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Southeast Asia, Islamic Liberalism in

In Southeast Asia, Islamic liberalism refers to a religious philosophy that recognizes freedom in approaching Islam, primarily characterized by a rational interpretation in accordance with liberal philosophies and institutions. Charles Kurzman, whose work has been translated and is read by Muslim scholars and activists in Southeast Asia, uses "liberal Islam" to refer to the form of Islam that promotes such liberal themes as democracy, freedom of thought, social equality, and human progress. This liberal Islam has emerged in a response to "customary Islam," which embraces the local customs, and to "revivalist Islam," which seeks to renew the fundamentals of Islam in the modern world (Kurzman, pp. 5–13). Many liberal Muslims in Indonesia come from the religious background of customary Islam, or "traditionalist Islam," represented by the Nahdlatul Ulama ("the awakening of religious scholars"), founded in 1926, or from "modernist Islam," represented by the Muhammadiyah ("the followers of Muhammad"), founded in 1912, which adapts Dutch organizational and educational modernity. Since the 1970s, liberal Muslims in Southeast Asia have viewed themselves as part of a religious revival in the public sphere, as a substantive norm that is progressive, rational, critical, and inclusive, in opposition to what they view as a conservative, literal, exclusive, or political Islam. Thus, liberal Muslims or Muslim liberals promote such values as freedom, democracy, pluralism, justice, and peace although they interpret them in various different ways.

In Indonesia, liberal Islam has become particularly popular with the birth of the Liberal Islam Network (Jaringan Islam Liberal, JIL) in Jakarta in 2001. Founded by young activists, academics, and cultural critics, the Liberal Islam Network (www.islamlib.com) defines liberal Islam as “an interpretation of Islam which is open to all forms of intellectual expressions on all dimensions of Islam, prioritizing religio-ethics, rather than literal textual readings, believing that truth is relative and plural, siding with oppressed minorities, believing in the freedom to practice religious beliefs, and separating the worldly and heavenly authorities.” (islamlib.com/en/pages/about). The adjective “liberal” as it applies to Islam has been publicly debated, and in response to critics, the JIL’s cofounder, Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, has argued that “liberal” does not refer to freedom without limits, nor tolerance toward every idea and act. For him Islamic liberalism is a worldview which asserts that no Islam exists without reason and recognizes freedom to embrace or reject it. Liberal Muslims define liberalism as recognition of civil rights. A liberal thinker links liberalism to the rule of law. M. Dawam Rahardjo writes, “There is no freedom without law, and in practice one’s freedom is limited by the freedom of others. And freedom applies to all human beings” (quoted in Budhy Munawar-Rachman, p. 4). Farid Wajidi, the director of the Islamic and Social Studies Institute (Lembaga Kajian Islam dan Sosial, LKiS) in Yogyakarta, defines freedom of thought as the prerequisite of real religiosity. In *Islam dan Liberalisme*, Wajidi writes: “A person can only be genuinely religious when he or she uses his or her rationality” (p. 61).

In Indonesia, liberal Islam has emerged in conformity with Indonesia’s state philosophy of Pancasila, the five pillars consisting of monotheism, humanism, nationalism, representative democracy, and social justice, and with the national motto of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), embracing social and religious plurality, thus resisting the idea of an Islamic state, political Islam, the formalization of Islamic law, and the homogenization of cultures.

In Malaysia, liberal Islam is defined in the context of a racial politics among Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Malaysian liberal Muslims show their critical stand against Islamic laws (*sharī’ah*) that do not conform to Malaysia’s constitution and pluralism, and are opposed to the politicization of Islam and the discriminative policies toward women and religious minorities. Malaysian liberals define and work for religious freedom and civil law that is just for all citizens, an increasingly popular attempt that critics, including the Islamic scholars councils, see as heretical, secular, and Western.

In Singapore, liberal Islam is defined in terms of the state’s construction of religious moderation and modern global economy. Some Singaporean activists seek to redefine Islam in terms of anti-terrorism and liberal capitalist global economy, although they too are engaged in international liberal themes across national boundaries.

Thus in these countries, liberal Islam has been defined in different historical and sociopolitical contexts, but there is emphasis upon individual freedom and a critical attitude toward religious conservatism associated with intolerance as well as toward the state that

interferes with such freedom. Liberal, progressive Muslims connect with each other in addressing various liberal themes. In their diversity and dynamics, Islam and liberalism are compatible.

