

# Dialogue Amongst Civilizations

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Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, there has been either an antipathy against Islam on the one hand, and an increased interest in understanding the world fastest growing religion on the other, as a group calling themselves an Islamic organization became the number one suspect. The U.S Government turned their attention not only to Afghanistan with its Taliban, but also to all other potential Muslim extremists, including some of Southeast Asian countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The latter two have ever been or are still considered to be the operational bases for *Al-Jamaah Al-Islamiah*, a radical Islamic group allegedly linked to Al-Qaida attempting to carve out an Islamic state in Southeast Asian region. Indonesia itself has been viewed as something of a laggard in the global war, not only by the U.S., but also even by its friends in the region, Malaysia and Singapore. Since September 11, 2001, Indonesia has always been on the U.S. international policy agenda, because it allegedly is a haven for terrorist groups. Singapore has also accused Indonesia of being a safe ground for nurturing terrorist activities.

Either independently or within the context of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Indonesia has now been integrated into an antiterrorist network. Washington believed that Indonesia could play a crucial role in ensuring that "militant Islam" does not spread and thus jeopardize regional peace and security. Yet, many issues remain puzzling: Does Southeast Asian Islamists have a link with global terrorism networks? What is thus Southeast Asian Islam? Is it different from the Middle Eastern Islam? In global politics, are there such things as Islamic threat and Western threat? What is the best path to establish harmonious transnational, inter-communal, and inter-religious relationships?

It appears that public perceptions of Islam have tended to be characterized by ignorance, confusion, and misinformation.<sup>2</sup> Some observers, such as Edward Said, have long asserted that "Islam has been singled out for abuse", in part due to the historical and theological confrontation between Islam and Christianity, which is still echoed by many observers.<sup>3</sup> The most notable one

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<sup>2</sup> Fred R.von Der Mehden, "American Perceptions of Islam", in John L. Esposito (ed.), *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978)

has been Samuel Huntington who has viewed Islam as monolithic entity and the West as monolithic as well. For Huntington, Islamic civilization will always be contradictory to Western civilization, with its Christian origin. “The fault-lines between civilizations, “ Huntington observed, “are replacing the political and ideological boundaries of the Cold War as the flash points for crisis and bloodshed.”<sup>4</sup> “Conflict along the fault line between Western and Islamic civilizations has been going on for 1,300 years,” he warned.<sup>5</sup> Following V.S. Naupal, Huntington further believed that at a superficial level, it is true that Western civilization has indeed permeated the rest of the world. At a more basic level, however, Huntington argues, “Western concepts differ fundamentally from those prevalent in other civilizations. Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures.”<sup>6</sup>

Huntington further claims, both are deeply irreconcilable and the level of conflict has been influenced by demographic growth and decline, economic developments, technological change, and intensity of religious commitment. Huntington has been criticized to have oversimplified and sidestepped the phenomena of the Muslim world as well as the Western world. His general inability to interpret present-day movements within Islam is largely attributable to his and our way of peering at them through the outmoded theoretical spectacles which are all we have to hand, and which simply blur our perception even more.

The critics of Huntington would say that Muslims, like Christians and others, do not speak with a single voice. In contemporary Southeast Asia, for example, the dominant discourse to emerge has been marked not by theological fundamentalism, but by a remarkable combination of pluralism, intellectual dynamism, and openness to dialogue with non-Muslim actors and institutions.<sup>7</sup> It is also largely theologically moderate, while “Islamic fundamentalism” has attracted only a handful of people. Many Muslims in Southeast Asia have tended to subscribe to anti-fanaticism and anti-extremism. The majority of Indonesian Muslims are not hostile to modernism; they have long been interested in modern discourses such as democracy (or popular sovereignty), human rights, civil society (or citizenry participation), international peaceful

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?”, *Foreign Affairs*, 72, no.3, Summer, 1993, p.29.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p.40.

<sup>7</sup> Robert W. Hefner, “Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia” in Robert W. Hefner & Patricia Horvatic (eds), *Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), pp. 3-31.

relations or dialogue rather than confrontation, as well as religious pluralism rather than religious exclusivity.

