

Trends in Southeast Asia Series: 12(2003)

Perspectives on Doctrinal and Strategic Implications of Global Islam

PART II

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Hussin Mutalib

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, National
University of Singapore

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE OF POLITICAL ISLAM

Bernard T. Adeney-Risakotta

Professor of Social Ethics, Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana,
Indonesia

Published by
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang
Singapore 119614

E-mail: publish@iseas.edu.sg
World Wide Web: <http://www.iseas.edu.sg/pub.html>

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ISSN 0219-3213
August 2003

Editor's Note:

This publication is a substantially revised version of the Proceedings of the Public Forum on “Doctrinal and Strategic Implications of Global Islam” held in Singapore on 4 September 2002. The Editorial Committee wishes to thank Dr K. S. Nathan for editing the entire manuscript.

About the Speaker

Surin Pitsuwan is currently a member of the U.N. International Commission on Human Security, and also Advisor to the U.N. Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty. Between 1997 and 2001, Dr Pitsuwan served as Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand. He holds a B.A. in Political Science from Claremont Men's College, California (1972), and a Ph.D. in Political Science and Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard University (1982). Between 1980-82, he wrote regular columns for Bangkok's two English language daily newspapers, the Nation Review and the Bangkok Post. Between 1976-78, Dr Pitsuwan was engaged in studying Arabic and researching into Islamic Philosophy and Jurisprudence in Cairo, Egypt.

SEPTEMBER 11 AND THE PROSPECTS OF A MUSLIM RENAISSANCE

The world is approaching an anniversary, an anniversary that is different from others because it is not waiting for it with joy and celebration, but is anxiously watching it moving towards our region. September 11, 2001 has become a new reference point for all of us and certainly it is going to remain a reference point for our individual lifespan and for all humanity.

The response to the 9/11 trauma has been twofold: worldwide force, overwhelming force, unilateral force, multilateral force, systematic force, and certainly worldwide efforts to suppress international terrorism. The other kind of response is the one that is going to produce a much more sustained and lasting impact on the world. It is the approach of exchange, sharing, conversation, dialogue and consultation.

The Muslims continue to pursue their doctrinal reforms, re-evaluation, re-examination in many centres around the world including the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. This certainly will have repercussions on various communities around the world — the dynamics, the energy, the heat that are being generated by this re-examination, re-formulation, re-assessment, re-evaluation of everything Islamic — everything Muslim will have an impact worldwide.

Muslims are inspired by their past glory, tempered and always stimulated by bitter memories, by failures, by memories of oppression and injustice way back into the era of the crusades and beyond. Muslims are frustrated by the present circumstances of marginalization, of poverty, of lack of preparation to participate in modern world affairs and by the sense of inadequacy. But at the same time Muslims are motivated by a vision of the future — a vision that at some point in time they will be restored to the level of equality and enjoy the limelight of glory equal to others.

Here in Southeast Asia, Muslims are doing just that — to create a community of excellence among the Malay-Muslims in the region.

Muslims take pride in being moderate adherents of the faith, being Shafi'ite, accommodating, flexible, and tolerant in the Southeast Asian region. This is a unique feature of Muslims in Southeast Asia that the region and world should recognize in the attempt by Muslims in this part of the world to evolve a community of excellence.

How can this be achieved? In the past, Muslims passed on the wisdom of the Greeks to the Europeans. That wisdom helped the Europeans to get out of the dark ages, come up with the Renaissance, and attain their own enlightenment which led to reforms in the Christian church, all the way to the industrial revolution, enlightenment etc. until they attained supremacy of power and embarked on colonialism.

The time has come that the traffic should flow the other way and that is, all Muslims are aspiring for their own renaissance — liberal Islam in Indonesia, many institutes in Malaysia, in Southern Thailand, in Brunei, and here in Singapore. If Muslims can come up with their own renaissance, through education, science, technology, philosophy, and through all the disciplines that they have been successful in the past, they would be able to get rid of that sense of inferiority, marginalization, inadequacy, and frustration within the *ummah* (Islamic community) at the present time.

Muslims have to re-examine their curriculum in their schools, *pondok*, *pesantren*, and *madrasah*. They have to analyze the way in which education and science are being taught in their institutions and schools. Muslims have this tradition called *taqlid* — following the previous generations in the interpretation of everything, including the Qur'an, the Hadis, and the application of the *Shariah* (Islamic law). They have to put some new intellectual effort into that and see if the creativity, the innovation, and the dynamism of the past could be re-infused into their educational institutions. Such efforts in Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Southern Thailand would contribute towards the Muslim renaissance.

The outside communities could most certainly participate in this process. The idea of college and university came from the Muslims. This idea was passed on to the Europeans in the Middle Ages, leading to the establishment of universities in Oxford, Cambridge, Padua, and Paris — all of which emerged as communities of people in

search of intellectual excellence. Within those university walls in Europe, there was pluralism, there was freedom and there still is the freedom to search based on human intellect, wisdom, logic, and human brain power. But somehow that which was passed on to Europe became stagnant in various Muslim learning centres in the Muslim world, including Southeast Asia. Pluralism of knowledge, freedom of speech and the ability to exert one's own intellectual power, *ijtihad* of the first order, has not been part of the Muslim culture here in Southeast Asia and in other places.

How can the search for Muslim excellence be promoted? Oxford University has just established a Centre for Islamic Studies. The patron is no less than Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales. This newly established institute will undertake research in Islamic studies, civilization, culture, *Shariah*, philosophy, and all the sciences of Islam in an environment of freedom. This initiative is also now seen at Harvard, Chicago, and at the Australian National University in Canberra. The exchange should begin flowing two ways: the Muslims have passed on the wisdom of the Greeks — Plato, Aristotle, Socrates all the way up to the West and produced modern civilization. There is room for dialogue and exchange and cooperation that would also help Muslims in Southeast Asia produce that kind of open civilization as it has been achieved in Europe.

