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Emergence of Wasatiyyah Islam: Promoting 'Middle Way' Islam and Socio-Economic Equality in Indonesia

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Synopsis

The spread of extremism and widening socio-economic inequality have led to a serious complication in Indonesian society. Wasatiyyah Islam, a comprehensive concept of 'Middle Way' Islam, must be reaffirmed to solve the complex problems confronting Indonesia.

Commentary

THE COMMITMENT of promoting *Wasatiyyah Islam* – or 'Middle Way' Islam – in Indonesia implies reaffirming the implementation of moderation in the practice of the Islamic faith, which has long been a key characteristic of the mainstream Indonesian Muslim. This is significant as a response to the spread of extremism, be this of the religious liberal or the religious radical kind.

The interplay between Muslim majority, democracy, and a heterogeneous population has resulted in a dynamic relationship between Islam and state in Indonesia. In this regard, Indonesia adheres neither to theocracy nor secular principles but instead leans towards consensus to manage the relationship between Islam and state based on Pancasila as the state ideology and 1945 Constitution.

Significance of Wasatiyyah Islam in Indonesia

Wasatiyyah Islam thus serves as the relevant expression and understanding of Islam within the idea of state in Indonesia. The relationship between Islam and state has experienced prolonged debate since before the proclamation of Independence in 1945. It has undergone various phases marked by rebellion, social resistance, tough

debates in the House of Representatives, before finally becoming a national consensus.

Wasatiyyah Islam is defined as 'Middle Way' Islam, characterised neither by liberal nor radical religious thought. Wasatiyyah Islam promotes tolerance, balance, equality, consensus, reformism, and all things that take the middle path to materialise *khairu ummah* (the best people).

The re-emergence of the importance of Wasatiyyah Islam in Indonesia can be traced to several factors. In 2014, during the fasting month of Ramadan, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) declared its establishment in Syria and campaigned for the Caliphate system using violence and war. Various states were labelled as "illegitimate" as well as *thaghut* (idolatrous), and should be fought. The influence of ISIS in Indonesia is considerably strong as seen in the series of terror acts by their supporters.

Even before ISIS, the Caliphate ideology that is contrary to democracy and nation state had already emerged, such as the non-violence model like Hizbut Tahrir, and the violence-based model like Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) which has strong transnational links in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Australia. JI served as the mastermind of terror acts prior to ISIS since 2000.

Wasatiyyah Islam in Indonesia's Early Years

During the earlier era of independent Indonesia, there was also an anti-state movement called Darul Islam/Indonesian Islamic Army (DI/TII), which later transformed into the Indonesian Islamic State (NII) towards the end of Suharto's New Order.

All these movements aimed to realise the aspiration of political Islam, perceiving that the Muslims had been marginalised or suppressed by the anti-Islam regimes in power even though the majority were Muslim. The movements were not only domestically generated, but were also stimulated and propelled by global dynamics under the banner of *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Muslim brotherhood), or the protection of *akidah* (faith), including from the agenda of liberalism.

In fact, the perception of these extremists is false. The aspirations of political Islam in Indonesia have been accommodated in various forms, such as policy, legislation, regulation, and state facilitation. Various religious public services are also facilitated such as religious dispute settlement through arbitration, Haj services, zakat, endowments (*wakaf*), Islamic banking, Islamic-based non-bank financial institutions, and halal certification. Indeed, Shariah is being carried out in the province of Aceh, which enables the comprehensive application of Islamic law.

Two Opposing Trends

The view that the Indonesian government is anti-Islamic and is a manifestation of idolatry continues to be echoed throughout the post-Suharto period of *Reformasi* due to the flowering of freedom of expression and ease of information flow enabled by technological advances through social media.

Besides, Indonesian Muslims are faced with two main phenomena: the first is the strengthening of the exclusivist, intolerant, rigid and scripturalist groups who freely express hostility, and even violence against fellow Muslims; and the second is the consolidation of groups that tend to be permissive and liberal.

As a result, Islamic movements increasingly tend to shift to the extreme left or right poles. While the left pole tends toward liberalism, pluralism and secularism, the right pole fosters radicalism and narrow fanaticism in religion.

Reconsolidation of Islamic Moderation

Consequently, a number of Islamic organisations in Indonesia gravitated around various Islamic moderation movements that are compatible with democracy and the nation-state. Before MUI established the Wasatiyyah Islamic paradigm which emphasised anti-extremism, the two largest Islamic organisations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, carried out similar consolidations in their respective congresses.

