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Islam with Progress: Muhammadiyah and Moderation in Islam

By Alexander R. Arifianto

Synopsis

Dr Haedar Nashir, Muhammadiyah's general chairman, recently outlined the concept of Islam with Progress during his visit to Singapore. It is the organisation's new platform to reemphasise the doctrine of moderation in Islam in Indonesia, by promoting socio-economic development to counter radical ideas in the country.

Commentary

ON 26 October 2017, Dr Haedar Nashir, general chairman of Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's second-largest Islamic organisation, delivered his RSIS Distinguished Public Lecture in Singapore. The main thrust of his speech is to introduce the concept of Islam with Progress (*Islam Berkemajuan*), the organisation's new platform, which was adopted during its 47th national congress (*muktamar*) in Makassar, Indonesia, in August 2015.

Dr Nashir argues that from Muhammadiyah's perspective, Islam is a religion that is constantly progressing. The Qur'an and the *Sunnah* (Way) of the Prophet Muhammad - the principal sources of Islamic teaching - contain messages which exhort all human beings to think critically and rationally. The first revelation to the Prophet is iqra or read. "Read" has a broad definition: exploration, research, as well as to think about everything created by God. Dr Nashir adds that within the Qur'an, there are messages in the form of questions and orders that encourage humans to think rationally to resolve their worldly problems.

Muhammadiyah's Socioeconomic Mission

Dr Nashir argues that Islam is not only asking humanity to worship God but also to be

able to manage its own affairs. In other words, Islam teaches Man to be proactive actors to promote various socio-economic changes. Humans will not be able to change their socio-economic conditions unless such change starts from their own efforts.

Dr Nashir highlights that Muhammadiyah is strongly committed to implementing this vision in order to improve the socio-economic conditions of Indonesian Muslims. The promotion of social welfare and development is the key characteristic which defines Muhammadiyah ever since it was founded in 1912. Muhammadiyah continues to build new schools, universities, and hospitals throughout Indonesia. Currently, Muhammadiyah has established more than 5,000 schools and 177 institutions of higher learning – including 42 universities – in all of Indonesia's 34 provinces.

Recognising Indonesia's diversity, Dr Nashir states that Muhammadiyah opens its schools, universities, and hospitals without regard to the ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic background of their users. Muhammadiyah has established universities in Sorong, West Papua province where 80 percent of its students are Christians, and in Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara province, where 95 percent of its students are also Christians.

Many of these students come from low socioeconomic background. They are able to attend these universities thanks to generous scholarships provided by Muhammadiyah. Thus, Muhammadiyah does not only preach the Islamic principle of promoting mercy to all mankind (*rahmatan lil alamin*), but is also promoting it through good deeds, through the development of education and health facilities throughout Indonesia.

Countering Radicalism

One reason why the concept of Islam with Progress was introduced within Muhammadiyah is to counter hardline ideas promoted by a number of Islamist groups, including Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Islamic Community Forum (FUI), and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI). In recent years, these groups are attracting many new members, particularly those who are young and of university-going age.

Dr Nashir argues the rise of radical groups in Indonesia is caused by an open political process that enables such groups to express their ideas freely, especially through the Internet and social media. He considers such actions as a misuse of religion to achieve political ends, but also added that the growing popularity of these groups can also be attributed to the poverty and the increasingly unequal income and resource distribution among Indonesians.

He reasons that the majority of Indonesian Muslims are still living in poverty. As they feel they are being marginalised economically and politically, they express their grievances to the political elite by using religious arguments, as religion is one resource they possess. Hardline Islamist groups such as FPI and FUI have no significant financial resources. However, they utilise their religious networks to achieve their political goals, often with relatively successful outcomes.

Another Muhammadiyah leader, its General Secretary Dr Abdul Mu'ti, asserts that religion should not be used to polarise and politicise a multiethnic and multicultural

society like Indonesia. There is no place for the use of violence and hate speech in society, he says, even as Muslims and non-Muslims alike have utilised both means to polarise Indonesian society.

While religiosity is a highly prized value in any religion, he says, religious preachers who promote violence and intolerance within society should be rejected. Instead, religious texts and teachings should be interpreted rationally and implemented as teachings about good deeds.

New Perspective to Moderation?

Dr Nashir adds Muslims should not only promote good words among their fellow men but also should match those words with good deeds, especially through the development of socio-economic infrastructure. Radical groups are not interested in building such infrastructure, he argues, as they are only interested to promote violence. As a result, the real essence of Islam in society is being undermined by the actions of these radical actors.

Instead, one must interpret Islam, he says, through reason and promote socio-economic development in order to eliminate 'triggering' factors for a few Muslims to engage in radical actions, such as poverty and socio-economic inequities.

He asserts that Islam with Progress is similar to the concept of *Islam Nusantara* promoted by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) – Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation. He states both Islam with Progress and Islam Nusantara are concepts used by Muhammadiyah and NU respectively, to strengthen the identity of Indonesian Islam characterised by values such as moderation (*wassatiya*), peace, and tolerance.

Alexander R Arifianto PhD is a Research Fellow with the Indonesia Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg