

**Alhassanain (p) Network for Islamic Heritage and Thought**

# **RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN INDONESIA**

**Helpful and Hindering Aspects**

**An Analysis by Agus Hadi Nahrowi**

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## Introduction

There was a Christian woman living close to my house in Indonesia. She ran a small restaurant in which the most of her customers were Muslim. She also actively took part in events in the neighborhood, and had not been discriminated against by the community with regard to her religion. While Christians celebrated Christmas inside the churches, young people from Muslim organizations worked with the police to provide security outside due to the threat of terrorism. Muhammadiyah, one of Indonesia's largest Muslim organizations, offered the use of its schools for Christians to observe Christmas. Is this the picture of inter-religious engagement in Indonesia? Not quite.

Based on a Tempo magazine report, between March 1996 and August 2005, about 180 churches were destroyed, burned or closed by force.<sup>1</sup> For instance, in 2003, in Jakarta and in many parts of Java, these incidents were perpetrated by the radical Islamic organization, Islamic Defender Front (FPI), which attacked and forced the closure of more than two dozen churches in West Java; the lockout of believers from the “Sang Timur” Catholic School; the conflict between Muslim residents and members of a Christian Batak Church; and the violent attack against followers of the Muslim Ahmadiyah sect.

These incidents are indicators that something is amiss with regard to engagement among religious communities. Indonesia today is not only a country with diverse ethnicities, religions, and races, but also a country with several challenges to issues of religious pluralism. This paper tries to describe the current situation in Indonesia in terms of how tolerance, pluralism (religious), and dialogue among members of religious communities in Indonesia have been promoted and improved. Additionally, it also attempts to map the hindrances to religious pluralism in Indonesia.

Systematically, this paper will explore firstly the helpful aspects of emerging issues of religious pluralism in Indonesia, including the roles of government, individuals, and non-governmental organizations that work to enhance public awareness and understanding about how to engage with other members of religious communities. Secondly, this paper will explore those aspects that hinder the efforts in promoting inter-religious harmony in Indonesia.

## Helpful Aspects

### Governmental Role

Although more than 88 percent of the Indonesian population is Muslim, Indonesia is not a religion-based state. Indonesia's ideology is Pancasila (five principles) which are: belief in the one and only God; just and civilized humanity; the unity of Indonesia; deliberation for consensus; and social justice for all of Indonesia's people. Pancasila stresses that Indonesia is neither a secular nor religious-based state.

Pancasila assures that every religion can exist in Indonesia. Yet, Indonesia only recognizes five religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. For those religious adherents, Indonesia's constitution provides for "all persons the right to worship according to his or her own religion or belief" and states that "the nation is based upon belief in one supreme God."<sup>2</sup>

However, many conflicts among religions have occurred in the past. Through the inter-religious conference on November 30, 1967, sponsored by the government in order to find some exit strategies regarding social problems that involved religion, the participants came up with the concept of inter-religious harmony.<sup>3</sup> The aim is to foster engagement so that every religious community can live together peacefully and respectfully.

Then, in 1969 the government issued a joined-decree of the minister of religious and internal affairs about preserving harmony among the members of religious communities. This decree was renewed in 2005. Generally, it mandates government leaders in the provinsi (provinces) and kabupaten (districts) to take part in sustaining harmony among religious communities. Additionally, those leaders must support the communities that have begun to establish a forum called Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama/Inter-religious Harmony Forum (FKUB). This forum aims to build dialogue among religious leaders, accommodate aspirations from religious organizations and communities, and give recommendations to the government about the feasibility of erecting places of worship. Members of this forum are religious leaders from the various traditions. Currently, FKUB can be found in most of the provinsi and Kabupaten in Indonesia. If this forum can function properly, it can bridge miscommunications that often occur among multi-religious communities.

## **Individuals**

This section of the report part will explore some Indonesian scholars who have contributed to bringing issues of religious pluralism to the public and encouraged people to be aware of other religions and minority groups in Indonesia.

