

Concord Consulting: “Time for the worm to turn”

by Keith Loveard

Analysis

The head of the religious organization Nahdlatul Ulama has spoken out in defense of Indonesia's traditional moderate form of Islam and attacked the government for tolerating an increasingly strident campaign by radicals to hijack the agenda and turn Indonesia into an Islamic state. The debate is certain to represent the dominant theme in public and political debate in Indonesia, with the risk of a takeover by rigid interpretations of religion and the state that could once again threaten the unity of the nation.

Analysis

Time for the worm to turn

An outspoken attack on the government for failing to confront radical pressure and violence by the influential head of the traditional Muslim organization Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) marks a critical juncture in the battle for Indonesia's religious future and the nature of society.

KH Said Aquil Siradj has come out strongly on the side of elements which believe that a failure to combat radicalism could see Indonesia become a nation like Iran, ruled by a coterie of hard-line clerics, rather than the tolerant, moderate society of the past.

Essentially, he has come out fighting in a battle that is likely to consume public and political debate in Indonesia for the next decade, and possibly longer.

His statement also represents a bid to cut through dissension within NU itself that is being driven by forces from both within and outside the organization that seek to emasculate it as a critical element in society and politics.

Siradj was chosen as the head of the general council of NU in March last year, immediately finding himself embroiled in intense maneuvering to split the organization apart.

NU matters. With some 60 million followers, it is the peak organization for a style of Islam that is syncretist and nationalist, rejecting calls for a cleansing of Indonesian Islam coming from puritanical pressure groups.

Politically, support from NU is an essential component of the support base for anyone with ambition. NU also represents the mainstream style of Indonesian Islam for many more millions who are not formally represented in its ranks.

Observers of NU politics state that the aim of those who wish to divide NU is to remove it as an influence on national political life, weakening its ability to defend traditional styles of Islam in the face of the assault by hard-liners.

Siradj spoke out in an op-ed piece in respected national daily *Kompas* on Tuesday, following up with equally strident comments in an interview on MetroTV. He attacked the government for failing to intervene to stop religious radicalism from dominating the agenda, stating that instead the government has used the problem to shield itself from criticism on other, more overtly political grounds.

“To tolerate religious radicalism means the same as to deliberately tolerate repeated abuses of people’s rights. Failure to act represents a passive form of abuse of those rights. It is possible that the people will ask whether radicalism is being intentionally protected,” wrote Siradj.

He defended NU’s support for the nationalist credo of ‘unity in diversity,’ stating that, rather than it being a betrayal of Islam, it represented the vitality of Islam in Indonesia in adapting to cultural realities. The comment represents a doctrinal defense of NU’s basic position against the ‘purist’ position of the hard-liners.

Siradj states that the problem of radicalism has infected the nation from top to bottom. The comment reflects the belief that vested interests, including political parties such as the United Development Party (PPP) and arguably elements of the government itself, have been hijacked by the hard-line movement.

Faced with the attack from Siradj and earlier criticism from Din Syamsuddin, head of Muhammadiyah, the nation’s second largest Muslim organization, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has made a number of statements calling for an end to religious conflict.

The latest statement came on the same day as Siradj’s *Kompas* article, at a meeting on security issues attended by police and military officials from across the country.

He warned that a number of recent incidents represented a serious threat to public security. The incidents marked a heightening of radical activity, terrorism and inter-communal conflict, he said.

On other occasions, Yudhoyono has spoken out demanding better protection for minority groups such as Ahmadiyah, while at the same time accepting stronger restrictions on the group’s rights. It has to be stated, however, that there is little sign that anyone has taken notice of his demands.

As Siradj states, the public is entitled to ask whether radicalism is being intentionally given free rein.

Holland Taylor, head of the LibForAll Foundation, which works to promote a peaceful image of Islam on the international arena, says the NU leader’s statements represent a positive sign in the emergence of NU as a force for stability and an opponent of the posturing of radical groups.

He notes that Siradj’s statement represents a counterattack on attempts by groups such as the PPP to sideline him. The NU leader has clearly placed himself in the camp of KH Mustofa Bisri, a leading NU figure and the most active member of the organization’s governing council, who has long argued that Indonesian Islam is under attack.

It is a blow, says Taylor, against the conniving of figures such as the former NU general chairman, Hashim Muzadi, and others who he alleges are plotting to turn NU to their own devices. Siradj is throwing his weight behind efforts to unify NU, expel the opportunists and make the organization count once more in the national debate on the future of society.

Siradj has also launched a frontal attack on ‘Arab’ interests who for decades have been funding schools and organizations which follow the narrow interpretation of Islam represented by the Saudi Arabian Wahabi model. Taylor acknowledges that Arab funding has been a critical

element in the development of a mass following and the creation of organizations including the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS).

Over time, notes Taylor, the purist movement has developed momentum and has been able to generate funding and mobilize political power in its own right.

Taylor also acknowledges that the forces of plurality and tolerance face an uphill battle in defending Indonesia's traditional Islamic tolerance against the attack from Wahabi Islam. While the adherents to Wahabism have much to gain, NU and other proponents of a more moderate and inclusive form of Islam can see no obvious gains in speaking out, and in fact run the risk of creating enemies in powerful positions in government.

"It is an extreme challenge," he states. "If NU cannot resuscitate itself, it will be critical for the future of the nation."

Conclusions

The debate over Indonesian Islam and the right to govern societal norms will tend to dominate the agenda over the next decade and determine the future of Indonesian society well into the future.

The ultimate danger of a radical Islamization of society by hard-line groups is that non-Muslim areas such as eastern Indonesia and North Sulawesi will once more elect to secede from the state of Indonesia, once more raising the threat of Balkanization.

As part of such a process, there would inevitably be conflict between religious groups in contested areas, raising the threat of a repeat of the ethnic cleansing that took place in Maluku a decade ago and the subsequent reign of terror in Central Sulawesi.

On the regional and international level, an Indonesia dominated by hard-line Islamic clerics and politicians would also rewrite the text book on both bilateral and multilateral relationships.