Therefore, according to the critics of Huntington, any generalization about Islam, as other religions and worldviews, should not be justified for Islam has historically and sociologically revealed different expressions, most of which represent moderation rather than extremism. In Islam, there are some elements of liberalism, secularism, or modernity. For example, Charles Kurzman suggests that many contemporary Muslim intellectuals are liberal.<sup>8</sup> Themes such as democracy, rights of women, rights of non-Muslims, freedom of thought, and progress have been much appreciated and applied in Muslim contexts. Bassam Tibi has asserted the compatibility between Islam and democratization and further argued that Islam and the West must establish a common international morality.<sup>9</sup> Robert Hefner equally believes that Islam has been the main factor of democratization in modern Indonesia.<sup>10</sup> The idea of civil society, albeit originally a Western concept, can be applied to Muslim communities.<sup>11</sup> Given the above and following characteristics, Southeast Asia in general should provide an alternative to the existing unbalanced, one-side picture of the so-called “Muslim world”.

### **Southeast Asian Islam**

Contemporary Southeast Asian Islam has been a result of diverse outside influences as well as of indigenous localization. Politically, Middle Eastern Arab has been certainly important, but European arrival has led to the acceptance of the nation-state and its administrative system, including the civil law. The idea of Islamic universal caliphate has never succeeded in Southeast Asia. Instead, political liberalism has been more attractive to Southeast Asia than theocracy or fundamentalism. Culturally, religious dresses, mosques, and other ritual symbols in the region have been different from that in the Middle East and elsewhere. Linguistically, many Indo-Malaysian words are derived from Arabic, English, Sanskrit, Portuguese, Dutch, and hundreds of local languages. Economically, open-market system has been adopted almost thoroughly, although some Muslim elements in Malaysia and Indonesia have begun to develop the so-called

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<sup>8</sup> Kurzman, Charles (ed.), *Liberal Islam: A Source Book* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 1-5.

<sup>9</sup> Bassam Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Disorder* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), pp.2-10.

<sup>10</sup> Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Robert W. Hefner, *Democratic Civility: The History and Cross-Cultural Possibility of A Modern Political Ideal* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1998)

an Islamic economic system (non-interest system).<sup>12</sup> In religious terms, partly affected by the globalization and political dynamics, religiosity has had various forms, but the mainstream was the one with compromise and accommodation.

Southeast Asia is geographically far away and marginalized from the centers of Islam in the Middle East, but it has become highly important in terms of balancing the images of Islam. It has undergone peaceful conversions through trade, marriage, and missionary activities. Since Hinduism, Buddhism, and animism have long existed in Southeast Asia, conversions show a different nature and development. The emphasis of spiritualism, rather than legalism, has contributed to the tolerant, accommodating and open-minded religiosity. Although Middle Eastern Islam has had a significant influence, as indicated by the rise of some Islamist organizations, its application remains unique and mixed with Indonesian cultures and histories. As a result, the mainstream Islam in Southeast Asia has been the “Cultural Islam”, as opposed to the political Islam (the latter often manifested in “fundamentalism”).<sup>13</sup>

Indonesia alone is the world’s largest Muslim country (190 million Muslims, out of 220 million Indonesians). However, it is not an Islamic State; instead, it is the State of *Pancasila* (derived from *Sanskrit*, which means five principles: belief in one god, humanity, unity, democracy, social justice). The *Nahdlatul Ulama* dan the *Muhammadiyah* are the largest Muslim socio-religious organizations, which mostly represent moderation and constitute the mainstream movements. Islam has come to Indonesia in a more significant manner since twelfth century and Christianity came with the coming of Europeans from the fifteenth century onwards. In Soekarno’s era, nationalism, communism, and religion were to coexist but he failed. Islamic parties developed at the time, but the idea of Islamic State never gained majority support. Soeharto, with his pragmatism (economic growth plus political stability), was ‘successful’ in depoliticizing Islam; many Islamic figures and organizations were oppressed and jailed; consequently, Islamic identity, besides ethnicity, became a symbol of opposition. As economic crises hit Indonesia in 1997, Habibie started to boost openness in the name of reform, and Abdurrahman Wahid continued the process. Less controversial than his predecessors, Megawati is just following what has been initiated by Habibie, Wahid, and previous presidents, including her father, Soekarno. In constitutional terms, the Indonesian Constitution (UUD 45) does not

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Day McAmis, *Malay Muslims: The History and Challenge of Resurgent Islam in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Wm.B.Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), pp. 7-24.

