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‘Islam Nusantara’ and its Discontents

By Syafiq Hasyim

Synopsis

The idea of Islam Nusantara promoted by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Muslim organisation in Indonesia, remains debated among Muslim groups in Indonesia. The idea is not totally acceptable to Indonesian Muslims and needs more constructive dialogue.

Commentary

THE NATIONAL polemics on the idea of Islam Nusantara shows no sign of reaching any consensus since it was first tabled and deliberated at the National Congress of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation, in 2015 in Jombang, East Java. With the Indonesian presidential election approaching in 2019, the debates are likely to sharpen.

In essence, the idea of Islam Nusantara is understood differently by different parties who see it not only as a theological, but also a political and ideological construct. Although NU, a traditionalist Islamic organisation established in 1926, has declared that Islam Nusantara is the way of NU scholars in understanding Islam, it argues that this idea remains open to interpretation and negotiation within the larger Islamic community.

Deeply Controversial

Even within the NU family, the idea of Islam Nusantara – which approximately means Indonesian Islam – has proven to be deeply controversial, even divisive. This is evident in the ongoing criticism and cynical reaction in Indonesia.

Some even attacked it as the NU proponents trying to formulate a “new religion”. Not surprisingly, the West Sumatra provincial branch of the Council of Indonesian Ulama

(MUI Sumatra Barat) recently issued a fatwa or religious opinion on 21 July 2018 that condemned Islam Nusantara.

The fatwa states that Islam is one and therefore any additional attribution to the word Islam such as Islam Nusantara can erode the perfectness of Islam. In defence, its proponents say the critiques have generally been political and ideological in nature instead of questioning the method and addressing epistemological – or knowledge-substantive – issues.

This seems evident, they say, in the lack of criticism for other movements such as *Islam Berkemajuan* (Developmental Islam) as proposed by Muhammadiyah, and *Islam Terpadu* (Integrated Islam) as propounded by the Islamist Justice & Prosperous Party (PKS).

The fatwa of West Sumatra MUI may prolong the national debate on this issue and could divide further Indonesian Muslims who have been polarised by the NU move to promote Islam Nusantara.

Islam Nusantara as Action and Reaction

The emergence of the idea of Islam Nusantara in 2015 can be seen as a sort of action-and-reaction dynamic of NU to internal and external problems that the organisation faces. As an action, for instance, Islam Nusantara is the strategy of NU in strengthening the bond of NU members to their organisation, on one hand, and to local tradition, on the other.

NU follows the thoughts of Ash‘arī and Māturidī (the founders of the Sunni theology in Islam), the four schools of Islamic law and al-Ghazali in Sufism while stressing the importance of local tradition.

As a reaction, Islam Nusantara is NU’s way of responding to the current circumstances of national and global issues that confront NU and the Muslim ummah such as the phenomenon of radicalism and extremism. This reaction is taken to protect the religiosity of NU members from the intervention of other teachings.

However, the action and reaction of NU are often expressed by NU as if to demean and disavow the thoughts of the other Muslim organisations. This is the weakness of Islam Nusantara and other ideas that are often formulated in binary terms.

Need to Go Beyond Semantic Debates

Public debates and critiques on such new Islamic issues are highly encouraged as part of democratisation and freedom of thought in Indonesia. However, the debates and critiques must be oriented towards objectivity with a problem-solving mindset.

It seems that the debates and critiques of Islam Nusantara, since the time of its formulation in 2015, have not been addressing the fundamental issues. Many opponents of Islam Nusantara do not problematise the substance, content, method, epistemology of Islam Nusantara, but focus more on the semantics.

The proliferation of social media, in addition, makes the debates on Islam Nusantara even more shallow. The speedy, reactionary and instant characteristics of social media weaken the possibility of being fair and just in debating Islam Nusantara.

Hoax and fake news distributed through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram erode the circumstances favouring good debates. In addition, the critics of Islam Nusantara commonly proceed from their own definitions of this concept, not on their deep and careful understanding and the practice of checking-and-rechecking for the sake of clarifying facts and seeking the truth.

It is not strange if this approach leads such critics to a judgmental and unfair valuation of the proper concept of Islam Nusantara.

Mutual Understanding and Respect for Diversity

However, the critiques are partially caused by the proponents of Islam Nusantara themselves who do not sell the idea well enough by providing a solid body of concepts supporting Islam Nusantara as already found in Islamic theology. Because of this, many proponents of Islam Nusantara are trapped into arguing and reacting equally superficially to their challengers.

To produce more fruitful and beneficial debates on Islam Nusantara, both proponents and opponents of this construct should intensify mutual dialogue and conversation based on sincerity and objectivity. Evidence- and knowledge-based debates and critiques are the preferred strategy of turning this into a civil conversation on Islam Nusantara that is at once substantive and meaningful.

The proponents of Islam Nusantara should be aware that their ideas will not be free from criticism, misunderstanding and even disapproval from the Indonesian Muslim public. Although Islam Nusantara is promoted by the largest Muslim organisation in Indonesia, there is no assurance that this idea can be accepted by the Muslim community or even among the members of Nahdlatul Ulama.

As it is widely known, even among the NU elites, the discussion and debate on Islam Nusantara remain intense. NU Garis Lurus (NU Straight Path), for instance, does not agree with this concept. The followers of the late Hasyim Muzadi, a charismatic leader of NU, prefer using "*Islam Rahmatal lil Alamin*" (Islam as a universal blessing for all creations of God) rather than Islam Nusantara.

On this basis, therefore, it is vital to consider the importance of mutual understanding and respect for the diversity of ideas on Indonesian Islam among the Muslim community. The opponents of Islam Nusantara should also understand that Muslims have the right to think, interpret and practise their religion guided by *ijtihad* (the Islamic doctrine of intellectual reasoning in problem-solving). As a product of *ijtihad*, Islam Nusantara has the right to be respected.

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