ISLAM AND SOCIETY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AFTER 9-11

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The petrodollar boom of the 1970's led to Saudi Arabia becoming a major influence in the promotion of Wahhabi doctrines in Southeast Asia. Financial support and grants were given by the Saudi government and private organizations such as the Jeddah-based World Muslim League to groups which advocated more fundamentalist approaches to Islamic doctrines and were most active in seeking the creation of Islamic states. Such groups were in the forefront of efforts to emphasise the Muslim character of believers by encouraging the use of distinctive Muslim dress, education in *madrassahs* and an emphasis on literal interpretations of the Koran and the *hadiths* (the sayings and invocations of the Prophet Mohammad).

Over the past two decades, Malaysian Government policies have aimed at winning Malay Muslim political support in the face of sustained competition from PAS which advocated an Islamic state. This competition led to efforts to out-Islamise PAS with the creation of a Muslim religious bureaucracy and the codification of laws that provided the basis of an Islamic state. In Indonesia, for most of President Soeharto's tenure, political Islam was seen as the opposition to the state. The Indonesian Government strongly supported the religious needs of the Muslim community. But, efforts to transform Indonesia into an Islamic state were opposed vigorously by President Soeharto and the Indonesian armed forces. With the emasculation of political parties and the establishment of an authoritarian political system, increased religious identification was often perceived to be synonymous with distancing from the existing political system in Indonesia.

The past two decades have witnessed an increasing *santri-ization* of Indonesian society. (The *santri* community is seen as devout Muslims compared to the *abangan* nominal Muslims. In reality, the divisions are not so stark and there is a continuum that reflects the diverse practice of religious faith.) Increased public practice of their Islamic faith has also characterised Malaysian and Singapore Muslims but the focus has been on the form rather than the substance of religious belief. At the same time, there has been greater awareness of Islam's global identity, with growing support for the Palestinian cause, and commitment to support the struggles of Muslims in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation, Bosnia, Kosovo and Chechnya. While the governments of Malaysia and Indonesia backed the governments of the Philippines and Thailand in their fight with Islamic separatist movements, popular support for the insurgents exists at the ground level.

Saudi Arabia's strategy in promoting its austere literal version of Islam has not been

widely discussed because of the aversion to evoking Saudi protests, especially in the United States, which has been dependent on Middle Eastern oil. Although Western analysts have shied away from using the term Wahhabism, Wahhabi-inspired ideas have been promoted in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia in the last thirty years through a variety of semi-official and official actors. The Taliban was the final and the most formidable product of this long term strategy.

This Wahhabi influence has also been seen in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, the Islamisation race has resulted in Islamic discourse being dominated by conservative ulamas and advocates of Wahhabi austerity. A significant reason for the Malaysian Government hosting the recent international Islamic conference in Kuala Lumpur was the desire that moderate Muslims reclaim centre stage. Likewise, Indonesia is also witnessing a struggle between moderate Islamic scholars (who describe their movement as Liberal Islam) and the Wahhabis (representing what the moderates describe as Literal Islam) who advocate the establishment of an Islamic state, implementation of *sharia* law and the imposition of state-sponsored codes of dress and public behaviour.

First enunciated in 1999, Liberal Islam (also known as "Islib") was initiated by a group of Jakarta-based intellectuals led by Ulil Abshar Abdalla and Luthfi Assyaukanie. In March 2002, they established the Liberal Islam Network (*Jaringan Islam Liberal*) to disseminate their views through the media. They have established an active website and a moderated chat group where they debate issues, respond to questions and views, cite the Koran to support their arguments and even provoke debates with their critics. They have also formed the Liberal Islam Writers Syndicate and have published booklets and pamphlets on controversial issues such as *jihad*, the *sharia* and the establishment of houses of worship.

Liberal Islam activists have come from the network of State Institutes for Islamic Affairs (IAIN) and have often been educated at major Western universities including Chicago, Columbia, Leiden and London. By contrast, proponents of Literal Islam tend to be educated at *madrassahs* in Pakistan or universities in Saudi Arabia if their training was in Islamic studies. Literal Islam activists in Malaysia and Indonesia have also frequently been graduates in science and engineering from universities in their home countries or from the West. Such science and engineering graduates have reflected a tendency to apply the analytical tools of the Western scientific tradition to the re-interpretation of Islam in a narrow, literal fashion.

The essence of the argument of Liberal Islam is the need for separation of religion and the state. Religion is regarded as a private matter, not a question of public concern. Literal Islam is regarded by 'Islib' as adopting literal interpretations of the Koran and the *hadiths*, resulting in extremist, even fundamentalist perspectives on politics and society. There are at least four organizations that Liberal Islam regards as Literal Islam groups: Laskar Jihad, Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders Front), Partai Keadilan (Justice Party) and Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (Indonesian Council for Propagation of the Islamic Faith).

For the fundamentalists, Liberal Islam is seen as anathema, comprising Muslims who want to follow their own beliefs while claiming to be Muslims. Instead of a strict adherence to doctrines and teachings, supporters of Liberal Islam are perceived as re-interpreting texts handed down by the Prophet to suit their own convenience. 'Islib' is regarded as a group of secularists who are spreading confusion and disinformation among the masses.