Liberal Muslims see themselves inspired by the universalized, rather than particular message of the Qur'ān and Prophet Muḥammad, and find various religions, philosophies, and histories relevant for reforming Islam and Muslims in the modern time. They quote such *ḥadīth*s as the one saying 'religion is reason, and there is no religion without reason,' as well as the Qur'ān passages, such as "If one wishes he may believe, and if one wishes he may reject." (QUR'ĀN 18:29). Reason serves not as the antithesis, but as a means of interpreting revelation. They regard liberal democracy, separation of religion and politics, freedom of thought and expression, religious freedom, gender equality, human progress, peace, as both universal and divine, in their diverse expressions. They trace their thought to the spirit of reform throughout Islamic history as well as the spirit of Enlightenment in Western history. For example, they emphasize the objectives of Law (*maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*) formulated by medieval Shāfi'ī jurist Al-Shatibi (d. 1388), namely: protection of religion, soul, intellect, property, family, and honor, and interpret them in light of modern notions of religious freedom, freedom of thought, individual property rights, and other private and civil rights.

The rise of Islamic liberalism in Southeast Asia can be attributed to an increased degree of education among middle-class Muslims, to a more sophisticated communication technology and organization, and to political opportunities. Muslim liberals are therefore characterized by their eclecticism, employing a wide range of literature produced in the Middle East, Europe, the United States, Africa, as well as Asia, in seeking sources for reformist ideas. Indonesian liberal Muslims cite select medieval scholars from Al-Shatibi, Ibn Taimiyya, al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd, to Mohammed Arkoun, Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, Ḥasan Ḥanafī, Jamal al-Banna, Fazlur Rahman, Fatima Mernissi, Farid Esack, Khalid Aboe al-Fadl, and Abdullahi Ahmed al-Naim, among contemporary scholars. Malaysian progressive thinkers, such as Chandra Mudzaffar, Anwar Ibrahim, Faris Noor, and Zainah Anwar, and Singaporean writers make references to these scholars as well as Indonesian scholars such as Harun Nasution, who coined the phrase "rationalist Islam," Abdurrahman Wahid who promotes "domestic Islam," and Nurcholish Madjid, who says "Islam Yes, Islamic Party No" and promotes rethinking Islam in the context of nationhood and modernity. Nurcholish Madjid (1939–2005) was well known for "secularization," the process of making world affairs, such as politics and economy, worldly, not sacred. There has been an increased movement of liberal ideas and scholars across Southeast Asia and the globe.

For liberal Muslims, the gate of independent reasoning (*ijtihād*) should not be closed because of modern challenges, seeing the imitation of the tradition (*taqlīd*) as the cause of stagnation. In their view, conservative memories and cultures have placed women second to men, have viewed other religious communities as a threat or an enemy, and have triggered

the idea of reviving an Islamic caliphate, an Islamic state, an Islamic politics, regarded as the orthodox-conservative mindset. Liberal Muslims find the urgent need to engage with both Western and Muslim scholarship in an intellectual war (*ghaz al-fikr*) often referred to by their conservative counterpart. The intellectual context has been primarily historical and global, but its varied manifestations are primarily national and local. Educationally, Islamic liberalism is born in a multicultural context. Liberal Muslims have diverse backgrounds, but many study at the traditional schools (*pesantren*), at the Islamic studies institutes (Institut Agama Islam Negeri, IAIN) and in various places: Egypt, India, the United States, Australia, Europe, and other Southeast Asian countries.

In Indonesia, the fall of the authoritarian New Order's regime (1967–1998) following the Asian economic crisis has led to political openness that gives rise to diverse orientations, including conservatism and liberalism. In Malaysia, the enduring conflict between the Islamist Party of Malaysia (Partai Islam Malaysia, PAS) and the ruling part of the Islamic United Malay National Organization (UMNO) has paved the way for progressive thinkers and activists to voice their critical thinking in the public sphere. In Singapore, a global city government has influenced young Malays to also offer their diverse progressive perspectives.

