



## IDSS COMMENTARIES (13/2006)

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### THE CONTROVERSIES OF *FATWA*: GROWING CONSERVATISM IN INDONESIA?

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THE set of *fatwa* (religious edicts) issued recently by the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) – a quasi-state Islamic authority -- has generated intense debate in Indonesia. While the controversy over the *fatwa* that forbids the teachings of the deviationist Ahmadiyah sect is somewhat overblown, the contention is more understandable over the edicts against Islamic liberalism, secularism and religious pluralism.

The issue of Ahmadiyah in Indonesia is actually not new, having spanned more than two decades. It was not entirely clear why attention on Ahmadiyah followers has gained a renewed momentum this year. Ahmadiyah first arrived in Indonesia from India through Aceh in 1925. In 1980, the MUI issued a *fatwa* declaring Ahmadiyah as deviationist because it recognizes its founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, as a prophet -- contrary to a principle tenet of the Islamic faith that Muhammad is the last of all prophets. In 1984, the Ministry of Religious Affairs also issued a statement declaring that Ahmadiyah could not claim to be an Islamic sect, effectively banning it from Indonesia, because the state only recognizes five religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. A couple of weeks ago, the Minister of Religious Affairs reaffirmed this injunction.

But the Suharto government did not take any definitive measure to end the existence of Ahmadiyah in Indonesia. In fact, despite the formal ban of this deviationist group, Ahmadiyah continued to grow and now claims to have followers of around half a million Indonesians. But when thousands of Ahmadiyah followers congregated at their annual meeting in Bogor, West Java, in early July, they were surrounded by thousands of demonstrators. A few days later, around ten thousand people from the Laskar Jundullah militia demanded that the congregation be disbanded. Under duress, the Ahmadiyah followers stopped their congregation. Since the release of the MUI's *fatwa* late last year, pressures on the followers of the Ahmadiyah sect have occupied the public limelight and have not abated.

#### Islamic Liberalism

MUI also banned the ideas of Islamic liberalism, secularism and religious pluralism. Indonesia actually has a long tradition of Islamic intellectualism and some of its prime movers include the proponents of liberal Islam. While the traditional destination for Islamic studies has been the Middle East, as well as Pakistan and northern India, many Indonesian Islamic scholars are increasingly seeking education in the West. The practice that was started out by figures such as the late Nurcholis Majid continues until today with a young intellectual

Ulil Abshar Abdalla from the Liberal Islam Network (JIL) at the forefront.

Religious practices in Indonesia have always been plural. Even though Islam is the religion of almost 90% of its 225 million people, it is practised by many Indonesians in an eclectic way, combining the ritual practices from beliefs that came prior to Islam. This is not only the case with Muslims. Many Indonesian Christians and Catholics also practise their religion mixing with local and traditional rituals. So in a sense, religious pluralism has always been the way religion is practised in Indonesia.

Secularism is perhaps more problematic. The issue whether Indonesia should be an Islamic or secular state has been debated even before the Republic was born, and it continues to become one of the most important debates today. The proponents of Islamic state argue that as a predominantly Muslim nation, it is only natural that Islam should become the foundation of the state. On the other hand, the proponents of secularism contend that the plural religious practices, coupled with the existence of pockets where Muslims are in the minority, especially in the eastern part of Indonesia, necessitates the state to maintain an equidistance from all religions and beliefs. In the end, the argument for a secular state won the day, and Indonesia has been a secular state ever since.

### **Nothing to worry about**

There is actually nothing to worry about the MUI's *fatwa*. The appeal of MUI's *fatwa* traditionally has been limited. This could be seen when the MUI issued a *fatwa* in the early days of Reformasi, declaring that Muslims should vote only for Islamic parties and that Muslims should not vote a woman for president. Yet, Indonesians went on to vote for the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) and Golkar, both non-Islamic parties, in the 1999 and 2004 elections. Hamzah Haz, a leader of the Islamic party PPP, who previously had supported the *fatwa*, eventually agreed to become Megawati Sukarnoputri's vice president.

MUI itself has stated that critics of the *fatwa* have taken the edicts largely out of context. The council said it did not mean to suggest that the plural nature of Indonesia is an impediment to Islamic *dakwah*. The *fatwa* was rather aimed at purifying the practice of Islam in Indonesia from influences that the reformist Muslims in the MUI considered to be *bid'ah* (innovations not mandated by the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad's Traditions).

But the concern is that there seems to be some level of support from the community for the *fatwa*. While no opinion polls have been conducted to measure the popularity of the *fatwa*, call-ins in various talkshows in TV and radio stations indicate there was a good degree of support from the society. What explains this?

It is important to know the context of Indonesian society today. Like many religious communities all over the world, Muslims in Indonesia has been experiencing a growing sense of piety. Among Indonesian scholars, this phenomenon is known as "*santrinization*" (from the word *santri*: pious Muslims). As the society grows more pious, there is arguably also a side-effect – some increasingly take a conservative view towards religious practices that are considered "less" mainstream. In a few cases, such growing conservatism translates into intolerance towards people of other faiths.

The problem is that the proponents of Islamic "liberalism" have not done a good job in 'mainstreaming' their thinking. They have not undertaken systematic efforts to penetrate and

introduce their thinking in the *madrasah* or *pesantren* (religious boarding schools). The Liberal Islam Network (JIL) continues to be an intellectual exercise covering only urban society. Even on this matter, its appeal among the students in campuses is pale compared to that of the conservative Justice Prosperity Party (PKS). As a result, Islamic interpretation in Indonesia remains dominated by the conservative clerics.

This does not at all suggest that Indonesia is on the verge of a religious conflict or that it is becoming an Islamic state. Besides, the country is much more preoccupied with other matters, such as poverty, corruption, and local politics. It does suggest, however, that those who could provide countervailing views, including the activists of JIL, must do better in their efforts. Indonesia is inherently tolerant and has enough space for divergent views.

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