One of the things that Plato passed on, that Arabs passed on to Europe, was this idea that politics is the affairs of symbolism. Politics is the reality that only reflects the real reality, the affairs in the cave. For a long time, humanity has lived in the cave. Human beings lived in prejudice, mutual ignorance, and mutual suspicion. What is the example of politics of the cave? Inequality in the world, poverty around the world, lack of education, ignorance around the world, exploitation and injustices around the world. Humanity has travelled far away from Plato's politics of the cave. Can those who have already attained the sunlight outside the cave extend their hand of cooperation and assistance to enable others to attain the same glory on our turf in Southeast Asia where we believe tolerance, moderation and accommodation are still very much a pervasive feature of our region?

September 11, 2001 also engenders hope in the sense that it has brought us much closer to each other. Let us fill the gap, let us bridge the divide, and let us take the admonition of John Donne, the 17th century British-English poet when he said,

“no man is an island”. Donne’s astute observation applies equally to all — Europeans, Australians, Singaporeans, and everyone else. Any man’s death, suffering, or frustration diminishes a person because he is a part of mankind. Thus, the bell tolls for everyone — the bell of cooperation, dialogue, exchange, and mutual cooperation — to enable humanity to rise to greater heights of excellence.

On the issue of re-education of the *ulama*, how do we achieve this objective? In the past, Islamic jurisprudence, for example, was practiced in a very dynamic process. That is, the judge, the *ulama*, the *faqih* (Muslim jurist), would have to personally engage in the issues, in the problems, in the experiences of those who are asking for the *fatwah*, for the opinion, i.e. taking into consideration the circumstantial issues around the problem, whether it is a personal, social, or religious issue.

Lately the problem has become stratified, fossilized, and stagnant in the sense that there is no longer that exchange, that dynamism between the one who has the right to sit in judgement and the one who seeks the judgement. What has to happen into the future would be to train and to educate our *ulama* in sciences more comprehensive than the way in which they have been educated in the past few centuries. And this principle of following the tradition, of *taqlid*, has to be questioned, precisely because the world has changed, the wisdom is there, the reason for any particular injunction or commandment of the law is there — in that sense it is transcendental. But in the application of it, one will have to look into the environment in which the question has arisen.

Our training, and our education has been inadequate in that sense, therefore we tend to be looking backward for the answers to the modern world, and also to the future world. This approach is certainly not part of the teaching of Islam. Islam must be dynamic and infuse the spirit of creativity and innovation within the parameter of the injunctions of the articles of faith — only then can Muslims address the problems of the contemporary world, of contemporary life, with the wisdom of Islam. Otherwise, the problems will persist. So who communicates with the masses? Indeed, it is the *ulama*, the *imam*, the guru, the teachers, and the preachers. Their education will have to be looked at and that would depend on all of us, especially those who are active in public life, in modern life. It will also depend on responsible leaders and citizens in the Muslim community to question these things and encourage

the institutions, the schools and the *madrasah* to pay serious attention to their process of education.

About the Speaker

Zainah Anwar is presently the Executive Director of Sisters in Islam (SIS) — a non-governmental organization founded in 1988, and which advocates the rights of Muslim women within the framework of Islam. She earned a Diploma in Mass Communication (Journalism) from the MARA Institute of Technology in Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia in 1975, then went to the United States to obtain her M.Sc. degree in Journalism from Boston University (1977), and a M.A. in Law and Diplomacy from Fletcher, Tufts University in Boston (1986). Her book, Islamic revivalism in Malaysia: Dakwah Among the Students (1987) has become a standard reference in the study of Islam in Malaysia.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN ISLAM: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

The views presented in this essay stem from the standpoint of an activist, of someone who works on the ground, challenging political Islam, traditional Islam in the way it is interpreted and codified that very often discriminates against women and infringe the fundamental liberties of Malaysian citizens as upheld by the Federal Constitution. The perspective offered here is that of a feminist and a believer, and of someone who is determined not to be forced to live in exile because she cannot lead the life and practise the Islam she believes in, in her own country.

Where Malaysia is concerned, post-September 11 has been positive in many ways. One important impact has been the opening of the public space for debate, for discussion, for differences of opinion on Islam and Islamic issues. There is greater awareness, not just only among Muslims, but also among non-Muslims as well, who are claiming their right as citizens of a multi-racial country to take part in defining the kind of Islam that should govern the lives of citizens of Malaysia. There is greater awareness that if Islam is to be used as a source of law and public policy to govern the public and private lives of citizens of Malaysia, then the question of WHO decides what is Islamic and what is not is of paramount importance.

What are the implications to democratic governance, to multi-racial Malaysia, if only a small group of people, the *ulama*, as traditionally believed, have the right to interpret the Quran, and codify the text in a manner that very often isolates the text from the socio-historical context of its revelation, isolates classical juristic opinion especially on women's issues, from the socio-historical context of the lives of the founding jurists of Islam, and isolates the textual heritage from the context of contemporary society, the world that we live in today.

Increasingly, in Malaysia today, women's groups, human rights groups, NGOs, political parties, the media, and concerned individuals are beginning to speak up and to engage publicly in a debate on these issues. What is the role of religion in politics? Is Islam compatible with democracy? Who has the right to interpret Islam and codify Islamic teachings into laws and public policies? How do we deal with the conflict between our constitutional provisions of fundamental liberties and equality with religious laws and policies that violate these provisions? Should the state legislate on morality? Is it the duty of the state, in order to bring about a moral society, to turn all sins into crimes against the state? Can there be one truth and one final interpretation of Islam that must govern the lives of every Muslim citizen of the country? Can the massive coercive powers of a modern nation-state be used to impose that one truth on all citizens? How do we deal with the new universal morality of democracy, of human rights, of women's rights, and where is the place of Islam in this dominant ethical paradigm of the modern world?