The Liberal Islam Network (Jaringan Islam Liberal, JIL) was founded in March 2001 as a response to what the founders saw as the rise of Islamic conservatism in the public sphere. They published articles and books, held talk-shows that were broadcast on radio and discussions via online and offline, and worked with local networks across the country to disseminate their progressive ideas. They saw political and conservative Islam as a threat to a "blessing to all humankind"—to Islam as well as to the state philosophy of Pancasila and to the constitution. They seek to develop an Islam that is nonliteral, substantive, contextual, distinguishing the Arabic and local customary laws from the fundamental message of Islam so that Islam may conform to national progress, democracy, and world peace.

For the Liberal Islamic Network and other like-minded groups, such as the LAKPESDAM (the Human Resources Study and Development Institution, Lembaga Kajian dan Pengembangan Sumber Daya Manusia, Nahdlatul Ulama), the Muhammadiyah's Youth Islam Network (JIMM), the International Center for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP), religion is primarily a private matter and the public life is to be governed through deliberation and democracy. They agree with keeping religion and politics apart, although they do not reject religion-inspired norms such as equality, justice, and peace, in the public sphere. They define secularism not as a resistance against religious expressions and institutions. They recognize the process of secularization but do not see religion in decline in the public sphere. They accept the limited, non-discriminatory role of the state and political parties in religious and civil matters.

In Malaysia, Sisters in Islam (SIS), a Malaysian nongovernmental organization founded in

1987 by woman lawyers, journalists, professors, and activists, focuses on gender inequality, addressing such issues as domestic violence, veiling, child marriage, polygamy, moral policing, and unjust inheritance, and promoting civil liberties, constitutionalism, and human rights. SIS positions itself in the global movement of the progressive moderates against conservatism and extremism. Although SIS hardly uses the label "liberal Islam," nor "feminist Islam," it seeks to develop an understanding of Islam as the religion of justice and equality in the modern world. It creates a public space that enables them to engage with their faiths in the struggle for justice, human rights, and democracy. Sisters in Islam offers legal aid and advocacy; works with scholars, judges, and international communities; issues media statements, carries out trainings, and publishes bulletins, booklets, articles, and books about Islam and gender issues. In an op-ed column, Zainah Anwar points to the gender gap report that lists Malaysia in a low rank and to other surveys indicating the low level of economic and political participation of women in Malaysia despite some governmental speeches and bills proposed by the government and politicians. She urges political leadership to change traditional mindsets that still regard women as inferior to men. SIS is active in resisting bills that, according to them, violate women's human rights such as the Selangor Islamic Family Law Bill of 2003. SIS considers this bill discriminative against women and contends that the legal uniformity being introduced across the states poses a threat to the ideal of a just Malaysian society. They work with professors Kecia Ali and Amina Wadud from the United States, Tariq Ramadan from England, and Hussein Muhammad and Amin Abdullah from Indonesia addressing such issues as women's rights, human rights, secularism, and constitutionalism. Zainah Anwar, the cofounder of SIS, resists a literal interpretation of the Qur'ān and a blind following of the jurisprudence interpreted predominantly by male authority. Zainah Anwar says all that the *sharī'ah* has produced throughout history is a human understanding of God's law, not God's law itself; therefore it is subject to change given the context of changing times and circumstances. Regarding gender, Zainah Anwar argues that the role of women in procreation should not be a basis for discrimination. She emphasizes the sharing of responsibility between women and men in the upbringing of children and maintaining a harmonious household. To this objective, in 2009 SIS established a movement called *Musawah*, working for equality, nondiscrimination, justice, and dignity in the family and in society at large. *Musawah* is a global movement of women and men who believe that equality and justice in the Muslim family are necessary and possible, and that all citizens—women and men, Muslims and people of all religions and beliefs, no matter what their expertise—should be able to claim their rights and speak out on issues that affect their private and public lives. The *Musawah* Framework Action argues for reform from multiple approaches: international human rights standards, national laws and constitutional guarantees of equality, Islamic sources, including Muslim jurisprudence, and lived realities of women and men. *Musawah* builds knowledge, offers advocacy, and conducts outreach programs.

