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Indonesian Exceptionalism - Where to from Here?

By Basel Ammane

The recent demonstrations surrounding the blasphemy accusations against the incumbent governor of Jakarta known as Ahok have shined the spotlight on the state of Islam and minority rights in Indonesia. The case has acquired symbolic importance as many seem to consider its outcome a harbinger of the direction the country is headed in.

What is Indonesian Exceptionalism?

Along with a handful of other Muslim-majority countries, Indonesia stands out for having transitioned from autocratic rule to an electorally democratic one that is characterized by free and fair elections. The transition to democracy came after the abdication of long-time strong man General Suharto in 1998. Since then, the country has enjoyed regular and peaceful transition of power from one president to the next.

While the country is not truly exceptional among Muslim-majority countries in terms of having a democratic regime, it is when it comes to the character and practice of Islam in it. The emergence of Islamic schools (madrasas) was late compared to the Middle East. It materialized during the latter half of the nineteenth century, coinciding with modern Islamic reform and anti-colonial movements. This resulted in Indonesian Islamic education's absorption of ideas that remained within the confines of elite circles in other regions such as the Middle East.¹ A consequence of this has been the unique defining features of the two most popular Islamic organizations in the country, namely Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. Muhammadiyah, the older organization, is associated with the urban class and

building large-scale social welfare projects such as universities, schools, hospitals and clinics. Many prominent figures within it expressed support for the state founding ideology of Pancasila as they argued its compatibility with Islam.² NU was founded as a traditionalist response to the modernizing orientation of Muhammadiyah. As such, it represents the rural classes. Much like its counterpart, it is involved in religious and social welfare activities. However, it differs from it in that it is also involved in politics. It is closely affiliated with the National Awakening Party (PKB) to which former President Abdurrahman Wahid belonged. The party forms a part of the coalition that has enabled the current president, Joko Widodo, to stay in power.³ In short, Indonesian Islam has traditionally been known to be tolerant, and mainstream Islamic organizations have supported religious tolerance since the founding of the republic, and democracy since the transition in 1998.

Is this Exceptionalism Eroding?

There are plenty of indicators that demonstrate a decline in tolerance among Muslims in Indonesia. A lurch to religious conservatism and support for Sharia, not just as a system of rules governing religious life, but also as a body of laws that can complement or even supplant laws made by the Indonesian parliament can be detected. For example, a survey conducted in October 2016 among religion teachers in five of Indonesia's thirty four provinces indicated that 80% of these teachers supported the implementation of Sharia law. In addition, 74% of those surveyed said Muslims should not acknowledge the holidays of people belonging to other religions, and 89% said that other religious minorities should not be acknowledged.⁴ Moreover, in a study by the Pew Research Centre aimed at assessing levels of government restrictions on religion between 2007 and 2015, Indonesia exhibited a net rise in such restrictions as its scores were 6.2, 7.9, and 7.6 in 2007, 2014, and 2015 respectively.⁵ Another study by the same group that tracked the same indicator in

¹ Hefner, R. (2013). Indonesia in the Global Scheme of Islamic Things (K. Van Dijk, Ed.). In J. Burhanudin (Ed.), *Islam in Indonesia: Contrasting Images and Interpretations* (pp. 49-62). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

² Burhani, A. (2013). *Defining Indonesian Islam* (K. Van Dijk, Ed.). In J. Burhanudin (Ed.), *Islam in Indonesia: Contrasting Images and Interpretations* (pp. 25-48). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

³ <http://www.globalindonesianvoices.com/21914/impact-of-muhammadiyah-and-nahdlatul-ulama-on-indonesia/>

⁴ <http://www.voanews.com/a/majority-of-religion-school-teachers-in-indonesia-support-sharia-law/3652387.html>

⁵ <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2017/04/07154137/Appendix-C.pdf>

2012 and 2013 revealed scores of 8.3 and 8.5 respectively.⁶ It follows that government religious restrictions have increased since 2007, even though they seem to have reached a peak and declined slightly. A similar trend can be observed when it comes to the number of reported religiously motivated attacks. The country went from 91 cases of attacks against religious minorities in 2007 to 220 in 2013, peaking at 264 in 2012. The victims of violence tended to be Christians, Ahmadis, Shiites and Sufis, and the perpetrators were radical Sunni Islamist groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI).⁷