### **H.A. Mukti Ali**

H.A. Mukti Ali was an Indonesian modern-Islamic thinker and noted as one of the primary experts in comparative religion studies.<sup>4</sup> He was also labeled as a moderate Muslim because of his willingness to respect pluralism, both within Islam and other religions.

In 1960, he pioneered the idea of inter-religious harmony in Indonesia. Through his position as a minister of religious affairs (1971-1978) he developed a model of inter-religious harmony that was based on Islamic principles of justice, absolute freedom of conscience, the perfect equality among humans, and the powerful solidarity in social interaction. This model was very important at that time because several conflicts occurred that were caused by inter-religious issues. When Mukti Ali stepped down from his position, his successor, Alamsyah Ratu Perwiragara, continued his work modifying Mukti Ali's thought to become a "Trilogi Kerukanan" (Trilogy of Harmony). It included harmony among adherents of the same religion, harmony among adherents of different religions, and harmony between religious adherents and the government.<sup>5</sup>

When Mukti Ali served as a lecturer at the state Islamic Institute Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, he wrote many books, which are: Comparative Religion: Its Method and System, Comparative Religion in Indonesia, The Spread of Islam in Indonesia, Modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia, Religion and Development in Indonesia, Various Religious Problems in Indonesia, The Muslim Muhajir and Muslim Bilali in the United States of America, and The Method of Understanding Islam.<sup>6</sup> Some of his books have become required reading for comparative religion students. He passed away on May 5, 2004 when he was 81 years old.

### **Abdurrahman Wahid**

Abdurrahman Wahid, well-known as Gus Dur, is one of the greatest Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia. He was the fourth president of Indonesia and a past chairperson of Nahdlatul Ulama' (NU), one of the largest independent Islamic organizations in the world. Gus Dur served as chairperson from 1984-1999.

With a large membership, NU became extremely powerful. Hence, Soeharto, the second president of Indonesia, attempted to make it powerless by offering some benefits and facilities to Gus Dur. It was not easy however, because Gus Dur was personally an opponent of the government. In this regard, he became one of the most powerful threats to Soeharto's authority. Repeatedly Soeharto tried to remove Gus Dur from the top level of NU and replace him with a more cooperative person, but these attempts always failed.

Gus Dur's activities became more public, from 1991 to 1999, he served as head of Forum Demokrasi/Democracy Forum (Fordem), a group that aimed to criticize government policies. One of the problems that Gus Dur struggled with was the government's unequal treatment of minorities in Indonesia. He became a defender of minority groups, particularly Indonesian Chinese, Christians, and other groups. Gus Dur was considered as unusual Muslim, because of his commitment to pluralism and tolerance.<sup>7</sup> For instance, when he became president, he issued a policy about a new national holiday, "Hari Raya Imlek/Chinese New Year Day", from the Chinese tradition. As a minority group in Indonesia, the Chinese were pleased with this policy.

What Gus Dur had done inspired NU youth to start criticizing the government and its policies, demanding doors to be opened to others, including non-Muslims and the left wing. Besides learning the holy Koran, NU youth also explored social sciences, the theology of freedom, and socialist thought from Muslim intellectuals and postmodern authors. Ulil Abshar Abdalla, the former chairman of Liberal Islam Network (JIL), is an example of an NU-youth that was inspired to follow Gus Dur's moderate, tolerant, and liberal way of thinking.

In 1993, Gus Dur was honored with the Magsaysay Award from the Philippine government for his effort to build inter-religious relationships in Indonesia.<sup>8</sup> He was ranked twenty-fourth in the 1996 Asiaweek listing of the fifty most powerful people in Asia, with his power measured on the basis of his chairmanship of the thirty-million-strong NU. He has been described in the following terms: "a known champion of religious tolerance and democratization.....the most influential, enigmatic, fascinating and yet also vulnerable political player on the increasingly messy Indonesian political landscape."<sup>9</sup> Gus Dur's commitment to the freedom of religion reflects from his notion that "reducing religious freedom is a crime."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it cannot be ignored.