The emphasis upon public ethics and civic values rather than religious ritual and symbols, a characteristic of Islamic liberalism, can also be found in the thought of Chandra Muzaffar,

who is involved in the International Movement for Just World (JUST, www.just-international.org). Chandra Muzaffar offers a creative, dynamic approach which, inspired by such values as justice and compassion, attempts to formulate specific policies directed toward the elimination of poverty, the eradication of corruption, and the enhancement of human rights. For Muzaffar, both the government and civil society should work for shared values, or a global ethic, instead of legal formalism and ritualism. Another progressive activist, Farish A. Noor, whose work includes *The Other Malaysia* (2002), promotes freedom of speech, against the formalization of Islamic law in Malaysia. Farish Noor is critical of the Islamization projects by both the ruling party (UMNO, United Malay National Organization) and the Islamic party (PAS, Malays Islamic Party) for their failure in addressing civil liberties in a multireligious society. In a secular state, Noor writes, citizenship, nationality, and sovereignty are paramount, framed within a secular framework where one's identity is based on individuality rather than being a member of a faith community. He observes that many Malay Muslims turn to an Islamic state because of the failure of the secular state and therefore proposes a restoration of the integrity and credibility of the civil legal apparatus and system in Malaysia, working for justice in an open and fair manner according to the Malaysian Constitution. Other Malaysian liberal activists, such as Anwar Ibrahim and Marina Mahathir, write about public ethics, constitutionalism, human rights, democracy, and interfaith coexistence.

Islamic liberalism has often been linked to interfaith discourse and movements. Religious pluralism has become one of the key issues that both advocates and critics address. In Indonesia, Muhammad Syafi'i Anwar, director of the International Center for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP), defines pluralism as respecting the faiths of others. He says, "I believe that Islam is the true religion, but others say the same about their religions." (quoted in Munawar-Rachman, p. 218). Within the diverse faiths, liberal Muslims argue, there are commonalities and common platform, namely humanism. They refer to Qur'ānic passages such as "no compulsion in religion" (2:256), "your religion is yours and mine is mine" (109:6), and "every community has its own path... in order that He tests you, therefore compete in goodness" (3:48) to support religious freedom and pluralism. In Malaysia, the Interfaith Commission (IFC, Suruhanjaya Antara Agama Malaysia), whose members come from the existing religious and secular organizations, founded in 2005, aims at promoting freedom of thought and freedom of religion, develops common values shared by all religions, and works for interfaith harmony and national harmony, ratifies international laws and covenants regarding religious tolerance, and assists all citizens in upholding their religious and civil rights in Malaysia.

The Reading Group Singapore (www.thereadinggroup.sg) may be categorized as part of progressive, liberal Islam, although the Council of Islamic Religion in Singapore (Majelis Ugama Islam Singapore, MUIS), embracing moderation and progress, envisions "a community of excellence that is religiously profound and socially progressive." Being progressive in practicing Islam means working beyond ritualism, riding the modernization

wave, appreciating Islamic and other civilizations, developing good citizenship in a multireligious society and secular state, and being inclusive and pluralist without contradicting Islamic fundamentals. The Reading Group, engaged with such scholars as Fazlur Rahman, Asghar Ali Engineer, Khaled Abou el-Fadl, Nurcholish Madjid, demonstrates a sociocultural critique of religious bigotry, violence, and terrorism, as well as consumerism and commodification prevalent among the Singaporeans. They see themselves as a minority in a predominantly Chinese society and the secular state, and stress the value of religious freedom and the rights of minorities, tolerance, and peace. They define Islam in substantive, rather than legalistic terms, and promote a democratic Islam. One of the writers emphasizes Islamic norms of compassion and peace. He says that many Singaporeans are proud of their degree of religious freedom. The citizens are free to observe their religious beliefs and practices so long as they do not insult other religious communities. One of the activists, Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, says, "I am essentially a pluralist Muslim. By this, I mean I accept the inherent and necessary diversity—not only across various faith systems or religions, but more importantly, within Islam itself." (www.thereadinggroup.sg/articles.htm). He recognizes no single formulation on pluralism, but he is inclined toward what he regards as the "liberal" stand of Islam. For him, an interfaith engagement is sanctioned by the Qur'ān, embracing human dignity, mutual learning, and competition in goodness, and by the examples of Prophet Muḥammad, including the one that says the religion most loved by God is the upright and tolerant one (*al-hanafiya al-samha*). Thus, a peace-loving and rational Muslim will interpret Islam as a peace-loving and rational religion whereas an intolerant and parochial Muslim will interpret Islam in an intolerant and parochial manner (www.thereadinggroup.sg).

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