Given the popularity of the country's main Islamic organizations, their state can be used as a bellwether of public attitudes to the extent that they relate to Islam. One worrying recent development has been the decline in the religious authority of the two organizations in matters such as settling religious disputes. According to Ahmad Najib Burhani, a researcher at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, "NU and Muhammadiyah are still the main destinations of public services in the field of education and health, but they are no longer a reference in religious matters." During the spate of demonstrations that were agitated by extremist groups in the wake of the blasphemy accusations that the incumbent governor of Jakarta faced, NU and Muhammadiyah called on their supporters to refrain from attending them. Yet despite these pleas, many members of both organizations attended these rallies heeding the counsel of other Islamic organizations.⁸ Another disconcerting tendency has been the gradual activation of dormant conservative elements within the two organizations that have traditionally acted as a bulwark against intolerance. Furthermore, there is evidence that qualifies statements about NU and Muhammadiyah being bastions of moderation and tolerance. For example, William Liddle, a political scientist at the Ohio State University, described statements affirming the domination of the NU since the transition to democracy by moderate elements as

inaccurate. This, coupled with the inherent decentralization of authority within the organization, has made it hard to respond decisively to provocative acts by extremist organizations.⁹

Globalizing forces have also played a role in impacting important changes on Indonesian Islam. It is known that since the 1980s, Saudi Arabia has expended immense treasure for the purpose of influencing Islam in Indonesia by financing the construction of mosques and universities as well as providing teaching staff for the many boarding schools that exist in Indonesia. Saudi Arabia has also disbursed a large number of scholarships to encourage students to pursue graduate studies in its universities. That has led to the creation of a class of intellectuals who would later return to Indonesia and help spread Wahhabi Islam. Prominent among such graduates is Habib Rizieq, the founder of the group known as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI).¹⁰ This organization was one of the first to clamour for the governor of Jakarta to be charged with blasphemy, and organize protests against him. Increased connectivity through modern telecommunications, especially social media, as well as the open media landscape that emerged after the transition to democracy have further boosted the influence of conservative ideas as religious preachers' numbers multiplied.¹¹

Where is the Country headed?

Given all of the aforementioned changes elaborated upon earlier, it is tempting to conclude that Indonesia will succumb to the rash of intolerance that has ravaged many Muslim-majority countries. But there is cause for hope that this might not be the case. For example, NU continues to enjoy the largest membership and harbour tolerant and even reformist voices within it. In fact, the recent demonstrations have motivated the youth wing of the organization to advocate its support for what it called 'Humanitarian Islam' as a way to respond to understandings of Islam that have birthed conflict and violence.¹² Another

⁶ http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/02/Restrictions2015_byRegion.pdf

⁷ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/18/voting-against-indonesias-religious-intolerance>

⁸ <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/01/19/nu-muhammadiyah-suffer-setbacks-over-their-roles-in-society.html>

⁹ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/14/indonesias-moderate-islam-is-slowly-crumbling/>

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/03/saudi-arabia-salman-visit-indonesia/518310/>

¹¹ <http://thcasean.org/read/articles/327/Unholy-Alliance-Ultra-Conservatism-and-Political-Pragmatism-in-Indonesia.html>

¹² <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/04/03/nus-youth-wing-calls-for-rethinking-of-islam.html>



positive sign has been the recent large counter protests that were aimed at challenging and condemning the wave of religiously motivated attacks that targeted minorities.¹³ A third positive sign is the president's full utilization of his office's powers to preserve the moderate and tolerant image of Indonesian Islam by advocating for the separation of religion and politics,¹⁴ and adroitly linking his statement with calls for national unity.

While the Ahok case, despite its particularities, will act as an important indicator of the winds of change should there be any, the presidential election in 2019 will probably be more consequential should it result in the rise of an explicitly Islamist party to power.

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¹³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-politics-rally-idUSKBN13G2DL>

¹⁴ <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/03/27/jokowi-accused-of-promoting-secularism.html>