Currently, he has joined various international organizations, such as the Non-Violence Peace Movement in Seoul, South Korea (as President); the International Strategic Dialogue Center at Netanya University, Israel (as a member of the International Board along with Mikhail Gorbachev, Ehud

Barak and Carl Bildt); the International and Inter-Religious Federation for World Peace (IIFWP) in New York (as a member of the International Advisory Board); the Association of Muslim Community Leaders (AMCL) in New York (as President); and the Shimon Perez Center for Peace in Tel Aviv, Israel (as Founder and member).<sup>11</sup>

### **Nurcholish Madjid**

Nurcholish Madjid or Cak Nur was noted as an Islamic modernist. According to Syafi'i Anwar, executive director of ICIP (International Center for Islam and Pluralism) the greatest contribution of Cak Nur was his commitment to pluralism. He developed his view on pluralism through a theology called "inclusive theology."<sup>12</sup>

The basic foundation of his "inclusive theology" is the submission that comes from the unity of prophecy, the unity of humanity, and the unity of God. While most Muslims interpret "Innad dina 'inda Allahil Islam" as "the religion for Allah (God) is Islam." Cak Nur interpreted the Arabic word of "Islam" differently. For him, the meaning of Islam is "surrender to God." Therefore, Cak Nur would say, "The religion for Allah (God) is every religion that surrenders to God." He believed that there is no religion without surrendering to God. Although formally not Islam, every religion that surrenders to God would be in the same position to receive his mercy and salvation.<sup>13</sup>

Hence, Cak Nur suggested that Muslims study other religions. He said:<sup>14</sup>

".....when we are not courageous to go beyond, the religion becomes exclusive. Every religion has suffered the same thing. Every human is the same, that sometimes is lazy to think. Therefore, Muslims should keep reading. Read other holy books (bible, torah, etc) like what people in the past did. Alhamdulillah, until now some people are still reading the bible and torah; unfortunately it is just for making polemics. That is not true and not honest because just looking for the weaknesses (of others) only."

Undeniably, the tag "liberal" had been applied to Cak Nur. His attention to minorities brought him to broaden the issue of pluralism and democracy from the standpoint of his neo-modernist view of Islam.<sup>15</sup> Although he already passed away (August 29, 2005), Cak Nur left many followers that will carry on his "inclusive theology." Some of them are Syafi'i Anwar, the director of the International Center of Islam and Pluralism, and Sukidi Mulyadi, the author of a book entitled *Teologi Inklusif Cak Nur* (Cak Nur's Inclusive Theology).



### **Th. Sumartana**

Th. Sumartana was the founder of the first interfaith organization in Indonesia. Together with Gus Dur and Cak Nur, he is considered a pioneer of the interfaith movement in Indonesia. As a Protestant, he attempted to open the windows of consciousness about the importance of understanding other religious theologies.

His commitment to interfaith work came from his deep understanding about religion. For him religion is sacred and contains universal values. However, because of human self interest, the meaning of religion becomes biased, particularly when its meaning is being translated by a member of the religious community.<sup>16</sup> However, he believed that there must a way for understanding among several religions, as long as there is a willingness to find the peaceful message in each religion and to recognize what others have. He believed that “dialogue” is the only way to do this. He truly believed that everyone can talk. Furthermore, he argued that everyone is born with the ability to listen, so if some people become skeptical, desperate, and do not believe in dialogue they have been skeptical to themselves and to humanity. He quoted what Hans Kung said, “There is no peace within a community without inter-religious peace.”<sup>17</sup> He passed away on January 24, 2003.

### **NGO's and Academic Institutions**

NGO's and academic institutions have contributed a lot to increasing public awareness about the mutual relationship among religious communities. Their roles are very important.