The reality and the implications of Islamic governance in a multi-ethnic modernizing country like Malaysia are just beginning to sink in. As the contestation for power between UMNO and PAS escalates, issues such as the Islamic state, the *hudud* law, discrimination against women, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, enter the public sphere for debate.

It is useful to take the example of the controversy over the *hudud* law to illustrate some of these issues of concern that have been raised. In May, 2002, the Terengganu state government which is under the control of the Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), introduced the *hudud* law, which is the *Shariah* criminal law that prescribes punishment such as the amputation of limbs, and stoning to death. The debate that opened up on this effort of the Terengganu state government to introduce the *hudud* law really represented a microcosm of concerns in governing in the name of Islam. It pertained to the kind of Islam that Malay/Muslims want in Malaysia, what an Islamic state means, what kind of Islamic law should govern their lives, issues of women's rights, of freedom of religion, freedom of expression — they all came to the fore with that debate surrounding the *hudud* law of Terengganu.

One major area of concern was the gross discrimination against women. There is a misogynistic bent in so many Islamic laws that form a part of the Islamic

juristic heritage. The problem is the religious authorities in contemporary times are not willing to exercise their powers of *ijtihad* to reform these laws to deal with the changing realities of today's world where the demand for equality and justice can no longer be ignored. For example, what sparked off the outcry over the *hudud* law of Trengganu was the provision in the *hudud* law that if a woman reports she has been raped and if she cannot prove she has been raped, she will be charged for *qazaf*, which means making a false accusation. If found guilty, the woman will be lashed 80 times. It will not be difficult for the woman to be found guilty because in order to prove rape under the *hudud* law, you need to produce four pious Muslim male eyewitnesses who actually saw the act of penetration! In reality, this is of course impossible.

Other provisions in the *hudud* law also discriminate against women. Women cannot be witnesses which means half the population of Malaysia will be disqualified as witnesses. A single woman who is pregnant is assumed to have committed *zina*. In other jurisdictions, this has led to rape victims being charged for *zina*. Today, for many Malaysians, including many Muslims, to introduce such provisions in the law in the 21st century is unacceptable.

The second issue is the nature of punishment. Again this issue must be seen in its proper socio-historical context. The *hudud* law provides for chopping of hands, crucifixion, stoning to death, lashings. Within the context of the modern world today, can such punishments be acceptable or do they violate universal human rights demands for human beings not to be subject to torture or to cruel, degrading and inhumane treatment. Stoning to death an adulterer is not a punishment prescribed by the Qur'an and yet the proponents of this law chose to keep this pre-Islamic practice as the codified *hudud* punishment in the 21st century. Even if these punishments are in the Qur'an, they should be viewed in the socio-historical context of the time when these punishments were deemed ordinary and acceptable by the society of 7th century Arabia? Could the course of justice, of deterrence be better served through other forms of punishment in the 21st century? In the end the objective of the Quran, the objective of the teachings of Islam is to ensure that justice is done. In the context of the 21st century can the cause of the religion, the objective of the religion, be served in different ways?

The third issue is freedom of religion. Under the hudud law a person who leaves Islam will be sentenced to death. What is its implication to multi-racial Malaysia where non-Muslims have to convert to Islam in order to marry a Malay-Muslim? Marriages break down. The divorce rate among Muslims is far higher than the divorce rate among non-Muslims. What will happen to a Chinese woman who wants to go back to her original religion, to her family and community support system upon the breakdown of her marriage to a Muslim man? Is she going to be sentenced to death? This woman's right to life cannot be swept aside in the name of preserving the sanctity of religion.

The fourth problem area is the tendency to codify the most conservative opinion in Islam into law. For example, there are basically three traditional juristic opinions on the punishment for apostasy. First, is the orthodox opinion that the death penalty should be imposed on those who leave Islam. Second, is an opinion that prescribes the death penalty only if apostasy is accompanied by rebellion against the community and the legitimate leadership — in other words, treason. The third view holds that even though apostasy is a great sin it is not a capital offence in Islam. Therefore a personal change of faith merits no punishment. Yet, in its attempt to introduce the hudud law in the 21st century, the Islamic party in power in Trengganu chose the most extremist juristic opinion to codify into law. It is a well-known fact that the Quran is explicit in its recognition of freedom of religion and there exists as well within the Islamic juristic heritage a position that supports freedom of religion. This is further enhanced also by the official position of Al Ahzar University under the progressive Sheikh Tantawi who believes that there should be no punishment for a personal change of faith.

This tendency to codify the most conservative opinion is especially so in the area of women's rights. For example, under the hudud law, the provision that women cannot be witnesses is only a juristic opinion with no explicit support in the Qur'an or the traditions of the Prophet, for that matter. Pregnancy as evidence of *zina*, again is a minority opinion of one school, the Maliki School of Law. The majority opinion of the three other schools in Sunni law: Hanbali, Shafi'i and Hanafi, do not admit circumstantial evidence for a hudud offence, and do not admit pregnancy as evidence of *zina*. Yet, in legislating, PAS chose a minority opinion, even when the minority

opinion does not belong to the Shafi'i school, which is the dominant school in Malaysia.