<sup>13</sup> See for example, Nakamura Mitsuo, Sharon Siddique & Omar Farouk Bajunid, *Islam and Civil Society in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studie, 2001).

accommodate Islamic Law as national civil law, although dual court system has long prevailed for Indonesians in general to allow them legal options. Recently, the implementation of Islamic Law has been a controversial debate, but its proponents have never been successful in gaining majority support.

Malaysia is also a Muslim country, but Muslims do not account more than 65% of all population (which consist Indian, Chinese, Malay and other small ethnics). Islam is the religion of state, but the state exercises multicultural policy. Some areas, including Kelantan, have been dominated by an Islamic party, PAS, where an Islamic Law is applied, although democracy has entered their political discourse to gain educated peoples' support. Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammad has been the most vocal in Southeast Asia in criticizing the West, getting rid of such organization as IMF (International Monetary Fund).<sup>14</sup> The Philippines is a majority Christian country, but Islamic concentration in the southern part (Moro National Liberation Front/MNLF and a more radical Abu Sayyaf) has made it a focus of international concern because of suspected links to the Al-Qaida.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, in Singapore and Thailand, Muslims are minorities, while Brunei holds an Islamic monarchy, but all have been less influential in regional Islamic intellectual discourse.

### **Indonesian Responses to 9/11 and the U.S. Foreign Policy**

Soon after September 11, 2001, President Megawati met President Bush, expressing Indonesian commitment to participate in the global war against terrorism. Throughout the region, Indonesian peoples were in mourning and praying for the victims and their families as well as for all the Americans. Yet, as the U.S government retaliated and attacked Afghanistan in October and November 2001, some elements of Islamic organizations such as the *Nahdlatul Ulama* and Islamic Solidarity (KISDI) criticized them on the ground that proofs had not been adequate. Not convinced by the U.S government statements, they felt that their innocent Islamic brothers were under attack. Pressed by this situation, Megawati also criticized Bush, insisting that war cannot be solved by another war, as civilians could be the victims.

Islamic hard-liners are active and vocal, but very small in number and not-influential. They are some elements of Islamic preachers and organizations, which are much influenced by

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<sup>14</sup> For an excellent history of Malaysia see Barbara W.Andaya & Leonard Y.Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1982)

<sup>15</sup> On the history of Islam in the Philippines see W.K.Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Peter G.Gowing, *Muslim Filipinos- Heritage and Horizon* (Quezon City: New day Publishers, 1979).

Middle Eastern Islam (e.g. Egyptian Muslim Brothers), Indian *Hizbut Tahrir*, and Pakistani Islam. They often express their antipathy against foreigners, Christians, Americans, Westerners, especially through speeches and publications. As the U.S retaliated, some were ready to help Afghanistan as well as other Muslim countries when attacked. The Islamic Fighters (*Laskar Jihad*), *Majelis Mujahidin*, Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and Islamic Solidarity (KISDI) frequently used symbols, pictures, CD-ROMs, cassettes, talks, and demonstrations to show their own aspiration. For example, before the U.S definite conclusion, some had told the U.S not to easily suspect Muslims as actors without adequate proof. As a sign of solidarity, they cared also about Muslims living in the West who became the target of anti-Islam or anti-Arab sentiment. They took a militant interpretation of “Jihad” as holy war. Thus, it can be said that many radical groups have some connections with theological or organizational groups elsewhere, including the Middle East, but it is difficult to establish a direct connection with Al-Qaida, and the leaders of several groups, including Jafar Umar Thalib, have criticized Usama bin Laden in a meeting in Jakarta.<sup>16</sup>

In the meantime, it seemed that anti-U.S administration sentiment was often mixed up with anti-Americanism to some Indonesians. It is said that Bush’ speeches have contributed not only to anti-US administration but also to anti-Americanism. Some even proposed to boycott American products. The causes could be that they were too emotional when their brothers were being accused as the actors and that the U.S has implemented a ‘double standard’ policy in the Middle East where Muslims were oppressed. These external factors have also been supported by their literal, partial religious reading regarding Jews and Christians. Unfortunately, to many Indonesians, Western media have unqualifiedly presented the hard side of Islam. The Washington Post, The New York Times, and MSNBC TV station have contributed to the unbalanced, one-side image of Indonesian Islam by broadcasting how Indonesian Islamists hate the U.S and made Usama a hero rather than an evil. A leading Indonesian Christian priest, Franz Magnis-Suseno tried to convince that they are very small, and the picture could not be generalized as a whole image of Indonesia.