### **Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's)**

ICRP (Indonesian Conference on Religion and Peace) lists 51 organizations throughout the country that are considered interfaith organizations. Those organizations activities are similar to each other. Here is an example of an interfaith organization founded in 1996 in Yogyakarta, called the Forum Persaudaraan Umat Beriman/The Brotherhood in Faith Forum:

This forum was established due to the social conflicts that emerged in 1996, in which a number of unrests occurred in various locations which were publicized as being inter-religious conflicts. This forum is not organized by intellectuals or university activists but it is limited to community-based religious leaders: kyai (Islamic clerics), priests, pastors, Buddhist monks, Hindu priests and members of their respective religious communities. Through dialogue, prayer, and forming networks, they share experiences related to inter-religious interaction that takes place in the churches, pesantren, vihara, pura, klenteng, etc. on a revolving basis. The main activities of this organization are: monthly meetings to discuss current issues and actions to be taken from a religious and moral standpoint; collective prayer; calling for moral commitment of the government apparatus; assisting in finding resolutions for those suffering from spiritual and material difficulties; and disseminating the idea of a true fellowship.<sup>18</sup>

However, a lot of dialogues are only attended by elite religious leaders without any significant involvement of members of the religious communities, so what has been obtained through the dialogue is rarely enacted operationally through multi-religious engagements in daily life. This is the challenge of the interfaith movement in Indonesia today.

Furthermore, there are a number of NGO's that are not formally interfaith organizations, but have concerns related to issues of religious pluralism. Some of those organizations are ICIP (International Center for Islam and Pluralism), Liberal Islam Network (JIL), The Wahid Institute, and Lembaga Kajian Islam dan Sosial/Social and Islam Studies Institution (LKIS). Public campaigns, information dissemination, and networking are the primary activities of these organizations.

### **Academic Institutions**

An academic institution that contributes to studying religious diversity in Indonesia is the State Islamic Institute (IAIN) or State Islamic University (UIN). Although this institution emphasizes Islamic Studies, it has an academic program on comparative religion. This program can be found at 13 IAIN/UIN in Indonesia.<sup>19</sup> Many modern Muslim thinkers like H.A. Mukti Ali and Nurcholish Madjid were taught in this institute.

There is also a CRCS (Center for Religious and Cross Cultures Studies) in Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta that focuses on comparative religion studies. Students enrolled in this program come from various religious backgrounds. Through this study program, students gain a comprehensive understanding of world religions, and hopefully they will use their knowledge in the communities where they live.

## Hindering Aspects

Briefly, I will explore the recent situation that affected the improvement of religious pluralism in Indonesia.

### MUI

Majlis Ulama' Indonesia or the Indonesian Ulama' Council is the organization that consists of Islamic clerics and Muslim intellectuals that aims to reach the common goal of Islam in Indonesia.<sup>20</sup> Putting MUI as a hindering aspect for the development of religious pluralism in Indonesia is based on its controversial fatwas (religious decrees) issued last year (July, 2005).

Within 11 fatwas, there were three controversial fatwas related to issues of religious pluralism. Firstly, the fatwas banned secularism, pluralism and religious liberalism. MUI considered these things as bad because they only employ rational ways of thinking freely, not religious-based thinking. MUI defined secularism as a concept that considers religion only to be concerned with the relationship between religion and God, while the relationship among humans is not a religious concern. Additionally, MUI defined pluralism as the concept that every religion is the same, and characteristically relativistic so that no one can claim the truth of the religion. Secondly, they banned Ahmadiyah's doctrine. MUI considered that Ahmadiyah is not part of Islam because it teaches its followers that Mirza Gulam Ahmad is the last prophet; whereas for Sunni Islam, Muhammad is the final prophet. Lastly, MUI forbid collective inter-religious prayer. In this regard, MUI considered that such prayer is "halal" (allowed) only if the leader of the prayer is Muslim. Yet, if another religious leader leads a prayer, it is prohibited for Muslims to participate.<sup>21</sup>