In effect, what the Trengganu PAS government has done was simply to reproduce into statute language, the chapter on criminal punishments from an 11th century classical book on laws of Islamic governance by the well-known Shafi'i jurist, Al-Mawardi. The challenge and the reality we are facing today is the seeming unwillingness or inability of the *ulama* that dominate the religious authority and the Islamist activists of today to see Islamic laws from a historical perspective as rules that were socially constructed to deal with the socio-economic and political context of the times. Given a different world, a different time, a different context, these laws have to change to ensure that Islam's eternal principle of justice is served. More than ever, there is a need for Muslims to differentiate between what is divine and what is human — the source of the law is divine, but the human effort in understanding God's message, the human effort in codifying God's message into positive law is not infallible and divine. These laws can be changed, they can be criticized, they can be challenged, and they can be refined and re-defined.

Unfortunately, in the traditional Islamic education most of our *ulama* have gone through, the belief in *taqlid*, in blind imitation is very strong. The belief that the doors of *ijtihad* are closed is very strong. This rationale is based on the belief that the great scholars of the classical period of Islam who lived closer to the time of the Prophet were unsurpassed in their knowledge and interpretive skills. But to adopt such an attitude is totally untenable in today's world when we face new and different challenges: the issue of human rights, of democracy, of women's rights, the challenge of modernity, the challenge of change. How do Muslims find solutions from within their faith if they do not exert themselves in *ijtihad* and produce new knowledge and new understandings of Islam in the face of new problems?

For this to happen, the public space to debate on Islam has to open up. Unfortunately in many Muslim societies today, the public space does not exist, not just to talk about Islam but to talk on other issues that are deemed sensitive by the power elites, such as democracy, human rights, freedom, and fundamental liberties. Someone once said that bad secularism leads to bad religion. The challenge that the Muslim world faces today is that many Muslim governments and leaders govern in

less than exemplary ways, and lead less than exemplary lives. Many Muslim countries are led by autocratic rulers and monarchs where freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of association are very restricted. Our traditional upbringing, our culture, and our political system do not encourage us to engage freely in debate on issues. Of course then, when political Islam emerges as an alternative to challenge that autocratic state, it is an Islam led by those whose mindset and cultural framework are closed and limited. If this situation persists, then the search for solutions, the search for answers to deal with the challenges faced by the Muslim ummah today is not going to go far. In the end, the role played by civil society groups, such as women's rights and human rights activists, will be key in bringing about change and the terms of public engagement on Islam.

This can already be seen in Malaysia. Sisters in Islam has created and expanded the space for public discussion on laws and policies made in the name of religion that discriminate against women and infringe constitutional provisions on fundamental liberties and equality. Post-September 11 has propelled more groups and individuals to engage in the debate further because of fears of what could happen to the Malaysian body politic should a party like PAS take over power at the national level. PAS' reaction in calling for *jihad* against the United States, sending *jihadis* to Afghanistan to fight the Americans, calling for a trade boycott of the US, Malaysia's largest trading partner, brought a dose of shocking reality to many who had flirted with the idea of a PAS-led coalition government to replace the Barisan Nasional. The question foremost in many minds was: would Malaysia be at war with the United States if PAS was the government of the day? Confronting that kind of possibility woke up many Malaysians. This concern was further compounded by the attempt by the Ulama Association of Malaysia to charge certain writers for insulting Islam in January 2002 because of differing views on various issues in Islam. Sisters in Islam successfully mobilized civil society, human rights groups, prominent individuals, and progressive Islamic scholars to take a public stand in a joint press statement which criticised the attempt to criminalise differences of opinion in Islam. Again, that whole issue raised public consciousness as to the implications of having this kind of intolerant Islam dominating Malaysia.

It is noteworthy that in Malaysia the media has been very supportive in giving civil society groups the space to articulate their voices and concerns, especially on women's issues. Newspapers and women's magazines have highlighted issues of injustice women suffer in the *Shariah* courts, in particular the delays in getting a divorce, maintenance and custody should the husband challenge these applications. This has led to public debate and awareness on whether Islamic law as codified and enforced can bring justice to women and whether the *Shariah* courts can implement the law in a fair and just manner, according to the substance and spirit of the law. This public discussion and ownership of Islamic issues is important as it then challenges the authorities to deal with them and find solutions to the problems. This can be seen in the increased level of engagement between Sisters-in-Islam and other women's groups and different ministries and government agencies — the latest was an invitation to Sisters in Islam from the *Shariah* courts of Selangor to have a dialogue with them, and to raise our concerns in ensuring that women get access to the rights they have under the law. Sisters in Islam welcome any opportunity to work with government agencies in their effort to ensure that women are treated justly by the *Shariah* system.

One issue often raised is whether Muslim women activists are at a disadvantage because of the fact that they do not cover up, and do not speak Arabic. There are members of Sisters in Islam who are covered up and who speak Arabic. And there are members who don't. The members of the group represent the diversity of Malaysia, the diversity in the practice of Islam in Malaysia. There are women who cover up, there are women who are not covered up. Just because you don't cover up, you don't speak Arabic, you don't have a degree in Islam from Al-Azhar University in Cairo does not mean you do not have a right to publicly engage in Islam. Especially in a society where Islam is used as a source of law and public policy to govern the private and public lives of its citizens. Sisters in Islam claim their right as citizens of a democratic country to talk on economic, political, and social issues and how they affect them and their fellow citizens. However, why is it that when it comes to Islam, suddenly one has to speak Arabic, to be covered up, to have a degree in Islam before one can utter a word?

One could also point fingers at the PAS leaders and PAS activists who go around the country and overseas to talk about Islam — they don't have degrees in Islam, they don't know Arabic. Why is it that the issue of credentials is not raised when they talk about the Islamic state, when they talk about *hudud* law, when they declare other people as infidels for disagreeing with them? In the end, the issue is not about credentials, the issue is not about who has the qualification to speak on Islam, the issue is about what is being said. If you spout the demand for an Islamic state, Islamic law, death for apostates, the hudud law, women to be covered up and segregated from men, then you have the freedom to speak on Islam as this brand of Islam serves the political ideology and the political struggle of the group that is using Islam as a tool to mobilise public support for its political agenda. It does not matter if one is only a third rate engineering graduate from a third rate American university.

