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Preacher and Protests: Islam's Conservative Shift in Indonesia

By Barry Desker

SYNOPSIS

The controversial views of Indonesian preacher Abdul Somad Batubara and his supporters are the product of two trends — the rise of a generation of social media savvy youth and Saudi-funded religious schooling.



Supporters of Indonesian preacher Abdul Somad Batubara holding a protest in front of the Singapore Embassy in Jakarta on 20 May 2022. AFP

COMMENTARY

A STRIKING development in Indonesian society in recent years has been the rise of identity politics. While President Joko Widodo enjoys strong support in the populous abangan (syncretic Muslim) parts of the country — Central Java and East Java, as well as in areas with significant Christian minorities like North Sumatra, North Sulawesi and eastern Indonesia as well as Hindu-dominated Bali — areas dominated by santri (devout Muslims), including West Java, Sumatra and South and Central Sulawesi, continue to be fertile ground for his critics.

While the abangan/santri cleavage continues to be an important prism through which one gains an understanding of Indonesian politics, attention should also be paid to other, more recent influences which could result in changes in the country's domestic political dynamics.

Rise of IT Generation of Preachers

Widespread computer literacy among a younger generation of Indonesians has given Muslim activists and preachers a national and even South-east Asian platform. The messages of these preachers are conveyed effectively by social media through their YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram accounts as well as encrypted messages on Telegram channels.

The increasing presence of Middle Eastern graduates, the rise of religiosity among younger urban Indonesians and the use of social media is slowly changing the Islamic landscape in the country.

This reality forms the background to the protests and demonstrations in Medan and Jakarta after [Indonesian Islamic preacher Abdul Somad Batubara was denied entry into Singapore](#) along with six others on 16 May 2022. Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs cited [his record of "extremist and segregationist" teachings](#), which are "unacceptable in Singapore's multiracial and multi-religious society".

Abdul Somad had preached that suicide bombings are legitimate in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict, and are considered martyrdom operations. He had also made comments denigrating other religious faiths, such as Christianity, by describing the Christian crucifix as the dwelling place of an infidel jinn (spirit/demon). Any Muslim who died in a hospital with a crucifix would be sent to hell.

Singapore's Minister for Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam observed: "The language, the rhetoric, as you can see, is very divisive — completely unacceptable in Singapore... Racial, religious harmony, we consider (these) fundamental to our society." Abdul Somad is said to have influenced Muslim radicals in Singapore and his teachings have encouraged acolytes to consider participating in suicide operations in the Middle East.

Social Media Savvy

Since his return to Indonesia, the Riau-based Abdul Somad has commented in a video that Singapore belongs to the Malays, and Singaporeans are just immigrants there.

People in Riau, he claims, see Singapore as part of their land because Singapore was part of the Temasek kingdom. "In the future, God willing, the time will come, perhaps in the era of our grandchildren, the ones who will be in power are the Malays and that country shall be conquered back," he said.

More crudely, Abdul Somad added that if Indonesians were to take a piss together and direct it at Singapore, the island will sink ("*kurang ajar, kita kencing tenggelam dia*"). These comments reinforce the conviction of the authorities in Singapore that their decision to deny entry to the preacher was clearly justified. Such comments are provocative and could harm the cordial bilateral relationship between Singapore and Indonesia.

Educated in Egypt, Morocco and Sudan, Abdul Somad is part of a new generation of Islamic preachers in Indonesia who have risen to prominence because of their effective use of social media. With the sharp increase in Internet users, these preachers have attracted the support of younger, computer-savvy Indonesians.

As my colleague Noor Huda Ismail has observed, Abdul Somad's views are presented in a humorous, direct style which appeals to a more youthful audience. He attracts younger Indonesians because he addresses issues of concern to them.

His primary messages are related to the role of syariah (Islamic jurisprudence) in social and religious life as well as worship and faith (aqidah). Abdul Somad also articulates the concerns and grievances of the wong cilik (little people). This gives him the capacity to mobilise supporters and encourages politically influential figures such as Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto to cultivate their relationship with him.

