

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Jokowi's Soft Diplomacy: Global Islamic Network of Moderation

By Andar Nubowo

Synopsis:

In the face of rising conservatism, President Jokowi recently launched a new endeavour to promote "moderation in Islam" both domestically and internationally. Can Indonesia be a power house for promoting 'smiling' Islam internationally?

Commentary

A FEW DAYS before Ramadhan 2018, the extremists of Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) and Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD) launched suicide bombing attacks in Depok, West Java and Surabaya, East Java, respectively on 8 and 13 May. Terrorist attacks such as these are detrimental to the Islamic philosophy of *wassatiyyat* (middle path) that can create a peaceful and safer world.

Such an idea has long been advocated by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's two largest Islamic organisations. Both have recently co-sponsored The Bogor Message, a high-level consultation of 100 World Muslim Scholars on *Wassatiyyat* Islam. The consultation was inaugurated by President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo in Bogor, on 1-3 May 2018.

The Bogor Message & Jokowi's "Middle Way"

The Bogor Message emphasises seven characters of moderation in Islam; namely, *tawassut*, (middle of the road position); *i'tidal* (fairness with responsibility); *tasamuh* (recognition and respect for differences); *shura* (consultation and consensus in problem-solving); *islah* (reform); *qudwah* (exemplary behaviour); and *muwathanah* (recognition of the nation state).

President Jokowi advances his foreign policy and diplomacy by emphasising the growing significance of moderation in Islam as a reflection of his international and domestic policy towards Islam. In international forums, he seems to continue former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's public diplomacy to promote harmony between "Islam, democracy and modernity".

Compared to his predecessor, Jokowi's soft power diplomacy based on "moderate Islam" intends for Indonesia to have broader bilateral and multilateral roles. To counter extremism and to promote peace in South and Central Asia, Jokowi organised the High Consultation of 100 World Muslim Scholars on *Wasattiyah* Islam and the Afghan Peace Talks, consecutively held in Bogor on 1-3 May and 11 May 2018.

The Bogor Talks, which involved Pakistani, Afghan and Indonesian clerics, were perceived as a concrete diplomatic endeavour to promote peace in Central and South Asia.

Indonesia under Jokowi also shows its concern and commitment on resolving the Rohingya issue in Rakhine State, Myanmar through "Sarong Diplomacy"—borrowing Vice President Jusuf Kalla's term. Indonesia offers a comprehensive, sustainable solution: humanitarian aid and peace talks involving all conflicting elements.

Partnering with moderate Islamic philanthropic institutions such as Muhammadiyah's Board of Philanthropy (Lazismu) and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)'s Board of Philanthropy (Lazisnu), Jokowi sent humanitarian relief and aid to Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. This humanitarian initiative elevates Indonesia's credibility on the world stage.

Strengthening Moderation

Jokowi tries to promote these initiatives amid popular perception of his lack of Islamic credentials and rising Islamic conservatism. He has appointed some moderate figures to join his administration such as Din Syamsuddin and Ahmad Syafi'i Maarif from Muhammadiyah; alongside Said Aqil Siradj and Ma'ruf Amin from NU.

Jokowi's support for Islamic moderation is his response to his opponents who are more conservative in their ideological positions - by declaring himself a "moderate Muslim" who supports moderation as a national character and identity.

In practice, Jokowi vigorously assured the need for moderation-inclined religious networks including those favouring Pancasila and the Unitary State of Republic of Indonesia (NKRI). To this end he dissolved Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) in July 2017, an organisation which opposes Pancasila and wants to replace NKRI with a transnational Islamic caliphate.

Jokowi believes only moderate Islam can eradicate the ideology and network of extremism-radicalism. He believes moderate Islam shares the same national goal of developing a safe, peaceful, prosperous and just Indonesia. NU's "*Islam Nusantara*" emphasises the tradition of openness and tolerance in the archipelago, whereas Muhammadiyah's "*Islam Berkemajuan*" is oriented towards progressiveness in education and socio-economic development.

It is worth noting that the two movements - Muhammadiyah and NU - have also been actively crafting people-to-people contacts with their counterparts. Being actively engaged in global interreligious and inter-civilisational dialogue such as the

World Peace Forum (WPF) and World Conference on Religions for Peace (WCRP), the two organisations are Jokowi's best partners to promote Indonesia's multi-track and soft power diplomacy. It is aimed to promote dialogue and cooperation between various religions and civilisations based on the principles of Islamic moderation.

Opportunities and Challenges

Jokowi is very committed to develop a global network of moderate Islamic scholars and organisations. His state visit to Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan in early 2018, not only aims to further develop economic and political ties with these countries, but also to build a global Islamic network of moderation.

The Afghan Peace Talks of 11 May 2018 in Bogor is a follow-up to Indonesia's soft diplomacy for peace in the region. This shows that Indonesia's leadership among Muslim-majority nations is relevant, amid the weakness of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) countries which are currently plagued by sociopolitical conflicts.

Nonetheless, periodic acts of violent extremism still make Indonesia - the largest predominantly Muslim country in the world – to be perceived as a 'hotbed' of terrorism. In this vein, *Wassatiyat* Islam can be a counter-narrative against any negative reputation on Indonesia due to the acts of the violent extremists.

To that end, the domestic and international network of Islamic moderation needs to be complemented by a consultative institution – either permanent or semi-permanent, in which state and non-state actors can come together to formulate strategies to disseminate Islamic moderation.

Cooperation across actors and sectors will strengthen the growth and expansion of the global Islamic network of moderation, especially to pool funding for sustainable programmes to expand moderate Islamic ideology.

Nevertheless, given the ongoing economic, political, and technological challenges, building the foundation for *Wasatiyyat* Islam remains a big challenge. If this issue is not immediately addressed, the ideology of extremism would remain a powerful magnet for a vulnerable young generation.

Andar Nubowo is a Research Associate at the Indonesia Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.