

View Point: A respectful Ramadhan in the spirit of Islam Nusantara

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Sunni, Shia, Sufis, Naqsyabandiyah. Add to that the Ahmadis, the Ismailis, plus a host of other Islamic-based ideological schools and dialectical sects and you have a vibrant melange of Ramadhan-related festivities this month. All in praise of God, extolling the virtues of community and family.

Life is beautiful. If only it were so easily true.

Ramadhan is one of the holiest months for Muslims everywhere, whatever their denomination.

It is a month where the virtues of tolerance, humility and solidarity are sought in the hearts of Muslims.

Yet too often Ramadhan has become a calling card to impose self-righteous piety – basically everything that Ramadhan and Islam are not.

While we often see the best examples of what it means to be a Muslim during Ramadhan, unfortunately it is also often a period where the worst examples are exhibited by those whose interpretation of “the religion of place” is to demonize others.

Yet this year, despite minor incidents (which should not lessen the gravity of the offense), Ramadhan in the 1436th year of the Hijra has been relatively heartening.

In a country where symbolism is a convenient political stooge to overlook the substantial core of religious teachings, soothing signs of unity have been more prevalent than in past years.

Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, the two largest Islamic organizations in the country, agreed on the starting date of Ramadhan together, and will most likely do the same for the coming Idul Fitri.

Usually the source of a very heated yet completely unnecessary polemic, the stars seem to be aligning favorably over common ground this year.

In a month where demonstrative piety reigns – with restaurants keeping a low profile as if feeling guilty for doing business, and wine subtly being served in tea cups – Religious Affairs Minister Lukman Hakim Saifuddin turned the conventional rhetoric on its head by saying that Muslims should respect those who are not fasting and that warung (local eateries) should not have to close.

A move appropriately supported by Muhammadiyah and Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) chairman Din Syamsuddin, who said the statement might help delegitimize conservative groups who often “pressure” establishments that open during the fasting period.

“We, the majority, can respect those who do not fast and other religions. Do not force others to fast,” Din said.

Roving mobs in past years often seen attempting to close down entertainment spots or eateries during Ramadhan have also been less pronounced.

As a crossroads of trade, shipping and oceans, Indonesia has historically always been a cultural melting pot where diversity and nonconformity are the rule rather than the exception.

Hence, as a nation, we have embraced and dealt with the challenges of diversity for over a millennium. And successfully deal with it we have. Not by any force of assimilation or preponderance of one culture over another.

Managing those differences has become a daily socio cultural reality in the archipelago, yet sometimes it seems we are fighting somebody else’s battles that have little practical relevance here.

Islam, like many other faiths, has been waging an internal struggle since the days of the first generation of converts. A battle of power between the Prophet Muhammad’s successors, which persisted and eventually expanded to an issue of modern-day identity.

Issues of identity that eventually fuelled hatred and bred fertile ground for extremism.

In the 1980s, the Iranian revolution spurred a new Shia awareness, which was countered by funding and efforts to promote Wahabism around the world.

An indication as to just how far these ideological battles within the Islamic world of the Middle East have impacted events in Indonesia can be seen in recent exposures from WikiLeaks on Saudi Arabian government cables.

Two cables in March and May of 2012 between the Saudi government and its embassy in Jakarta suggested their concern and efforts to help check the spread of the Ahmadiyah in Indonesia.

Another cable indicated potential efforts to influence public opinion against the Ahmadis with alleged payments to Indonesian media, including The Jakarta Post.

That is not to say that the Saudi government helped incite the wave of anti-Ahmadiyah sentiment, but it shows how divided we can be, easily swayed by ideologies and political motives that have no root in Indonesia.

As many Islamic scholars contend, there is no singular notion of Islam. From a socio cultural aspect there are various Islamic spheres of influence, and Indonesia in its own right has its own identity.

Noted Islamic scholar Azyumardi Azra described it as “Islam Nusantara”.

A brand that takes into account the empirical historical reality that Islam in the archipelago has evolved to accommodate the unique cultural precepts that permeate the country and express themselves in various unique forms different to the kind of religious bent that is a source of conflict in other parts of the globe.

In this Ramadhan there is hope that the diverse colors of Islam that make up the mosaic of our archipelago can be celebrated together.

Let the wars of religion remain where those battles were originally fought. Because Islam, of all shapes and sizes, has lived and grown in Indonesia in peace.

An Islam Nusantara that has minimized the significance of our differences and maximized the spirit to live in harmony and peace.

<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/07/05/view-point-a-respectful-ramadhan-spirit-islam-nusantara.html>