Of course, we recognise that the class of ulama who have spent decades of their lives studying Islam have a right to interpret Islam, to exercise *ijtihad*. But what does one do when the ulama with the authority to interpret Islam come out with laws, rules, regulations and policies, and whose implementation as well, bring so much injustice? Look at the public reaction to the implementation of hudud laws in Nigeria and Pakistan. Why have ordinary Muslim — and even civil society — risen up to challenge these laws and their enforcement? Because of the gross injustice they have caused to so many women. The kind of Islam that they have preached, codified and implemented, especially for women and for issues of fundamental liberties, have been damaging to the lives of so many Muslim women.

If we observe the current developments in Iran, Indonesia, Egypt, Pakistan, and Nigeria — it is women's groups that are at the forefront in challenging traditional religious authorities because justice has not emanated from those traditional religious authorities and their pronouncement on women's issues in Islam. If the system cannot deliver justice, if the citizens are suffering injustice, then we are not going to wait for someone in authority to confer on us the right and the license to speak on religion. We will claim that right for ourselves to engage publicly and challenge the injustices that we have suffered and that are perpetrated in the name of religion.

About the Speaker

Hussin Mutalib is currently an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore. His teaching and research interests include contemporary Southeast Asian Politics and Islamic Political Theory. He graduated with a B.A. and B.Soc. Sc. (Hons) from the University of Singapore. He holds a M.A. in International Relations from the Australian National University in Canberra (1982), and a Ph.D. in Comparative Politics from Sydney University (1987). His major publications include: Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics (1990, as author), Islam in Malaysia (1993, as author) and Islam, Muslims, and the Modern State (1994, as co-editor). Dr Hussin is also currently the Director-General of the Centre for Contemporary Islamic Studies in Singapore.

THE RISE IN ISLAMICITY AND THE PERCEIVED THREAT OF POLITICAL ISLAM

This essay will cover four main over-arching frameworks on the issue of Political Islam. One, it is more than obvious that many governments in this region perceive political Islam with a great deal of concern, if not threat. It is time for Muslims not to fudge this issue and not to pretend that the problem is merely make-believe. Second, with all the hype and paranoia about global Islam and political Islam in Southeast Asia, there is a need for a serious re-look at some of our very basic assumptions and conclusions about Islam, failing which, these assumptions would colour our judgements of this contentious issue. Third, there is a tendency for many (governments, included) to look at the problems posed by political Islam through an overwhelmingly religious lens or periscope. Politics, including the role of governments in managing Islam, have a part to play in explaining why political Islam has become a problem in governance. Finally, some perspectives are offered as to how political Islam, which can be expected to assume a higher profile in this era of globalization, can be better approached and appraised.

Much has been written recently about the so-called 'Islamic threat' in the world post-9/11, some of which have arguably increased Muslim frustrations. However, the last thing that Muslims should do in dealing with this Islamophobia is to adopt an apologetic stance and to engage in self-denial. Whether Muslims like it or not, the reality is that political Islam is perceived to be a major issue of concern, if not threat, by many countries, including in many Muslim countries themselves.

To begin with, the tenor of Islamicity has become more militant. Worldwide, especially in the Gulf where Islamist movements are openly challenged, militancy is often due to the existence of despotic and illegitimate regimes. We can also raise another development: Islamic issues have intruded into mainstream politics in many

countries and examples again abound in Southeast Asia, as Islamic-oriented groups and organisations become more active and demonstrate their aboligy to galvanise Muslim masses. Finally, rightly or otherwise, many Southeast Asian governments have openly declared their concern that growing Islamic sentiments and demands could weaken the social fabric and national cohesion of their heterogeneous polities.

Added to the wide misconceptions, and perhaps misreporting by the media, about political Islam these days, it has become necessary and urgent to review our whole treatment about the heightening Islamic ethos today, including in our own region of Southeast Asia.

To start with, whatever the rise of Islamic militancy in this part of the world, it may be useful to remember that such an assertiveness is not only relatively recent, it is also confined to small groups and fringe elements within the Muslim community. For instance, in the pre-September 11 era, very few of us would have bothered to do serious work about political Islam. In the research as well as many conferences that have been organised in recent years, seldom did one come across groups such as Al-Qaeda or Jemaah Islamiah. Now, all of a sudden, we are told that not only are they everywhere but have for many years established a network of cells in the region. It can be conceded that while these are fringe, small and extremist groups, admittedly, they could wreak havoc. Still, it is necessary to assert that moderate Muslims would be wary of such terrorist groups.

Secondly, whatever has been said about the religious sources of political Islam, it can be argued that religion is not always the principal precipitant of such militancy but other long-standing political and socio-economic grievances.

Thirdly, the many reports and statements about the radicalization of political Islam in Southeast Asia, have overlooked the fact that Southeast Asia has had a different Islamic temperament and practice as compared to the heartland of Islam in the Middle East. Not only is Islam in this part of the world (Southeast Asia) generally being practiced in peace and harmony with non-Muslims, many of the extremist ideas and violent actions of Muslims in other parts of the world, such as the resort to suicide bombings, killings and revolutions, are quite alien to this region. For instance, Southeast Asian Muslims have never been taught that suicide bombers are justified

under Islam or that hijacking civilian planes and ramming them into civilian buildings will take one to heaven.

The fourth point that needs some reflection as we deal with the issue of political Islam, relates to the manner with which Islamic assertiveness in general, and Islamic militancy in particular, are managed in this region. We may as well admit here that managing political Islam is patently more difficult for governments where Muslims constitute a sizeable, if not majority, population, and where the culture is not overwhelmingly secular — as in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. In these cases, governments tend to use a mixture of strategies to manage Islam — ranging from domination and co-optation to resorting to violent and extra-judicial means.

