



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL  
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**  
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

# RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: [RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg) or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 168/2010 dated 13 December 2010

## **Indonesian Islam: What went Right?**

By Adri Wanto

### **Synopsis**

*Muslims in Indonesia are well-known for their moderation. The local culture and traditional texts of Islam is the most dominant factor in influencing and shaping the moderate character of Indonesian Muslims.*

### **Commentary**

INDONESIAN MUSLIMS live in the largest Muslim country in the world and are well-known for their moderation. They embody the key ideas of democracy, tolerance, freedom, respect for human rights and equality. Instead of establishing an Islamic state, a majority of Muslims are actively involved in promoting democratic institutions. Many questions have been raised as to the factors that facilitate Muslim moderation in Indonesia, and specifically how democratic is Indonesian Islam?

To answer these questions, I argue that the local culture and the Islamic texts used in traditional Islamic boarding schools are the two most dominant factors in moulding inclusive and tolerant Muslims in Indonesia.

### **Islamic Law and Local culture**

Snouck Hurgronje, the Dutch colonial scholar, had written about the Indonesian community in Mecca in the 1880s. Hurgronje pointed out that the relationship between Muslims in Indonesia and in the Middle East was very unique. On the one hand, the Indonesian people sought knowledge and inspiration from Muslims in the Middle East, but they then adapted this knowledge to their local culture which was different from the source. Hurgronje considered it as adaptive and intelligent of the Indonesian people to blend Islamic teaching with their local culture to create a very rich religious synthesis.

In Islam, culture is usually referred to as 'urf or 'Adah. The 21st century Islamic scholar Muhammad Yusuf Qardhawi explained that 'urf is the habits and behaviour of people in everyday life which become hereditary customs. Because the 'urf is an inseparable part of a person, it is used in formulating the fiqh (Islamic law).

Muslims in Indonesia recognised that there were many cultures that existed in the pre-Islamic era, some of which were Islamised and adopted by the prophet Muhammad. This indicates that Islam was not born in order to eliminate the entire culture that developed in pre-Islamic Arab society. Prophet Muhammad created many rules of customary law that legalised Arab society, to make space for the practice of customary law in the Islamic legal system as long as the law was not against Islamic principles.

For instance, the Haj was practised in Arab societies long before Islam arrived. Pre-Islamic Arab societies also conducted worship at the Kaabah, although they were idolators. After the arrival of Islam, the practices continued with some changes. For example idol worship was terminated. The tawaf -- one of the rites of the haj involving walking around the Kaabah at the beginning and the conclusion of the pilgrimage -- was previously performed naked by pre-Islamic Arab society. The Prophet banned this and instead carry out this worship fully dressed till today.

The laws established by Prophet Muhammad and his successors (Sahabat) always took into account the evolving culture of the community. In the establishment of fiqh we can see the influence of different cultures in the laws that were created. Abu Hanifa, one of Islam's four great imams, took advantage of customs and social habits of a diverse range of communities as a secondary source to the law as long as they did not contradict the Quran. Similarly, Imam Malik was influenced by the indigenous communities in Medina when developing fiqh theory.

### **Fiqh and Flexibility**

One important history which explains social influence in the cultural constructs of Islamic fiqh is related to the phenomenon of Imam Shafi'i, another great imam of Islam after the Prophet. Social conditions and circumstances affected most of his thoughts on fiqh law. The clearest example of this is the emergence of the so-called qaul qadim (the old statement) and qaul Jadid (new statement) in the spectrum of thought of Imam Shafi'i. Originally, Imam Shafi'i made a statement for fiqh. However, later this statement became Qaul qadim (old statement) because he came across a new situation which led him to create a new statement or qaul Jadid. This indicates the flexibility of fiqh.

Many of Islamic book references (kitab kuning) used in the traditional Islamic boarding school (Pesantren) in Indonesia highlight the need for Muslims to apply awareness and wisdom when making historical reflections or interpreting Islamic fiqh thought in the early Islamic period. This perspective of Islamic law teaches that new approaches must be in accordance with the legal consciousness of society, namely law which was formed by environmental awareness, or with the local culture and traditions.

It is necessary to consider the traditions of the indigenous people when formulating local forms of Islamic law in Indonesia. This concept is based on Islam's egalitarian characteristics, so that all cultural elements in Indonesian society can be a source of Islamic law. This argument denies the idea that only Arab culture can be the basis for the formulation of Islamic law.

### **Religious Harmony and Social Stability**

Not all 'urf or culture conflicts with Islamic teachings and therefore, they can be used as the source of Islamic law. The late president Abdurrahman Wahid, when he was leader of the Islamic organisation Nahdhatul Ulama (NU), conceptualised local Islamic teachings. According to him, localised Islamic teaching is interpreted as an attempt to hold on to the cultural roots of Indonesia, while still trying to create a religious community. In his thinking, Abdurrahman Wahid tried to place Islam and other cultures in a position of dialogue. From this basis, he refused to accept any movement adopting a hegemonic position whether privileging "Islamisation", "Arabisation" or "the formalisation of Islamic teachings in the cultural sphere".

In the context of Indonesia, the Indonesian formulation of Islamic law is very important. This idea can develop two important paradigms in localising Islamic law. The first is contextual: Islamic law is understood as a doctrine associated with the dimensions of the time and place. Changing the time and place must influence the interpretation or Ijtihad (individual interpretation) in Islamic law. Since Islamic law is adaptive it can be applied to every era and place (fi kulli zamanin wa fi kuli makanin). Secondly, Islamic law respects local traditions as long as these traditions are not in conflict or can be reconciled with Islamic principles.

Therefore Islamic law should consider local tradition and should not view local tradition as an object that must be defeated. As Indonesia's case highlights, religious harmony and socio-stability prevail when Islamic law is positioned in synthesis with local tradition.

*Adri Wanto is a Research Analyst with the Indonesia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He studied at a Pesantren in West Sumatra (Nurul Yaqin, Padang Pariaman), Indonesia.*