Under these circumstances, many Indonesian Intellectuals and public figures have become concerned about discourses and initiated dialogues. The issues cover definition of terrorism, the relation between religion and tolerance, and so forth. Dialogues between foreign embassies and Indonesian organizations were several times held, including the dialogue on

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<sup>16</sup> The meeting was “Islam and the West Working Together for A Peaceful World”, initiated and held by the *Muhammadiyah*, on March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2002.

“Islam and the West Working Together for A Peaceful World”, initiated by the *Muhammadiyah*, on March 26, 2002. Afterwards, in May, U.S ambassador for Indonesia, Ralph Boyce, proclaimed, trying to understand the Indonesian people, that radical Islamic groups in Indonesia do not disturb or threaten U.S interests. Boyce personally didn’t intend to link Indonesian Islam with Al-Qaida or other terrorist groups. Before that, in December 2001, world Muslim leaders of the Islamic Organization Conference (IOC) held an international meeting in Jakarta to express their commitment to fight against terrorism and their statement that Islam never justifies intolerances. These dialogues have been certainly helpful in reducing tensions amongst Indonesians themselves and foreigners in Indonesia. Media coverage about such dialogues has been more useful than the coverage of demonstrations and hatred which are usually carried out by only a handful of people.

Meanwhile, based on the free and non-aligned policy, Indonesian government seemed very careful, which gives an impression that it has been slow in fighting against terrorism. The free and non-align foreign policy was being attained. The Indonesian Military were in definite commitment to help fight against terrorism through such ways as information exchange, education and training (International Military Education and Training (IMET), or participating in United Nations peace keepers, rather than through risky operational cooperation such as sending troops to attack Afghanistan.

In May 2002, a tension reoccurred. The U.S. Department of Foreign Affairs accused Indonesia again as the base of Al-Qaida terrorist groups. The proclaimed reasons were that Southeast Asia had attracted terrorist groups due to its great number of islands and of Muslim population. The economic crisis has been also said to have contributed to the rise of terrorist groups in the region, while law enforcement was not strong enough. In addition, the U.S claimed that some of Islamic organizations in Indonesia and Malaysia had admitted to have connection with Al-Qaida, but the claim was not quite convincing at the time. The government of Megawati Soekarnoputri has long denied the presence of substantial terrorist networks in the archipelago, although it has taken US\$50 million from Washington to assist security forces in the antiterrorist struggle.

Apart from that, there is a matter of regulation. Indonesia has soon ratified several international conventions: 1) Convention on Offences and Certain other Acts on Board Aircraft, Tokyo 1963, 2) Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Civil Aviation, Montreal 1971, 3) Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Civil

Aviation, The Hague 1970, 4) Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material, Vienna 1980, 5) Protocol on the Suppression of Unlawful Acts of Violence at Airports Serving International Civil Aviation, supplementary to no.2, 1988, and 6) International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism, New York, 1999. The effectiveness of this ratification remains yet to be seen.

In regional context, Indonesia recommended that ASEAN Regional Forum be revitalized to talk and find solutions on regional issues, including terrorism threat. Similarly, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) was hoped to be more active, especially in attempts at reducing poverty in the region which in turn could help minimize terrorist potentials. War against terrorism then became common issue, transcending national interests. The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks have led members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to join the American-led global war against international terrorism.

Some officials said all the activities were not carried out just because the U.S. pressures. Indeed, Indonesia had long had its own programs and ways in dealing with internal problems although not often successful. Indonesia has been facing separatist movements and local terrors (e.g. a series of bomb terrors in 2000-2001) and civil wars in Aceh, Ambon, Kalimantan, Irian Jaya, and others on a more small scale. Global, regional, national, and local difficulties have not yet come out of Indonesia as a big, young democratic country.

### **Challenges and Opportunities: Dialogue and Civilizational Pluralism**

If it is true that Muslims are the actors, how can religion justify or even encourage violent intolerance? Why do some Islamists hate America? Some of the answers have been partly accounted above, but from another point of view, these also could mean challenges. The history has not ended yet. Ideologies and interests still vary and are often conflicting. Fundamentalism, as an ideology, has been endorsed by many. We can see that globalization has facilitated both convergent and divergent processes. Both good peoples and terrorists use communication and information technologies. Modernity has been interpreted differently by different people. Modernity could mean rationality and humanity, but could also signify unlimited, irresponsible freedom and violence to reach certain goals.

