Indonesian Islam

by Muhammad Abul Fadl, deputy editor, Al-Ahram | 11 June 2015 | Cairo

Some might imagine that geographic remoteness between nations is sufficient evidence that there will be scant political and human contact between their respective peoples, or that great distance militates against seeking to develop said relationships. The falsity of this notion is easily demonstrated by the case of Egypt and Indonesia. Despite the fact that thousands of kilometers lie between them—travel from Cairo to Jakarta takes approximately 20 hours by plane—after you arrive in Jakarta you will not, for a moment, feel as if you’re far from home. This is because Egypt and Indonesia share so much in common: socially, culturally and religiously.

This primary observation swiftly emerged from, and was constantly reinforced by, the numerous dialogues held during my recent visit to Indonesia. Wherever I went, I encountered Egypt: so many Indonesian graduates of al-Azhar University, who have mastered the knowledge of Islam and possess an excellent inheritance from that institution and their time along the banks of the Nile; the heavy street traffic; and a long history of sharing, and concretely addressing, mutual concerns. This latter point is of crucial importance, regarding the development of Egyptian/Indonesian relations during the next phase of world history.

Often, when I met a man who wields real power within Indonesian society—whether one of the ulama, or major figures within Indonesia’s government and civil society—I met a graduate of al-Azhar, who welcomed me with an amazingly dignified sense of hospitality, and eagerly shared his beautiful memories of Egypt. At every meeting, conference and seminar I encountered skilled translators, from Indonesian to Arabic and vice versa, who were also al-Azhar alumni. These experiences made me realize how very mistaken are those who attack this prestigious institution, and fail to understand the vital role it can play in promoting the status of Egypt in Islamic countries, simply by requesting the assistance of its graduates, who are well-disposed to Egypt (and our moderate understanding of Islam).

This issue is of the utmost importance, as I sensed a desire on the part of many prominent Indonesians—constituting elite opinion leaders from many fields—who wish to strengthen both official and unofficial relations with al-Azhar. This should come as no surprise, given that Indonesia has the largest population of Muslims of any country in the world. It also possesses a unique civilization characterized by open-mindedness and respect for others. Throughout history, Indonesian Muslims have been known for their peaceful and tolerant practice of Islam. They regard cultural diversity—both within Indonesia, and throughout the world—as an obvious and beneficial fact of human existence. Over the centuries and millennia, they have constantly evolved mechanisms
for selecting and adopting new foreign values to enrich their national civilization, which is part of, and inseparable from, Islamic civilization as a whole.

The values of human affection are stunningly obvious in social interactions. Most Indonesians believe that noble character and virtue are essential components of religion, necessary both for salvation and to facilitate the good life they seek in this world.

This spiritual worldview both explains and legitimizes the diverse manifestations of religiosity, which vary from one region, and faith tradition, to another. Within Indonesia, the essential values of Islam are deeply embedded within local traditions and cultures. The immense diversity of these cultures and their manifold physical expressions—even though primarily local in nature—are derived from profoundly Islamic values, which underlie and animate the daily lives of most Indonesians. This is proven by the “five basic principles” of the Indonesian nation-state, or “Pancasila”: belief in one supreme God; a just and civilized humanity; national unity; a deliberative democracy; and social justice for all members of society.

This distinct culture has inspired Indonesians to create and widely embrace the term Islam Nusantara (“East Indies, or Malay Archipelago, Islam”). Prof. Dr. Abdul Mon’em Fouad—Dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies for International Students at al-Azhar University—critiqued this term during our recent visit to Indonesia [for meetings co-sponsored by the Nahdlatul Ulama and Kompas, Indonesia’s largest newspaper]. He suggested that Indonesians refer to “Islam in the East Indies,” rather than “East Indies Islam.” Dr. Fouad acknowledged that each nation possesses unique characteristics that distinguish it from others. However, the fundamental “pillars” of Islam remain identical for all nations of the world. Leaders of the Nahdlatul Ulama—the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, with 70 million members—acknowledged this point [without, however, abandoning their use of the term Islam Nusantara, whose rapid, viral diffusion through print, broadcast and internet/social media has severely discomfited Wahhabi and Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated extremists].