A controversial issue is primarily about the definition that MUI uses to define pluralism. The definition that MUI has used is totally different from what several non-governmental organizations concerned with issues on religious pluralism use. According to Syafi'i Anwar, the Director of ICIP, the religious pluralism that his organization struggles for is defined as promoting mutual relationships among religion, not only through tolerance but also through respect of each religion.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, Azyumardi Azra, Muslim intellectual from State Islamic University Syarif Hidayatullah in Jakarta, argued: "The MUI cannot ban Muslims from thinking, because pluralism, liberalism and secularism are not ideologies but ways of thinking. MUI's fatwas are against freedom of expression and human rights in general."<sup>23</sup>

Although fatwas are not legally binding in Indonesia, they are an important source of guidance for many Muslims. The decrees arouse controversies and heated debates. Unfortunately, there is only a small number of Muslims in Indonesia that are aware of a critical way of thinking. Most of the Muslims are traditionalist, conservative, and some of them even fundamentalist. Therefore, the inclination to follow these decrees without any critical thinking has undeniably occurred. To some extent, it is delaying the efforts in promoting religious pluralism.

### **Islamic Fundamentalist Movement**

Today, there are at least 5 Islamic organizations that are working toward an Islamic state in Indonesia. Those organization are Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI), Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Darul Islam/Indonesian Islamic Army, (DI/TII), and Indonesian Islamic Dakwah Council (DDII). By promoting Shari'ah (Islamic law) as a solution to any problems in Indonesia today, they have tried to push the government at all levels to include Shari'ah values in government policies.

Among those organizations, FPI is well-known as a radical Islamic organization. The FPI's stated goal is the full implementation of Islamic Shari'ah law. FPI has been involved in many raids on bars, massage parlors and gaming halls. The FPI justified these raids on the grounds that the police were unable to uphold laws on gambling and prostitution.<sup>24</sup>

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, FPI had significant involvement in the forced closure of several churches in West Java last year. They were also at the front position of attacks against a Muslim sect, Jemaah Ahmadiyah, and also led attacks on the offices of Liberal Islam Network (JIL) and threatened the physical safety of its members. These several incidents are a sign of Islamic radicalism in Indonesia.

According to Syafi'i Anwar, there are three ways to explain the religious radicalism in the society. First, there is an inclination to interpret texts from the holy book literally and ignore the context. Secondly, there is a tendency to agree with Shari'ah (Islamic law) enforcement, or be Shari'ah minded. Lastly, there is a trend to be anti-pluralist.<sup>25</sup> Considering that, it might be difficult to establish religious pluralism within the Islamic radical community, because they tend to be anti-dialogue and intolerant to others, unless others follow the rule of law that they set up.

Furthermore, a survey by Indonesia Survey Institute (LSI) in March 2006 found that the number of people who support a radical Islam group in Indonesia, such as FPI, is on the increase. The survey shows that the use of violence for religious purposes has the support of one in ten Indonesian Muslims. Between one and two of every ten Indonesians support the recent behavior of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and the Muslim Mujahidin Council (MMI). Although it's small percentage, it can not be ignored. This situation implies that others need to work harder to find a strategic way to deal with it and also to clarify the misuse of the term "religious pluralism."

## Closure

To go back to the story from my village at the beginning of this paper, although Muslims and Christians live together peacefully, most of the Muslims who live in my village are exclusive in understanding their religion. The way they engage each other is based on the ethics of social interaction. Ultimately, it affects their willingness to get to know people of other religions. They are afraid that once they learn about other religions they will convert to a different religion. This is why they never care for what my neighbor does in her religion, even just to greet her with “Merry Christmas”. This is just a simple example about how tough it is to build public awareness on how understanding religious pluralism is supposed to take place in the daily lives of Indonesians.

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