of Indonesia; 4.Democracy; 5.Social Justice. Proposed initially bySoekarno, the First President of the Republic of Indonesia, Pancasila was (and still is) a compromise between secular nationalists who advocated a secular state and Muslim leaders who demanded an 'Islamic state'. Muslim leaders accepted Pancasila when it was adopted into the Preamble of the 1945 Constitution and regarded it as having no incompatibility with Islamic teaching.

Therefore, Muslims' acceptance of Pancasila is one of the most important Indonesian Islamic roots of pluralism. For the bulk majority of Indonesian Muslims, Pancasila is, in line with a verse of the Qur'an, a ―*kalimah sawa*‖, a common platform, among different religious followers. Addressing the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an has this to say: ―Say: O the people of the Book [*ahl al-kitab*, that is the Jews and Christians]; come to common terms between us and you; that we worship none but God, that we associate partners with him, that we erect not, from ourselves, lords and patrons, other than God...‖(Q 3:64).

As the prominent Indonesian intellectual Nurcholish Madjid rightly argues in his 'Islamic Roots of Modern Pluralism: Indonesian Experience' (1994), the Pancasila thus becomes a firm basis for development of religious tolerance and pluralism in Indonesia. Madjid cited Adam Malik, once Vice President during the Soeharto period, who maintained that Pancasila, in Islamic perspective, is in a similar spirit to the *modus vivendi* that was created by the Prophet Muhammad in Medina after having migrated (*hijrah*) from Mecca. The Prophet laid down the *modus vivendi* in a famous document called the 'Constitution of Medina' (*al-mithaq al-madinah*). The document includes a provision which states that all Medinan factions, including Jews, were one nation (*ummah*) together with Muslims, and that they have the same rights and duties as Muslims. Adam Malik interprets the 'Constitution of Medina' as a formula for a state based on the idea of social and religious pluralism.

Similarly, Robert N. Bellah, the American sociologist of religion in his important article 'Islamic Tradition and the Problem of Modernization' (1970), maintains that the Medinan state was a root of Islamic modernity and pluralism. He further argues that Islam in its seventh century origins was for its time and place 'remarkably modern...in the high degree of commitment, involvement, and participation expected from the rank-and-file members of the community'. Despite that, the Prophet Muhammad's experiment eventually failed because of the lack of necessary socio-cultural pre-requisites among the Arab Muslims. In other words, the *modus vivendi* failed because it was 'too modern' for the Medinan society. Looking to Indonesian experience with Pancasila as a common platform, it is a part of what Bellah sees as an effort of modern Indonesian Muslims to depict the early community as the prototype 'Islamic recognition of pluralism'.

As a basis of Indonesian pluralism, Pancasila unfortunately had been used by the Soeharto regime as a tool for repression. The forced implementation in 1985 of Pancasila as the sole ideological basis of all organizations in the country had been unfortunate and resented by many Indonesian. Through a special training, the Pancasila was forced on Indonesians through indoctrination, which in the end gave the Pancasila a bad name. It is clear that for most Indonesian nothing is wrong with the Pancasila as such, but when it was abused and manipulated for the maintenance of President Soeharto's political statusquo, then people rapidly lost their belief in the Pancasila as an integrating factor within plural Indonesia.

In my view, there is no other viable alternative to Pancasila as common platform of a plural and multi-cultural Indonesia. Therefore, it is a serious challenge for Indonesia to revive and revitalize Pancasila. At the same time, there is an increasing need to bridge the gap between the ideal five-pillars of Pancasila with current daily realities of various aspects of Indonesian life. Otherwise, people will again lose their belief in Pancasila; they would regard Pancasila simply as lip-service that has very little meaning in their life.

Muslims and Democracy

Given the fact that Muslims are the single largest group of the faithful in Indonesia, it is reasonable to expect that they should play a greater and more positive role in the development and enhancement of a democratic and multicultural Indonesia. Indonesian Islam possesses distinctive traits and characteristics that to a large extent are different from that one in the Middle East. Indonesian Islam is essentially a tolerant, moderate, and 'middle way' (*ummah wasat*) Islam, given the history of its early spread which was generally peaceful and had been integrated into diverse ethnic, cultural and social realities of Indonesia.

The bulk majority of Indonesian Muslim belongs to moderate mainstream organizations such as the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, and many other regional organizations throughout Indonesia. All of these Muslim organizations support modernity, and democracy. They support the current form of Indonesian state and the Pancasila, and the same time oppose the establishment of an Islamic state in Indonesia as well as the implementation of *shari`ah* (Islamic law) in the current Indonesian nation-state.

All of these moderate and mainstream organizations are also religiously-based civil society organizations, which play a crucial role in the development and enhancement of civic culture, civility, democracy, and good-governance. These organizations are very active in the dissemination of the idea of democracy, human rights, justice, gender equality, and other ideas that are crucial in the modern society. Not least important, mainstream Muslim organizations have been very active in conducting religious dialogues with non-Muslim groups at local, national, and international levels.

With the Muslim acceptance of democracy, Indonesia has been successful in conducting peaceful elections in 1999, 2004, and 2009. These general elections have been very historic; particularly the election of 2004, which was the first direct presidential election. With the success of these democratic elections, Indonesia as the largest Muslim country in the world has shown a compatibility between Islam and democracy.

CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that a good understanding of culture of people within various ethnic groups and nation-states will contribute a great deal to successful dialogues across boundaries and differences. With that, healthier inter-cultural exchanges can also take place.

In such inter-cultural dialogues, it is necessary to find and strengthen commonalities among people of different cultural backgrounds. By the same token, it is also appropriate not to emphasize—let alone to exaggerate—differences among them. Ifwe can do that, then we have some strong reasons to be optimistic for a better future of human-kind.