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ABU BAKAR BASHIR: Jihad or Tyranny of Leadership?

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Abu Bakar Bashir resigned from the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI) recently, claiming that its leadership system was unislamic. Did he get it right this time?

THE INDONESIAN Mujahidin Council, or Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), is an umbrella organization of Indonesian Islamist groups, headed by Abu Bakar Bashir until his surprise resignation in July this year. His exit was over his claim that MMI's leadership system was "unislamic". He argued that MMI favoured the democratic style of leadership over the rule of *shariah*. The concept of democracy, to him, departs from the Islamic concept of *shura* (consultation) as the final decision in democracy lies in the rule of the majority, whereas the ultimate decision *in shura* rests on the shoulders of the leader. This renders democracy incompatible with *shariah*, and therefore "unislamic". The most critical part of his assertion was that members of an Islamic organization should accord the leader the final say in all matters.

Analysts have suggested that Bashir's assertions on his version of *shura* are an effort to mask the more likely reason for his departure: the power struggle within MMI. Irrespective of the reasons, does Bashir have a case that the leadership system in MMI is unislamic? He raised two points of contention: first, democracy is unislamic, and second, the leader's final say is imperative in an Islamic organization.

Refuting Bashir on His Own Terms

With regards to Bashir's first point, a careful study of the *Pedoman Umum Perjuangan Al-Jama'ah Al-Islamiyyah*, better known as PUPJI -- the general guide of JI -- reveals that Bashir's reasoning clearly matches point 7 of article 28. This article states that "when there is difference between the majority and the views of the emir, the final decision will be in the hands of the emir". This statement resonates with his official reason for leaving MMI. It is based on the understanding that there is only one form of leadership supported in the *shariah*. While this may fit Bashir's mode of thinking, established Islamic scholarship, however, does not agree with him.

By standing by the statement on leadership, Bashir is actually portraying himself as having an ideological character that is rooted in absolutism. An absolutist line of thinking causes one to regard an indefinite matter as having a definite character. Rather than seeing disputable matters as social, ideological or intellectual constructs based on *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), absolutists tend to believe they are instead immutable principles of the religion. Eventually, this mode of thinking drives Bashir to the assumption that there is only one form of leadership in shariah.

Scholars, however, have long disagreed on this issue and on the nature of decision making in an Islamic organization. There is no consensus on whether shura in Islam is mere consultation or is bound to the view of the emir.

The Quran does not provide an absolute model of governance save the enjoinder to uphold shura. Neither is the Sunnah (the Prophet's Traditions) clear-cut on this matter. For instance, in signing the historical peace treaty of Hudaibiyyah, the Prophet acted against the majority of his companions. In the case of the battle of Uhud, however, the Prophet followed the will of the majority and fought the enemies outside Medina, although he personally felt that the better option was not to go to war. This clearly shows that there is flexibility in the system of Islamic leadership.

In matters which are open to dispute in understanding divine or prophetic texts such as the above, scholars usually resort to the fundamental juristic formula *la inkar fi al-mukhtalaf fihi* (no absolute negation in disputable matters). This means one needs to respect the freedom of others to believe and act however they wish within accepted interpretations of the texts.

This, however, does not negate the value of discussion on such matters; in fact, it is encouraged in the spirit of critical thinking, and of course within the ethics of disagreement. The fundamental point here is that parties with contrasting viewpoints should never impose their will on others as these matters are open to interpretation. The fact that variance is permitted in decision-making therefore does not justify one to render opposing views as unislamic.

Absolutism

Such a principle, however, does not augur well with those who subscribe to absolutism. When they feel they are right on a seemingly fundamental issue, they would reject any disagreement, consequently judging opposing views as having deviated from the shariah. This explains the harsh attitude they adopt in differing with others. Differences in non-fundamental issues are therefore seen as matters of principle that are not open to interpretation. This is why they keep splintering and forming groups anew whenever they have fierce ideological divisions .

Accordingly, Bashir's attempt to legitimise his struggle in the name of Islam should not blind people to believe that he is infallible. He is, on the contrary, a normal man who is prone to make mistakes, and is not at all free from human desires. Similarly, there is no guarantee that he will not fall into the trap of "absolute power corrupts absolutely". In this regard, Bashir argues that total obedience of the leader's final decision should be observed from the lowest ranking member to the uppermost ranking leader of the highest council of the organization, regardless of how unpopular the decision made by the chief leader may be.

His line of argument runs parallel to his second contention – that followers owe total obedience to the emir. This is also refutable by declarations published by leaders of the jihad movement in Egypt who have recanted their views. Their revisions on jihad clearly show how Bashir's argument runs counter to the Quran.

An example of the declarations, which shook the intellectual foundations of Al-Qaeda, is the one made by Sayyid Imam Al-Sharif a.k.a Abdul Qader Abdul Aziz or Dr. Fadl, an influential ideologue who is

one of the leaders of Egyptian Islamic Jihad. He asserts, in article 13 of his revisions in Arabic, that a member of an Islamic group should not sacrifice his mind on the pretext of *sam'an wa ta'atan* (total obedience). He iterates that total obedience is only for God and His Messenger, that is based on the evidence from the Quran and the Prophet's Traditions, and not to the emir. It is for this that God has enjoined the return to textual evidence in matters of dispute with the authorities (Quran, 4:59). One should therefore not obey his emir when he is commanded to commit an objectionable act (Quran, 43:54).

Wisdom in Majority View

Bashir's resignation produces vital learning points for activists in the name of religion. In a globalised world, one cannot afford to remain exclusive and elusive. Decisions, then, should not be made based on mere independent judgment of one single person or on assuming absolute truths. Islam already recognizes the value of collective wisdom as the Prophet himself has declared: "If you see divergence, you must follow the greater mass or larger group [of experts or authorities]." (Narrated by Ibn Majah.) Thus, Muslim jurists usually give weight to religious opinions that are agreed by many rather than by the few.

While fundamentals should always be adhered to, space should also be given to variances in non-fundamental matters. Differences are part and parcel of life; they give colour to an otherwise world of dullness. It is never about "us and them". It is about what is best, for all, in making the world a better place to live in.

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