Although 88% of Indonesians identify themselves as Muslim, the total vote obtained by all Islamic political parties in all general elections since 1955 has never exceeded 43.5% of the votes cast. Despite recurrent attempts to seek the adoption of *sharia* law in Indonesia since 1945, there has been declining support within Parliament for such a move on every occasion when the issue has been raised. The latest attempt in 2001 was opposed by the two largest Muslim organizations in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. In the 1999 elections, the two largest political parties, Partai Demokrasi Indonesia (Perjuangan) and Golkar were secularist. Although Abdurrachman Wahid of NU was elected President, he adopted secularist policies in government and had a reputation as a liberal thinker with an inclusivist outlook. Under him, NU nurtured a group of eclectic intellectuals and thinkers who sought to re-define Islam to meet the needs of current society.

Nevertheless, Indonesia has become more *santri* (devout Muslim). There is an increase in the public and private practice of Islam but this should be distinguished from a turn towards the establishment of an Islamic state. Some have even observed that the Indonesian armed forces are represented by many more *santri* within its senior ranks today. However, this was a result of recruitment policies during the Soeharto era when there was an effort to draw in talent from around the archipelago. It was also a reflection of the absence of *santri* in command positions in the 1970s and 1980s as most *santri* officers had participated in the Dar-ul Islam revolt and the regionalist revolts of the 1950s.

Increased *santri* influence also arose from Soeharto's efforts to seek new sources of support following his estrangement from senior leaders of the Indonesian armed forces in the late 1980s. The establishment of the Association of Indonesian Intellectuals (ICMI, *Ikatan Cendiakawan Muslim Se-Indonesia*) in December 1990 with Soeharto as its patron and Minister of Research and Technology, B.J. Habibie, as its chairman highlighted Soeharto's overtures to the Muslim community. Habibie's ascent to the Presidency in May 1998, following Soeharto's resignation, paved the way for the appointment of leading Muslim activists to key positions in government.

Increased *santri* influence and resurgent Indonesian nationalism have shaped the Indonesian response to the issue of terrorism. The Indonesian government, press and public were lukewarm in their response to reports that Indonesian ulama and their followers were at the core of planned attacks on American installations and other targets in the region. The reality is that the political elite in Jakarta is aware of the increased clout of political Islam in Indonesia today. The strength of the fundamentalists is evident from the declaration of the Indonesian Council of Ulamas (MUI) issued on 25 September 2001 calling on Muslims in the world for *jihad fii sabilillah* (fight in the path of Allah) should the US and its allies commit "aggression" against Afghanistan and the Islamic world.

An even greater shock to the region has been the sudden awareness that al-Qaeda linked radical Islamists were active in the region. In recent months, the Malaysian Government arrested more than 40 members of a militant Muslim group, the Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (Malaysian Militant Movement). KMM has been implicated in bank robberies, murders and kidnapping. KMM was part of a larger network that intended to establish an Islamic state (Darul Islamiyah Nusantara) linking Malaysia, Indonesia, southern Thailand and the southern Philippines.

The regional terrorist networks indicate the dimensions of the new security challenges facing Southeast Asia. The transnational al-Qaeda terrorist network will be the major

security threat over the next decade. However, the identification of radical fundamentalist Islam with terrorism risks perpetuating the perception that Islam is the cause of regional terrorism, especially in states where Muslims are minorities such as in Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand. In reality, these radical fundamentalist Islamic terrorists represent the extreme manifestation of Wahhabism.

Even for Islamists committed to the establishment of Islamic states, the approaches taken will change over time. They will re-position themselves to take advantage of political opportunities while adjusting to a changing social environment. The objectives and goals of an Islamic state will be re-defined. In confronting states intent on retaining their existing identities, the strategies adopted will vary in the years ahead as they have in the past. Terrorist attacks and violent confrontations, public agitation, private resentments and attempts to infiltrate public spaces will occur. A key role will be played by Muslims from diverse backgrounds that will participate in the public debate. The debate within Indonesia sparked by Liberal Islam demonstrates one response to attempts by the Wahhabis to dominate the Islamic agenda. Its salience arises from the wider support provided by the larger community when such activists have moved to take the stage and debate issues.

The debate within Islamic communities in the region continues. Islam is not a monolithic entity. Its believers stretch from secular modernists sensitive to the multi-religious, multi-cultural fabric of societies; inclusivists aware of Islam's accommodation with existing beliefs when it penetrated the region; to revivalists seeking a return to an Islamic Golden Age; and terrorists intent on overthrowing existing regimes and creating a new Muslim state linking territories in the region with Muslim majorities.

From the perspective of regional order, the inaction of the Indonesian Government despite concrete evidence, has undermined existing trends in regional security cooperation. While proponents of ASEAN previously highlighted ASEAN's evolution into a security community, recent developments draw attention to the risks of more open borders resulting from ASEAN arrangements to encourage increased intra-regional communications, tourism and trade.

Frictions among ASEAN states following the arrests of radical Islamic terrorists highlight the decline in ASEAN's cohesion following its expansion to include all ten Southeast Asian states in the 1990's, the regional financial and economic crises, and the downfall of Soeharto in Indonesia. Ironically, it was during this period that radical Islamists committed themselves to establishing an Islamic state unifying the Muslim majority territories of Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, southern Philippines and southern Thailand. While Singapore does not have a Muslim majority, the JI activists concluded that its existence at the heart of Southeast Asia required its incorporation into the new entity. Even as the original members of ASEAN wrestled with the doctrines of non-intervention and non-interference in a world where the concept of humanitarian intervention has received increasing support, they were challenged by radical Islamists seeking to create a unified Islamic state through the violent overthrow of existing regimes.

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