As alluded to earlier, there is a tendency for many governments and non-Muslims to view political Islam as motivated primarily by religious factors. The picture is incomplete if we fail to see the political dynamic revolving around this phenomenon. As an example, in many countries, governments and opposition parties have resorted to outbidding tactics (the ‘holier-than-thou’ charge) that have led to raising the ‘Islamic temperature’ as it were. We certainly find this situation in cases such as Malaysia and Indonesia.

Another point that deserves mention, especially post-9/11, relates to the issue of democracy and civil society and the danger that these issues might be compromised under the guise of the need to protect state security and stability. There is a need to ensure that governments in Southeast Asia and elsewhere do not exploit the prevailing ‘war on terrorism’ by resorting to harsh measures, or the passage of arbitrary laws that hinder citizens’ freedoms and privacy, or curtails or violates basic human rights. In some countries, governments have profiled and targeted Muslims as potential terrorists under the mere pretext of wanting to quash Islamic terrorism.

In some cases, governments exploit this opportunity by decimating genuine dissenting voices which operate within civil society, and which respect the democratic framework of conflict resolution. We saw how individuals and groups who were previously, at worst, described as radicals and fundamentalists, are now conveniently dubbed as supporters and sympathizers of terrorism. We read in the newspapers as to how groups of Muslims in the Philippines were rounded up merely on the grounds of being suspected as Abu Sayyaf supporters and how it was later revealed that they

were teenagers (thirteen and fourteen year olds) who were merely fishing in the Sulu Sea. Apparently, in the post-September 11 hunt against the Abu Sayyaff in the Philippines, the civilian casualties were conveniently described as Abu Sayyaf sympathizers when no hard evidence was produced to back up such claims. The point that cannot be allowed to pass is this: hitting the guilty hurts terror, hitting the innocent spawns terror.

Of all the countries in the region of Southeast Asia and for reasons of demography and the political power of the Muslim majority, the cases of Malaysia and Indonesia are indeed being watched closely. It is quite instructive to see how the differential treatment and attitudes towards political Islam by countries in this region will affect the coherence of ASEAN as an entity, and also the related debate about 'collective security' in this region.

As governments (and scholars, observers too) ponder future scenarios of political Islam, it is imperative that more effort be made by all parties to see how the perceived threat of political Islam can be better approached. One area deserving greater attention, and support, is the need to heighten inter-civilizational dialogue and debate. For instance, since the September 11, 2001 Incident, the Centre for Contemporary Islamic Studies in Singapore has initiated a series of such dialogues. The fact that more than 400 people came and participated in the dialogues must indicate that Singaporeans of all faiths see in such opportunities, avenues for buttressing further inter-faith and inter-ethnic understanding.

The other important area to consider is the impact of globalisation on political Islam. Arguably, one can expect the phenomenon of political Islam as a reaction to globalisation to be with us for some years to come. Greater opportunities for travel, better access to the Internet, and the freer exchange of trade across borders, will all lead to greater intensification of political Islam, and this will be even more pronounced in situations where Muslims were made to feel isolated, alienated and marginalised, and where world issues affecting them emotively, such as the injustices against the Palestinian people, continue to be perpetrated.

In conclusion, it is more than obvious that there is an urgent need to better manage political Islam and to place the perceived threat in perspective. In this latter regard, the role of the media cannot be under-estimated. There is much more that the

media has to know and learn about Islam in general, and about Muslim sensitivities in particular. The coverage (both in the Western media and in some local media in Singapore as well) about Islam and Muslims, certainly deserves to be improved; there is a pervasive feeling among many Muslims that the reports about Islam and the Muslims, especially from Western sources, generally lacks objectivity and are prejudiced.

The other aspect deserving some attention is the re-education of the *ulama*. The time has come when the traditional *ulama* must be prepared with adequate knowledge beyond their traditional disciplines, and are prepared to engage with Muslims who desire a change in the *ulama*'s approach towards solving Muslim problems. In Malaysia for instance, the *ulama* has to engage in greater debates with groups such as Sisters in Islam and in ways that demonstrate their comprehensive knowledge and capacities. Gone are the days when Muslim masses listen and accept their *ulama*'s views without question, and more can be expected of this trend given the prospect of greater democratisation of Muslim societies everywhere including Southeast Asia. Furthermore, as Islam is integral to the life of a Muslim, politics is an inseparable part of Muslim religiosity. Thus, greater care needs to be exercised when Islam and politics are mixed, as is now evident in the difficulties that now confront Indonesian politics.

Given the immense difficulty and challenge of managing inherently plural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious societies, it is still in the interest of secular governments to better understand, if not accommodate, the different world views of their Muslim citizens. It would also be helpful if secular systems are cognizant of the many sources and causes as to why more and more Muslims, including secular-trained professionals, are turning to Islam, as it were — even as they (Muslims) appreciate the desirability of maintaining the secular basis of their societies.

About the Speaker

Bernard T. Adeney-Risakotta is currently Assistant Director and Professor of Social Ethics in the Graduate Program at Duta Wacana Christian University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. He is also a regular guest professor at IAIN Sunan Kalijaga and Sanata Dharma University. He holds a B.A. (Hons) from the University of Wisconsin, Madison (1970), B.D. (Hons) in Theology, Ethics, and Asian Religions from the University of London (1974), and a Ph.D. in Religion and Society from the Graduate Theological Union, (with the University of California), Berkeley (1982). Dr Adeney-Risakotta has written extensively on religion and society, including: Just War, Political Realism and Faith (1988), Strange Virtues: Ethics in a Multicultural World (1995), Etika Sosial Lintas Budaya (2000), and Kekuasaan, Agama dan Kekerasan di Indonesia (forthcoming).

