

IDSS SEMINAR NOTES

**IDSS Public Seminar on
Whither The Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI)?
Guest Speaker: Dr. Nadirsyah Hosen*
Visiting Research Fellow
Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies
Nanyang Technological University
12 July 2006**

Introduction:

Dr. Nadirsyah Hosen started the talk by providing an overview of Islam in Indonesia. He said that Indonesia was the biggest Muslim country in the world. At the same time, there was a great variance in the culture. Thus, there was no single uniform Islam in Indonesia due to the varied culture that became intertwined with the religion. At a theological-doctrinal level, Indonesian Muslims were followers of the Ahl al-Sunnah wal al-Jamaah. By being followers of the latter, they could be seen as following the middle or moderate path in the Islamic discourse.

Background

The MUI was established in 1975 at the instigation of the government with the support of several groups of ulama. The council was established as an effort to accommodate Islamic aspirations during Soeharto's regime. It comprised of ulama and scholars from Nadhlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah and other Islamic organizations. The MUI has a fatwa committee that issues fatwa at both the national and local level. The function of the MUI was merely advisory and not to launch any practical programs.

According to Dr. Hosen, fatwa was a legal advice or opinion in Islam. It could cover a variety of issues such as rituals, charity, pilgrimage and economics. Unlike Malaysia, there were no government regulations in Indonesia concerning fatwa. A fatwa was also only morally binding. It had no legal power. As Indonesia did not have a state Mufti, unlike Singapore, a fatwa could be issued by individual scholars or Islamic organizations, resulting in many different and conflicting fatwas.

MUI in a changing environment

Following the collapse of the Soeharto's regime and the advent of democracy, there was now freedom of opinion in Indonesia, as guaranteed by the second amendment of the constitution. With Soeharto's departure, the voice of the Indonesian Muslims - moderates and radicals - became louder but that did not mean that they were in existence during Soeharto's rule.

Dr. Hosen claimed that the 9/11 incident had to some extent influenced fatwa in Indonesia. In post-9/11, the US government was seen to have taken a more pro-active approach in liberating the Muslim world. In Indonesia, this could be seen through the Asia Foundation's provision of funds to the Liberal Islam Network (JIL). JIL's provocative style had given it a negative image in the eyes of many Muslims particularly the radicals.

JIL claimed that it wanted to re-edit the Qu'ran and publish a critical edition of the holy book. JIL also promoted secularism and the strict separation of religion and state. According to JIL, every religion was the path to the same truth.

MUI was now adopting, what Dr. Hosen labelled as, the big tent strategy. By that, he means that MUI had tried to accommodate all voices of Islam in Indonesia including the conservatives. There was a Declaration of Islamic Ummah on 21 June 2006. Following this, the Indonesian Mujahideen Council (MMI) and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) agreed to be part of the MUI.

Controversial Fatwa

Among some of the fatwas issued by the MUI were: declaring liberalism, pluralism and secularism as forbidden; Ahmadiyah was a heretical sect; and mixed marriages between different faith was *haram*. Dr. Hosen added that some of MUI's fatwa was not unique to Indonesia. For example, Ahmadiyah had also been rejected in other countries such as Pakistan, Malaysia, Brunei and Bangladesh. In fact, the fatwa on Ahmadiyah was issued by MUI in 1980. The reason for MUI reissuing it in 2006 was due to the rumours that Indonesia would become the centre of Ahmadiyah. However, the Indonesian government could not ban the Ahmadiyah because Indonesia was now a democratic country and the rights of minority were guaranteed in the constitution.

Similarly, the MUI has earlier issued a fatwa in 2002 on the anti-pornography bill and this was not a recent issue. The Head of the Fatwa Committee, Ma'aruf Amin, even rallied the Muslims to hold a demonstration on 22 May 2006 and lobbied for the anti-pornography bill. It was vital for the MUI to approach and gain the trust of the Muslim fundamental groups and according to Dr. Hosen, the protest should be seen in this regard. The MUI was not known for one to organize mass demonstration.

Despite some of the controversial fatwas that had been issued by the MUI, the council claimed that it had not been 'hijacked' by the radical groups. Rather, it was part of their big tent strategy to accommodate all voices. In fact, the MUI claimed that it did not tolerate anarchy. In Dr. Hosen's words, even Muhammadiyah approached radicals in an attempt to soften the latter rather than to be influenced by them.

There was however, a problem with MUI's fatwa and this was due to the practice of MUI's re-defining words in accordance to their unique understanding. According to MUI, their fatwa was only about religion and Islam and had nothing to do with liberal democracy. In this regard, their meaning of pluralism was different from the academic or secular interpretation. MUI's definition of pluralism was that all religions are equal and to them, pluralism was *haram* but plurality was not. It was this practice of interpreting words differently from their mainstream meaning that had created misunderstanding and controversies on MUI fatwas.

Conclusion

Dr. Hosen concluded the seminar with the question: has the MUI experiencing a shift from being a moderate to being a conservative? According to Dr. Hosen, the MUI was still moderate and their fatwas had to be understood in its context. It was also part of their current strategy to maintain good relations with all Muslim groups. Nevertheless, there

were two issues which the moderates and the fundamentalists had agreed upon; the issue of morality and to defend the core of Islamic teachings. Dr. Hosen ended his presentation by saying, “standing in the middle is not easy.’

Discussion/ Question and Answer

The issue of JIL

A member of the audience asked Dr. Hosen the possibility that the radical groups such as MMI and FPI had actually exploited the MUI fatwa to attack JI. Dr. Hosen replied that MUI had rejected the violence against JIL. The Council’s leader had made a statement that the radical groups should not get provoked. Dr. Hosen added that one could not conveniently blame MUI’s statement. The political situation needed to be taken into account.

Dr. Hosen said that on the issue of MUI possibly co-opting JIL into the council, the answer was unlikely as MUI has already claimed that JIL was out of Islam. JIL’s ideas had cross the boundary of acceptable act and thus, the MUI could not accommodate its ideas. JIL’s provocative style had given it a bad image. Even the Asia Foundation had cut its funding to JIL in order not be associated with the bad image.

Ideal Model of MUI

Dr. Hosen thinks MUI’s current position was the best thus far. It was impossible to make MUI a governing body because Indonesia was not an Islamic state and to ban the Council may invite violent protests. Nevertheless, MUI’s current strategy of trying to accommodate all Islamic groups was not without problems. Dealing with the second layer of leaders in NU and Muhammadiyah was problematic because they believed that they were bigger than MUI and thus, would not need the latter. As a result, different fatwas may be issued by the various groups on the same issue. It was up to the individual to adopt the fatwa that best suited him/her.

MUI and its leadership

A question was posed if the MUI’s strategy of accommodating all groups was the personal position of Din Syamsuddin, MUI’s secretary general, or Ma’aruf Amin. Dr Hosen agreed that MUI’s strategy often reflected the position of the key figures of the day. There were rumours that Din Syamsuddin could become the President or the Vice-President in the 2009 presidential election. Thus, that could be the reason he was accommodating so many groups in MUI in order to gain the support of the Muslims. However, Dr. Hosen added that this remained to be seen.

Recorded by: Rohaiza Ahmad Asi
Research Analyst

* *Dr. Nadirsyah Hosen is a visiting research fellow at IDSS from 15 June to 15 July 2006. He is working at T.C. Bierne School of Law, University of Queensland, as a postdoctoral*

research fellow. He is also adjunct fellow of the Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance at Griffith University.