Activists from Non-Traditional Backgrounds

Interestingly, many of these younger Muslim activists have backgrounds in the sciences and engineering. While they often do not come from families with strong religious practices, they are drawn to religious study groups in their universities and institutes of higher education. They tend to apply the analytical tools of the Western scientific tradition to the re-interpretation of Islam in a narrow, literal fashion, reading religious texts in the same way that they would approach a physics or mathematics textbook.

Abdul Somad's message appeals to them as he is exclusivist and focused on literal interpretations of the Quran and the hadiths (sayings of the Prophet). He has labelled non-Muslims as kafir (infidels) and preached that Muslims should not accept non-Muslims as their leaders. Abdul Somad is reflective of the conservative shift in Indonesian Islam resulting from the impact of growing Saudi and Middle Eastern influence.

Saudi Arabia's petrodollar boom in the 1970s, and the political challenge arising from the 1979 Iranian revolution and fear that the Teheran authorities would export Shi'ite

Islam, led to Saudi Arabia becoming a major influence in the export of Wahhabi doctrines in Southeast Asia. As someone who was based in Jakarta in the 1970s, followed by a second assignment from 1986 to 1993 and regular visits thereafter, I saw the difference which Saudi and Gulf funding made in Indonesia over the past 40 years.

Since independence, the dominant Indonesian Muslim organisations were Nahdlatul Ulama (the Association of Religious Scholars) and Muhammadiyah. NU was traditionalist, conservative and based in the rural Javanese heartland. Muhammadiyah was modernist, innovative and urban-based, with strong support in the cities and in the outer islands of Indonesia.

Today, NU retains influence within the Indonesian government and society through its accommodationist stance, inclusive, tolerant approach and the emergence of a younger generation of innovative Muslim thinkers within its intellectual leadership.

Muhammadiyah maintains a commitment to religious reform and social justice within the framework of an essentially secular, multi-religious Indonesia. It has an Indonesia-wide network of madrasahs and universities and has a long standing strategy of abstaining from direct engagement in political activities.

Role of Saudi Funding

However, the distinct difference since the 1980s lay in the financial support provided by the Saudi government, wealthy non-governmental organisations and individuals in the Gulf states and organisations like the Jeddah-based World Muslim League. Their funding was channelled to groups and individuals advocating a more fundamentalist approach to religious doctrines and most supportive of the establishment of an Islamic state.

In visits outside Jakarta, I observed that Saudi-financed mosques led by religious preachers who had been educated in Saudi Arabia were newly built and had excellent facilities. The madrasahs provided scholarships to Saudi Arabia and welcomed preachers who advocated Wahhabi doctrines. By contrast, NU pesantrens (Islamic boarding schools) relied on community support and did not have the financial largesse of the Saudi-affiliated mosques.

The Middle Eastern impact was noticeable through the emphasis of Saudi-trained preachers on the literal interpretation of the Quran, the use of distinctive Muslim dress influenced by Arab dress styles and criticisms of interactions with followers of other religious traditions in Indonesia.

Tolerant Approach to Religion Will be Maintained

Although most observers of developments in Indonesia highlight the abangan/santri cleavage, and emphasise the traditional tolerant and inclusive approach to religion, greater attention should be given to the changes on the ground.

Trends in the Middle East are influencing Muslim identity in Indonesia. The distinctive accommodations that Islam has made over generations with other religious traditions

are being questioned by a younger generation of Muslims instantly aware of trends in other parts of the Islamic world and who communicate with one another.

The impact of this re-assessment is most noticeable in urban areas, universities and institutions of higher learning, and in santri-dominated areas like West Java, Sumatra and Sulawesi.

At the same time, the availability of social media also results in Indonesia's youth having access to liberal Western perspectives and reinforces secularising trends in urban environments. This clash of perspectives is most clearly seen in cities like Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta and Surabaya.

While political Islam influenced by the Middle East attracts attention, there are countervailing pressures which suggest that Indonesia's historically tolerant approach to religion will be maintained.

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