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE OF POLITICAL ISLAM

“Political Islam” should not be equated with radical or violent movements to seize power. Rather, “political Islam” is the political face of Islam both in its positive and negative senses. All religions have political implications and give birth to a variety of perspectives on politics. Political Islam in its literal meaning is valid and it will always be with us. Islam cannot be banned from politics. Islam is a part of politics. The extremes of secularization where religion is completely banned from the public sphere does not work in the West and it certainly would not work in Southeast Asia.

Islam cannot be banned from public life because the deep religious commitments of people will always influence what they do and what they strive for in politics. It should not be banned because it will always be used as a powerful tool for motivating and mobilising people for positive ends. Political Islam is a challenge from two perspectives. From the perspective of Muslims, political Islam is a challenge to see how Islam can constructively engage with the social problems that we are facing. From the perspective of non-Muslims the same challenge is there. How do we accommodate and negotiate with Muslims about how we should build our public life together?

The Islamic Renaissance in Indonesia is well under way since the 1990s. It has been going on for over ten years and shows no signs of coming to an end. This Muslim Renaissance is not widely reported but is very evident in Indonesia. The outflowing of religious expression in art, literature, intellectual dialogue, published books, architecture, poetry, music, dance and drama, has been just amazing in Indonesia. It always has a political aspect, in how to bring Islam into the struggle for justice, equality and a good society. That is the challenge of political Islam. It is how can Islam become a servant of building a more humane and just society. Most

Muslims, from the extremes of the very liberal, almost secular Muslims, to the very radical and sometimes violent Muslims, share a desire to build a just society. From both those extremes, and everywhere in between, Muslims in Indonesia want peace and justice. They all share the goal of building a good and just society, which in turn constitutes the basis for constructive dialogue.

One of the challenges of political Islam has to do with the crisis in the modern nation-state. Nationalism has been very much under challenge and political Islam has developed an international consciousness, a desire for a solidarity that is international and does not put its faith in the nation-state. We cannot trust the nation-state to solve all the problems of humanity. We need to find vehicles in civil society to build a good society and not see it as simply the responsibility of the state. Political Islam is a part of civil society. Political Islam is a vehicle for expressing and building new ways of living together and seeing the world.

Of course no one agrees with all the things that are proposed in the name of Islam, just as no one agrees with everything that is proposed in the name of liberalism, or Christianity or any other particular ideology. There is too much diversity. However, as long as we live in a plural society, we have to live together whether we like it or not. Pluralism is not primarily a normative concept — that we want to live together in harmony — it is an empirical reality. Many of the concerns that we face are urgent, and they are not any different for Muslims than they are for non-Muslims.

There are a number of fears, there are a number of dangers and there are a number of opportunities that September 11 presents us with. The greatest danger we face as a result of September 11 and the so-called war on terrorism is the danger of fear. However, fear is a very bad counselor. Fear does not bring wisdom. Fear brings polarization. It brings antagonism. At its extreme it brings violence and death. The fears that we face in a world of terrorism and globalization are not just from one side. They affect both Muslims and non-Muslims.

Many Muslims feel that all of the powers of the modern world are arrayed and mobilized to destroy Islam throughout the world. After the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq, there seems to be a sound basis for that belief. The war on terrorism is perceived by many Muslims as a war on Islam throughout the world. It is not only a

threat to Muslims because of increased surveillance, discrimination, bigotry and sometimes even physical attacks, but it is a war on a way of life that includes the massive domination of information in the information age by the powers of global capitalism. The powers that want to reduce everything to economic growth and prosperity and manipulate all of us to live in accordance with the demands of the market place and of consumerism.

As a result of September 11, non-Muslims face the fear of death, of terrorism that could strike at any time. Some fear that Islam threatens to destroy their freedoms as individuals, the possibilities of living their lives according to their own conscience. In Indonesia and Malaysia, non-Muslims face the fear of becoming second class citizens who do not have the same political rights and responsibilities as Muslims. Non-Muslims are often treated with discrimination. And it is fear, fear both from Muslims and from non-Muslims, that destroys the ability for us to negotiate and understand each other.

The challenge of political Islam after the September 11 calamity, is to overcome fear and engage in politics together. Politics is the art of negotiation, of compromise, of reaching understandings, of reaching ways of living together in peace. A very famous phrase states that “politics is war by other means”. That is a rather inadequate definition, but there is some truth to it. Politics is not always war; often it is cooperation to reach common goals. But in so far as politics is war by other means, what needs to be stressed is the phrase, “other means”. When we resort to violence, it means that politics is not being used anymore. When violence is used either by the state or by individuals and communities that are at a point of desperation, it means that politics has come to an end. We are no longer willing to use “other means” to communicate, negotiate and compromise. Fear makes us resort to violence.

A second danger is the danger arising from excessive use of state-based military power to combat terrorism. This is a real danger throughout Southeast Asia because September 11 has been used as an excuse to use military power to crack down on anyone considered to be the enemy of the government. In some cases this is legitimate. There are violent groups that need to be stopped. The power of the state must protect its citizens from violence. The use of the military and the police, to defend citizens from violence is a necessary part of modern life. But violence in the

form of militarism is also a great danger, especially in Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, militarism has become much stronger in the last couple of years and has not demonstrated a capacity for promoting peace and justice. In Malaysia and the Philippines the role of the armed forces in maintaining national security has also been strengthened by September 11. Violence usually begets violence, and both sides claim to be responding to the other side. When politics ends and the state responds with violence, each side claims that they are using violence against the other because the other used violence first. They both say it. It is only a very short step to justify preemptive violence against parties suspected of planning violence. Because of fear, militarism is given free reign to violate civil rights that have taken decades to establish. Basic human rights are easily sacrificed in the name of the war against terrorism.