September 11 tragedy thus should provide us, as world citizens in this global village, with many lessons. Of course, international military cooperation is indispensable to prevent any



kind of intolerance and resolve international conflicts. Other kinds of international technical cooperation are also urgent. Regulation and ratification of conventions are also important. Yet, in the long run, cultural approaches seem to be much more strategic. Inter-civilizational dialogue should be the best way to bridge differences and distrust. All need to be encouraged to seek and follow “wisdom” wherever it exists. Exchange of ideas and experiences would help increase mutual understanding. All should promote dialogue vision and minimize conflict vision (as expressed by many political fundamentalists).

World citizens should set up common platforms, should find global ethics, and apply contextual democracy and civil society. “Oh ye human beings, We have created you into tribes, peoples, and nations in order that you can know and help each other. Those who do righteousness are indeed the best and noblest”, to quote a verse in the *Quran*. “All lands in their diversity are one, and men are all neighbors and brothers “, says a Muslim scholar, Al-Zubaidi, in the tenth century C.E. Thus, religious education needs to be more comparatively and contextually, rather than textually, in order to understand how human history has been moving progressive, rather than retrogressive. We need to accept that pluralism is a historical necessity and that adaptation and accommodation are more useful and meaningful in allowing different kind of human beings to live and coexist in peace and harmony.

There is another blessing in disguise. In the aftermath of September 11, there has been a continuous need and an increased awareness throughout the world to more seriously study the complexity of the relationships between different nations, cultures, and civilizations, between “the East” and “the West”, and to figure out more acceptable world management. Dialogue, as a non-violent conflict resolution, has proved to be the best option for international communities in order to develop more peaceful relationships based on mutual understanding, recognition, listening, and respect. The road ahead is still fraught with problems, but the on-going diplomatic and educational processes have helped make at least some of regional and global difficulties less pressing. If this performance can be enhanced in the next decade, enough time may be bought so that ‘the new world order’ may yet emerge.

Although we disagree with Huntington in his thesis of the clash of civilization, we may use his definition of civilization: “Civilization is the highest social grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguish humans from other species.”<sup>17</sup> Before him, Ibnu Khaldun (1332-1406 C.E) suggested that civilization is a human

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<sup>17</sup> Huntington, *op.cit.*, p.24.

social organization as a result of urbanization and a group feeling.<sup>18</sup> Based on this definition, we can then promote ‘conversation of civilizations’. Peoples from different civilizations can only understand and appreciate each other with an effort of what Habermas would call ‘communicative action’.<sup>19</sup>

In order to implement a dialogue in a more concrete way, we will need a kind of ‘civilizational analysis’, by which we mean a study of different civilizations throughout history. Consequently we realize that there is more than one civilization. There has been always a civilizational plurality. Of course there are many civilizations, but only few people in the world view this plurality as a positive reality. If we see this as a historical necessity and respect civilizations other than our own then we advocate what can be called ‘civilizational pluralism’.<sup>20</sup> In addition, there will be no universal civilization, but instead a world of different civilizations, each of which will have to learn to coexist with the others.

To conclude this article, it is good to quote two enlightening poems, the first one written by a Germany poet and the second one by a Muslim mystic poet, Jalaluddin Rumi.<sup>21</sup>

*But good is it  
To have dialogue and to talk  
About the heart's thought, and to listen much  
About the days of love  
And about the deeds that have happened  
(Frederick Holderlin)*

*Come now whoever you are!  
Come without any fear of being disliked  
Come whether you are a Muslim, a Christian or a Jew  
Come whoever you are!  
Whether you believe or do not believe in God  
This door is not a door of fear  
This is a door of good wishes.*

(Jalaluddin Rumi)

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<sup>18</sup> Ibnu Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* trans. Franz Rosental from Arabic (New Jersey: Princeton Press, 1969).

<sup>19</sup> Habermas, “Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action,” as explained by Marc Lynch, “The Dialogue of Civilizations and International Public Spheres”, in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol.29, no.3, 2000.

<sup>20</sup> See Victor Segesvary, *Dialogue of Civilizations: An Introduction to Civilizational Analysis* (Lanham, New York, Oxford: University Press of America, Inc., 2000)

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Fred Dallmayr, *Dialogue of Civilizations: Some Exemplary Voices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

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