

The Jakarta Post

Major Islamic groups angry over scholar's treatment

National News - November 29, 2007

Muhammad Nafik, The Jakarta Post, Jakarta

The nation's two largest Muslim organizations criticized Wednesday the Religious Affairs Ministry for barring a liberal Egyptian Islamic thinker from addressing an international youth conference in East Java.

"We are concerned with the case. It should not have happened," Muhammadiyah chairman Din Syamsuddin told *The Jakarta Post*.

Last Sunday, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd of Egypt decided to cancel his appearance at an Islamic seminar slated for Tuesday in Malang, East Java, following pressure from the ministry.

The ministry said it had received demands from certain Muslim organizations, believed to be extremist and conservative groups, for the government to ban Abu Zayd from attending.

Abu Zayd was already in Surabaya, East Java, when he was told through an SMS by the ministry to stay away from the forum.

Din, who is a professor of Islamic political thought at Jakarta's State Islamic University, said the "expulsion" of Abu Zayd should have been avoided.

"His visit should have instead been used for *tabayyun* (clarification) with Abu Zayd to find the truth about his Islamic thoughts," Din said.

"We should have discussed this kind of issue in a forum or debate with broad-mindedness and tolerance."

Abu Zayd has widely been accused in Egypt and several other Muslim nations of blasphemy by saying the Koran was a "cultural product".

But Din, who said he has studied Abu Zayd's Islamic works, denied the Egyptian Koranic thinker was straying from Islam.

"Abu Zayd is not like what he has been accused of. I have never met him but I know about him," he said. "I hope the nation will not develop a culture based on suspicion."

Similar concerns were expressed by Nahdlatul Ulama leader Masdar Farid Mas'udi.

“I am not interested in judging whether Abu Zayd’s Islamic thought is right or heretic ... but I think it’s not wise to promote an excessive suspicion of new things considered to be violating the mainstream view,” he said in an SMS to the *Post*.

“My questions are: Why are the officials of this nation so corrupt? Why can our religious leaders easily condemn others? Why are our people so easily emotional and violent?”

On Monday Abu Zayd lashed out at the Indonesian religious ministry for forcing him out of the Malang conference, saying the incident made him worried about the situation of Islam in Indonesia.

He warned Indonesians against any “interference” by the government that would hinder intellectual debates and activities.

Abu Zayd, a leading liberal theologian known for his famous work on Koranic hermeneutic exegeses, lives in exile in the Netherlands, where he fled to escape persecution in Egypt over his views that the Koran was a religious, mythical and literary work.