It is next to impossible to visit Indonesia without noting the political, intellectual and socio-cultural role of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which was founded in January of 1926 in order to establish and preserve Islamic teachings based on the doctrines of ahlussunnah wal jama’ah (Sunni Islam) among the archipelago’s diverse Muslim communities. The Nahdlatul Ulama has played a key role at pivotal moments in Indonesian history, ever since its birth. The peak of its political ascendancy was reflected in the election of one of its most respected figures to the highest office in the land. H.E. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid (1940 – 2009) served as Indonesia’s president from 1999 – 2001. Today, political parties directly affiliated with the Nahdlatul Ulama hold 20% of the seats in Indonesia’s legislature and have six cabinet ministers who serve the current administration. Indonesia’s Vice President, Jusuf Kalla, is also a member of the Nahdlatul Ulama.

Some people might be confused trying to define the Nahdlatul Ulama. Is it a missionary (da’wa) organization? A political organization? Or both?

In fact, by observing the discourse adopted by many NU leaders, one may conclude that it is both missionary and political. Political engagement, in the broadest sense of the term, often supersedes the “missionary” element. The Nahdlatul Ulama seeks to preserve and widely disseminate the worldview, and actual values, that underlie the “Indonesian model” of religious moderation and tolerance, as an integral component of its political role. The NU now seeks to expand its field of operations and to project strategic influence on a global scale, in response to the shallow religious
discourse propagated by many Islamic groups, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, which has failed in all of its political experiments.

In fact, the Nahdlatul Ulama is currently battling on two fronts. It’s engaged in a war against extremist ideology and violence, which has begun to infiltrate Indonesia and affect many youth. About 700 Indonesian citizens have joined ISIS. Islamist extremism represents the greatest threat to Indonesia’s national unity and the tradition of religious tolerance upon which it was built. Thus, members of the Nahdlatul Ulama are making a tremendous effort to block the expansion of Islamist extremism—simultaneously isolating and discrediting it—by disseminating the inclusive values of “Indonesian Islam” (Islam Nusantara).

The second front is represented by the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Justice and Prosperity Party (PKS). The PKS lacks a mass basis. Yet although the Nahdlatul Ulama possesses a vastly superior moral/spiritual doctrine, buttressed by religious legitimacy and authority—and the tangible strength associated with its mass base—the Muslim Brotherhood has long been supported by external forces that render it more difficult [than ISIS or al-Qaeda] for the Nahdlatul Ulama to fight. Again and again the Nahdlatul Ulama has found itself in direct confrontation with political movements, and projects, that are heavily funded by Muslim—and in particular, certain Arab—nations.

The Nahdlatul Ulama has decided to confront this threat head-on. Opposing radicalism is one of the most difficult challenges facing the NU, as it seeks to maintain the tolerant face of Islam within Indonesia. Most Indonesians regard this “smiling face of Islam” as integral to their national character and a treasured inheritance from previous generations. As such, they refuse to allow the essential values that underlie their national character to be destroyed by Islamist extremism. When the Nahdlatul Ulama was established (in 1926) in order to preserve these values, it swiftly acquired a mass following. Again and again, this has been reflected in the form of enormous political influence as well.

The vital role of the Nahdlatul Ulama stems from its success as a mediator between the Indonesian government and its people. The NU can maintain a harmonious relationship between the government and the people due to its spiritual values, political engagement and mass following, which combine a profound understanding of Islam with respect for the inherent variety of Indonesia’s countless local cultures. That is why the Nahdlatul Ulama has consistently nurtured the values of Islam Nusantara (East Indies Islam) for over a century, and is now poised to export its collective wisdom and experience throughout the world, for the benefit of humanity.

English translation (from Arabic) by Eslam Saad.
كانت هذه الملاحظة الأولية مفتاحاً لكثير من المشاهدات والحوارات خلال زيارتي لهذا البلد، فأينما ذهبت وجدت مصر أمامي، بدءاً من خريجي جامعة الأزهر الذين يحتفظون بميراث ممتاز عن المؤسسة والدولة، وحتى زحام السيارات في الشوارع، ومروراً بالتاريخ الطويل من الهموم المشتركة، الأمر الذي أصبح منزلاً أساسياً لتطوير الروابط في مجالات متعددة خلال المرحلة المقبلة.

