Discursive Contest between Liberal and Literal Islam in Southeast Asia

Lily Zubaidah Rahim

Abstract

The paper focuses on the impact of global Islamic revivalism and state Islamisation initiatives on the cultural practices, institutions and laws in Southeast Asia's Muslim majority states of Malaysia and Indonesia. In particular, the assault on adat and the reconfiguration of legal and political structures with the intrusion of *Wahabi*-inspired literal Islam from West Asia are considered. As the discursive contest between literal and liberal or progressive Islam[1] will have a major impact on the direction and outcome of the protracted War on Terror, it is imperative that the discursive advances of the former are countered by reinforcing democratic structures and institutions and addressing localised socio-political and economic grievances. In the long term, liberal Islam's inclusive and flexible worldview based on *ijtihad* and universal humanism are likely to prove more effective than the reliance on draconian security-orientated measures in the protracted War on Terror.

Tradition of Inclusive Islam

Southeast Asia boasts a tradition of inclusive and moderate Islam that is strongly influenced by Sufi mysticism, religious eclecticism and the ideas of progressive Islamic reformers. Centuries before the arrival of Islam to Southeast Asian shores, in approximately the thirteenth century, the region had readily assimilated Hindu, Buddhist and other philosophies. In this rich tradition of cultural osmosis and pluralism, the "other" had been readily integrated into the "us" fabric. This cultural syncretism ensured that the penetration of Islam was not characterised by a sharp break with the past but was more akin to a gentle adaptation to the local socio-cultural terrain (Rahim 2003, 209).

Archipelago Southeast Asia's long tradition of relatively egalitarian gender relations markedly differentiates the region from the Arab world. In contrast to the generally subordinate status of Arab women particularly in pre-Islamic times, Southeast Asian women have traditionally enjoyed relatively high social status and access to public space. Adat (customary) practices have bestowed sons and daughters equitable rights to the family property. Such laws have also provided that property acquired during marriage be divided equitably in the event of a divorce (Couillard 1986, 84).

The region's tradition of cultural accommodation has been reinforced by the adherence of most regional Muslims to the schools of Islamic jurisprudence which allow greater space for adjusting the practice of Islam according to historical and cultural contexts. Neo-modernist interpretations of Islam, which encourage the practice of *ijtihad* (independent thinking and rational logic) have been

endorsed by prominent Islamic intellectuals in Indonesia. Islamic intellectuals such as the late Nurcholish Majid, have consistently maintained that there is no Islamic theological imperative to establish an Islamic state as the Quran does not mention, must less describe, the workings of an Islamic state (Rahim 2003, 210). Consistent with this worldview, the largest Indonesian Islamist organisations such as *Nadlatul Ulama* (NU) and *Muhammadiyah* have traditionally focused on the spiritual upliftment of Muslims rather than the enforcement of Islamic law. A significant number of Islamic scholars in Indonesia are theologically flexible and have incorporated Islam in the push for greater democracy, a vibrant civil society and the respect for human rights.

In contrast to the inclusive tradition of Southeast Asian Islam, rigid interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence from the Wahabi school,[2] dominant in conservative Arab societies and widely accepted by Islamic radicals and militants, reject innovation and ijtihad. Adamant that the Quran be read literally, Wahabis advocate the establishment of an Islamic state led by clerics, government by s*hariah* (Islamic) law, regulation of a strict dress-code, particularly for women, and the replication of the seventh-century Medina. Dazzled by prescriptions that are more than a thousand years old, they are prone to ignore the realities of the contemporary world. The non-implementation of shariah law is perceived as tantamount to worshipping the pagan deities of the pre-Islamic era (*jahiliyah*). This is based on the logic that as secular laws separate religion and politics and are devised by humans, they are inherently flawed (Rahim 2003, 210).

As the world is essentially understood in rigid "black and white" terms, non-Muslims and the Western secular world are projected as the perpetual "other". The obsession with a single truth rationalises the dismissal of others who do not accept their truth. It also rationalises the *jihad* (holy war) against "unbelievers" and the acceptance of "collateral" civilian deaths when conducting the jihad (Esack 2003, 89). The siege mentality of Wahabi-inspired radical and militant Islamists is in no small measure fuelled by an acute sense of political defeatism, frustration, disempowerment and humiliation in the face of Western domination and oppression by political elites in collusion with the West.

Literal and Wahabi Islamists insist that pre-Islamic traditions and cultures, particularly of non-Arabic Muslims, be cleansed and kept in line with conservative aspects of Arab culture. The belief that adat be jettisoned in favour of the supposedly purer and orthodox Arab traits is rooted in the logic that Islam in the periphery is lax, less pure and thus deviant (Abaza 1991, 219). Adhering to this belief in cultural cleaning, the conservative Islamist government in the state of Kelantan in Malaysia has discouraged traditional Malay artforms such as the Wayang Kulit performance as the puppets depict heroes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Traditional Malay woodcarvings, particularly those

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