The 2015 NU Congress promoted the concept of *Islam Nusantara* – loosely translated as ‘Islam of the Archipelago’. This emphasised the accommodation of local wisdom and innovation, in response to various transnational movements that were not friendly to local dynamics even though these are not inconsistent with Islam. The 2015 Muhammadiyah Congress proclaimed *Islam Berkemajuan* – loosely translated as Progressive Islam – which emphasised concern for the competitiveness and productivity of Muslims, while no longer questioning the national consensus.

After the two congresses, through a “National Consensus”, the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) in August 2015 enacted Wasatiyyah Islam. It became the spirit and guideline for policy formulation at every level.

Wasatiyyah Islam serves as the ‘Middle Way’ Islam to materialise *khairu ummah* (the best people). The characteristics of Wasatiyyah Islam are *tawassuth* (middle way), *tawazun* (balance), *I’tidal* (straight and firm), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *musawah* (egalitarian and non-discriminatory), *syura* (consensus), *islah* (reform), *aulawiyah* (emphasising priority), *tathawwur wa Ibtikar* (dynamic and innovative), and *tahadhdhur* (civilised).

In February 2018, there was a reaffirmation of the National Consensus at the Indonesian Muslim Congress (KUII) VI in Yogyakarta, followed by various Islamic organisations, universities, *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school), which produce the “Risalah Yogyakarta” (Yogyakarta Paper).

Rejection of Caliphate

I call this national consensus as *mitsaq* – the term used in the Qur'an to describe the agreement between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Indonesia is therefore a *Darul Mitsaq*. Muslims are committed to maintain the agreement with various elements of non-Muslim nations and a pluralistic life together, as exemplified by the Charter of Medina by the Prophet Muhammad.

To keep the Republic of Indonesia intact, a combination of paradigms between *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood) and *ukhuwah wathaniyah* (national brotherhood) remains significantly important. This paradigm must be echoed, including to anyone who has no national commitment, let alone extremists and radicals.

In this frame of mind, the concept of the caliphate is consequently rejected. Not because it is not Islamic, but because it contradicts *mitsaq*— the agreement. Similarly, the concept of *mamlakah* (kingdom) and *imarat* (emirate) will be rejected in Indonesia. With the republic state system, it has led to a certain openness in the Indonesian government to absorb Sharia elements through an agreed system of legislation (*taqnin*). In fact, there have been many laws containing Sharia that have been ratified.

Economic Justice: New Indonesian Economic Stream

In addition to the commitment to *mitsaq*, economic justice (*ekonomi berkeadilan*) needs to be strengthened in accordance with the fifth principle of Pancasila, the Social Justice for All Indonesians. Economic inequality is a perennial problem in Indonesia where the majority lives below average. Economic inequality must continue to be reduced towards the level of social justice.

In so doing, the synergy among three powers — government, communities, and entrepreneurs — is compulsory. In this sense, the strategy must not weaken the established entrepreneurs. Rather, it must strengthen the weak by involving the established entrepreneurs to collaborate and partner with the weak.

I call this framework *Arus Baru Ekonomi Indonesia* (The New Indonesian Economic Stream) as confirmed in the 2017 Congress on Economic and Community Empowerment in Jakarta. This is in line with President Joko Widodo's policy to redistribute assets and encourage partnerships between business conglomerates and small communities, including the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) world and various Islamic organisations, as the largest part of the Indonesian people.

This new framework is necessary due to the failure of *Arus Lama* (Old Stream) which emphasises more on strengthening the upper-class economy with the objective that the trickle-down effect can work. However, the reality shows the opposite trend.

The New Economic Stream is in line with the spirit of economic inclusion. Despite the absence of collateral, weak economic communities must be able to access capital and can be guaranteed by a fund-based guarantor institution, such as charities and endowments. There are also microfinance institutions facilitated by the government in many *pesantren*, which can reach the lower segments again.

Globalising Wasatiyyah Islam

Given its importance, Wasatiyyah Islam must not be seen as exclusive to Indonesia. Wasatiyyah Islam can also be used to foster harmony and stability in the Southeast Asian region. Considering the rising threat of transnational terrorism in the region,

mainstreaming Wasatiyyah Islam is an important step to prevent and counter extreme religious understanding.

With the support of governments, communities, and education sectors, various factors that can trigger the emergence of extreme movements and threaten the mainstreaming of Wasatiyyah Islam can be anticipated and prevented together.

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