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Religion and Politics: Reflections from Jakarta

By Nursheila Muez

Synopsis

Ahok's defeat in the Jakarta gubernatorial election and his conviction for blasphemy have reignited debates about the role of Islam in a secular state. Misconceptions about the relationship between the two need to be addressed.

Commentary

WHEN PRESIDENT Joko Widodo (Jokowi) called for religion and politics to be separated ahead of the Jakarta gubernatorial run-off election in April, he was met with scepticism from conservative Muslim voices. They took the statement to mean that the president was advocating the liberal and Western values of secularism.

Amid the resurgence of religion, specifically the rise of increasingly vocal voices of the religious-right as Indonesia struggles to fight the tide of conservatism, a reassessment of religion's role in the public space is necessary. As a key theme which underpinned the election it is imperative to clarify the relationship between religion and state.

Misconceptions About Secularism

The common negative perception of secularism stems from conflating politics and state as well as misequating secularism with Westernisation. There are three implications:

Firstly, by conflating politics and state, Muslims who reject the idea take separation of religion from politics to mean the relegation of Islam to the private sphere and its total exclusion from the public domain. However Jokowi's call to divorce religion from

politics was in no way an attempt to undermine Islam in Indonesian society. Rather, he was warning against the politicisation of religion which would divide society.

The impact of sustained use of the religion in politics was evident in how easily Basuki Tjahaja Purnama's opponent, Anies Baswedan, outperformed him in the election despite Basuki (Ahok) having a strong lead in the earlier round. Continuous slogans to defend the Quran and Islam, and messages emblazoned on banners in mosques that Muslims found to have supported Ahok would not be granted funeral rights are salient examples of how politicisation of religion is always divisive.

Secondly, the view that secularism as a Western idea is incompatible with Islam overlooks the nuances and unique contexts in which the social process of secularisation occurs. While it might have drawn its roots from the West, secularism as a political concept has manifested itself in diverse and multiple forms according to particular historical experiences of a country.

For Indonesia, which has had a history of positive experiences with democracy and pluralism, a secular state that is neutral towards all religious and non-religious communities is the most prudent form of governance to safeguard the country's social fabric. Secular and strong state institutions are also instrumental in meting out justice and upholding citizens' trust towards the government.

Beyond Ahok's defeat, his being sentenced for blasphemy is a bigger disappointment for secular-minded Indonesians. The verdict also stokes fears that religion is gradually encroaching into the legislative and judicial arms of the state. Human rights activists and lawyers have posed concerns that this verdict – arguably arrived at under the influence of religious rhetoric as well – sets an unwelcome precedent that religion could and would be used by some people to suppress others, especially minority groups.

At this juncture, it is worthwhile noting that there is no place for blasphemy laws in a secular state with secular institutions like Indonesia. However, there is still a place and a strong case for religion in the public space. The question is: what form of religion should operate in the public space? And how can religion contribute to the common space?

Contextualised Islam in a Secular State

In a recent interview with Indonesian TV series *Mata Najwa*, prolific Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) leader, Mustofa Bisri or more affectionately known as Gus Mus, and Quranic exegesis expert Quraish Shihab, attributed the rise of a hardline understanding of Islam and intolerant attitudes in Indonesian society to the presence of religious leaders who claim a monopoly on truth.

When putting forth the need for Muslims to 'return to the Quran' for moral guidance and practical solutions to modern problems, they in fact preach for a return to one particular translation of the Quran which they subscribe to and are familiar with – a reality that many Muslims fail to realise. While the Quran's message is complete, perfect and eternal, Muslims' access to it is not.

Especially for non-Arabic speaking Muslims, reliance on translations and commentaries by scholars is inevitable in order to unpack and comprehend what the Quran says. Meanwhile, scholars and commentators, in the process of interpreting the text, undeniably bring to bear the contexts in which they are living in and that have shaped their thoughts.

'Going back to the sources' does not simply refer to lifting a Quranic verse or a hadith and transplanting it to socio-political issues in the world today. Instead, 'going back to the sources' refer to a constant re-examination and re-learning of the text to glean meaning and discover its relevance in current context.

Understanding and appreciating the text beyond a literal and formalistic reading, the two scholars agreed, is a crucial step in dealing with the tide of conservatism and intolerant behaviour.

In other words, a contextualised form of religion – one that is not foreign or alien to the norms and values of a particular society – would be best able to contribute to expanding the common space. This is because it considers the important role of culture in shaping religious thought and practices, as well as promotes tolerance and respect for diverse views.

Youth Engagement in Public Space

What was also evident in the Jakarta election was the ability of fringe voices to mobilise masses in support of their cause. Most interestingly, yet also most worrisome, were reports in the Indonesian media which noted that youth as young as fifteen years old participated in the FPI-led rallies because they wanted to contribute to "defending the religion".

As such, renewal of the religious education curriculum would be central in tackling extreme thoughts and behaviours among the youth. In fact, this was one of the long-term policies outlined by the youth wing of NU, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor (GP Ansor), in its attempt to tackle intolerance and extremism. In a bold move, GP Ansor recently issued its Declaration on Humanitarian Islam, which also included strategies such as practising *ijtihad* to contextualise Islamic teachings to the contemporary setting, strengthening grassroots movements to build consensus and political will among society.

The youth, as a segment of the community that is tech-savvy, educated and aware about the workings of the modern political system as well as religion, play an important role in contributing to the ways that religion can expand and contribute to the common space. Their diverse and creative voices would be beneficial in populating public discourse with positive examples and resources from within the religion itself.

Religion would continue to have a space in public sphere in a secular state, insofar as it is able to constructively contribute to improving tolerance and understanding in society. For this to happen, religion has to be strictly separated from politics lest it is manipulated and abused for political ends.

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