Another danger that we face in Southeast Asia is American and capitalist domination of the region. Once again the United States has a global agenda. It has not had a global agenda since the end of the Cold War, but suddenly it has a global agenda that can be used to justify imperial power and domination in the region. The U.S. is willing to strengthen militarism in Southeast Asia as long as the regimes in power support the U.S. conception of a war on terrorism.

The events of September 11, 2001 and the challenge of political Islam, are not only negative challenges, they are also positive challenges that contain many opportunities. The challenge of political Islam has prompted deep debate and discussion within Islam. This is the true meaning of *jihad*, struggle: struggle to know who we are and where we are going. That is a very positive development. Secondly, political Islam stimulates questioning and introspection by non-Muslims. Many Americans are asking why they are hated. That is a very good question that can prompt some interesting replies. Non-Muslims in Southeast Asia are also much more aware of their relationship with their Muslim neighbours.

Thirdly political Islam can stimulate negotiations, politics, and a new synthesis. Non-Muslims need Muslims to question and challenge the directions of global capitalism and Western culture, especially in terms of its negative impacts. Muslims need non-Muslims to challenge how their religion has been used and abused

in the interest of the power of certain small groups that use the name of God to legitimize their own, self-serving political agenda of establishing an Islamic state.

Another opportunity is partnership — partnership to build a new and more just world. Ultimately, the issue is not about Islam versus non-Islam, or Islam versus the West, or even religious versus non-religious. The issue is about human beings who have different interests and commitments but who face the same massive challenges and opportunities in a world of increasing inter-dependence and globalization.

A lot has already been said about the *ulama*, but I have a slightly different perspective. Someone asked, “How do we reach the masses to counteract the teaching of the radical *ulama*?” We do not reach the masses. The ones who reach the masses are the *ulama*, including the radical preachers. That need not be interpreted as a threat. In Indonesia, the *kiyayi* are a source of knowledge. Many of them are very wise. We would do well to learn from them, rather than seeing them as a threat. The best counter-replies to the radical *ulama* are frequently and forcefully delivered by more moderate *ulama*.

From yet another perspective, what needs to happen is that the masses need to reach the *ulama*, and the masses need to reach us. The “masses” are not nearly as stupid or ignorant as many people seem to think. Intellectuals are not necessarily the fountain of enlightenment for the common people. There is a tremendous amount of wisdom among the traditional Muslim leaders who are close to their followers. Even when the *ulama* have very conservative views on certain issues, we can learn from them.

Secondly I would like to respond to the questions about liberals only talking to each other but not to the extremists — and what do we do about extremists who do not want to talk to us? How do we know they do not want to talk to us? This is really a problem of fear — their fear of us and our fear of them.

In the *kampong* (village-like neighborhood), where I live in Yogyakarta, some of my neighbors are members of the Laksar Jihad, a radical group known for violent actions against Christians. The Laskar Jihad members have very different views from the majority of Muslims and non-Muslims who do not share their ideology, yet they are willing to talk. If we can overcome fear, there is a lot that can be achieved and it does not have to just be liberals talking to liberals. Even when liberals just talk to

liberals, it may not produce the desired consensus. Even among “liberals”, there is a wide range of perspectives. Perhaps, if we can engage in dialogue without making assumptions, we can learn from one another and reduce the chasm between us.

Is America only serving the interests of money and not the interests of the American people? This is not an easy question to answer with the proper nuance. On the other hand, if we adopt a purely cynical perspective on the United States, we may also miss what is going on. We in Southeast Asia do not understand how deep and profound was the trauma of September 11 on the American people. If one can imagine the downtown of Singapore being bombed and all of the beautiful skyscrapers being wiped out, one might have some idea of the deep trauma of what that attack meant to the American people. Thus, there is a need for mutual understanding. There is also a widely held view that the U.S. government is stimulated by greed for oil in the Middle East and shows a shocking lack of concern for human rights or international law.

Finally, on the statement that, “religion for most of us is in the realm of the personal,” we need to recognize that Islam is multi-dimensional. There is political Islam, Islamic economics, social Islam, Islam in all these different, multi-dimensional areas of life. Actually I believe that is true of all religions and all ideologies. Any strong beliefs that are worth their salt cannot be confined to the realm of the personal. We all — even the most secularist, materialist, non-religious people — have a whole set of assumptions, commitments, values and beliefs that affect all the different areas of our lives. Islam is unique in the detailed instructions for everyday life contained in the Al Qur’an and Sunnah.

Under the ideology of secularism, one may not speak of secular things like economics or politics from a religious perspective. Religion is excluded from public debate. Islam is awakening us to the fact that Muslims are not going to agree that religion is illegitimate in the public sphere. Muslims are going to speak out in all of these areas of life. From my perspective this is a positive development and we all need to become aware of how our religions, our ideologies, our commitments, our principles and also our interests, affect all the different areas of human life — economics, politics, social structure and so on.

Someone asked if it is valid to say there is such a thing as “political Islam”. On the one hand, Islam is one unity and cannot be just divided up into all these different areas. On the other hand, it is possible to examine how the unity of Islam affects all the different areas of human life. In that sense we can speak about political Islam or even Singaporean Islam. Islam as it affects the real world is not the same as normative, ideal Islam. Whether one likes it or not, the way Islam is practiced in Singapore is different from the way it is practiced in Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Malaysia, and so on. This is not a matter of orchids on the *jubbah* (outward appearance, or a light-hearted matter). Rather it is a matter of how an Islamic way of life that is faithful to the Qur’an is expressed within each society: in its politics, economics, culture and so on. Political Islam is a positive challenge because it is asking how Muslims and non-Muslims should live together in the midst of rapidly changing, modern, pluralistic societies.

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