لم ألتقي مسئولاً كبيراً أو صغيراً، عالماً أو مواطناً بسيطاً، إلا وجدت أحد خريجي الأزهر يتقدم نحوي بحفاوة بالغة، ويحكي جانباً من ذكرياته الإيجابية في مصر، ولم أحضر ندوة إلا وجدت مترجماً من الإندونيسية للعربية أو العكس من خريجي الأزهر أيضاً، وقتها أدركت حجم الخطأ الذي يرتكبه بعض الزعماء الذين هاجموا دور هذه المؤسسة العريقة، التي يمكن أن تلعب دوراً هاماً في تعزيز مكانة مصر على خريطة الدول الإسلامية، إذا جرت الاستفادة من خريجيها بفكرة جيدة.

أهمية هذه الزاوية، تنبع من الرغبة التى لمستها من مسئولين ونخب في جهات مختلفة، يتوقون إلى توثيق العلاقات الرسمية والشعبية مع الأزهر، خاصة أن إندونيسيا أكبر دولة في العالم تستضيف أغلى مسلمة، وتبت حضارة فريدة من نوعها، في مجالات الانتاج والتصاميم، فضلماً أن إندونيسيا كتبت كأولى أولى رائدة في تاريخهم الطويل مسالون ومساحون، وتطورت، إلى يومنا هذا في القضايا الثقافية والدينية، وتعدها كإحدى الرموز في الحقيقة الإسلامية، بل كانوا (ولا يزالون) يطورون آليات ثقافية لاختيار القيم الجديدة والواقعة نحو إثراء حضاراتنا الإسلامية كذلك.

تبدو قيم المحبة واضحة، حيث يعتقد غالبية الشعب الإندونيسي أن الأخلاق عموماً أساسها إنقاذ البشر من الضلال إلى الحياة السليمة، من هنا كان الاختلاف في مظهر الدين التي تتنوع طبيعتها من دين إلى آخر، وتبتكر القلب الإسلامي في الثقافات والعانيات المحلية، تنمو مطار أو الثقافة حائجة، وإن كانت محلية بالدرجة الأولى، إلا أنها تابعة للقيم الإسلامية في حياة المواطن، ويجلي ذلك واضحاً من خلال المبادرات الخمسة لدولة SILA PANCA لإندونيسيا المسماة بـ "الإسلام الإندونيسي"، الأمر الذي تحفظ عليه بشدة الدكتور عبدالمنعم فؤاد عميد كلية الدراسات الإسلامية باللواء، وطلبت تغيير العنوان إلى "الإسلام في إندونيسيا"، فقد تكون هناك أشياء خاصة يجب أن نتفق على أبعد من الدين، لكن في النهاية الإسلام واحد في جميع دول العالم، وهو ما أقره كبار قادة جمعية (نهضة العلماء) التي تضمنها تحاول للانضمام إلى هيكل إندونيسيا.

وقد أثرت تلك القيم على تاريخها الفكري في تفصيل الصراعات التي اندلعت، حتى كم قيمتهم للحضارة الإسلامية، مع أن الإسلام ليس في إندونيسيا، بل جزء من الحضارة الإسلامية ككل، ومع ذلك، يظل كما يقول "الإسلام في إندونيسيا"، له нельзя للدعاية، يشمل كل الأعمال القائمة على الأخلاق الإسلامية، ويعتبر جزءاً من الفهم للدين الإسلامي، والذي يشير إلى عدم كسور من التراث الإسلامي، وقبل ذلك يوجه إلى صفة جامع مركز.align

1. SILA PANCA
2. الإسلام في إندونيسيا
3. الأيام المتبقية
4. الدراسة العالمية
5. الجبهة الرئيسية
6. الإسلام والثقافة
7. الإسلام والفكر
8. الإسلام والتعليم
9. الإسلام والثقافة
10. الإسلام والفكر

المصادر:
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