Indonesians champion their own way of practising Islam

Islam Nusantara, or Islam of the Archipelago, argues that Indonesia is culturally different from the Middle East and should follow its own, broad version of Islam that emphasises moderation and supports indigenous cultures and the rights of women.

by John McBeth  I  October 28, 2016

JAKARTA // Through mosque sermons and public debate, the Indonesian Muslim organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (Awakening of the Ulama) aims to promote the concept of Islam Indonesia-style.
Islam Nusantara, or Islam of the Archipelago, argues that Indonesia is culturally different from the Middle East and should follow its own, broad version of Islam. It emphasises moderation and supports indigenous cultures and the rights of women. For the 40 million followers of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), it also means clear distance between them and extremism.

“One of the difficulties with the Middle East is that it has too great a history,” the NU secretary general Yahya Cholil Staquf said in a recent interview. “It is difficult for people not to admire the past. The fortune we have here is we are less aligned with that mentality.

“By raising the idea of Islam Nusantara we call upon different Muslim societies everywhere in the world to connect themselves to the actual reality of their social and cultural environment, to maintain a social bond and not to delete it for some alien idea. The Salafist way of thinking is that Muslims must abandon anything that is considered un-Islamic.”

A traditionalist Sunni Muslim organisation, NU was established in 1926 as a response to the rise of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and a surge in Islamic modernism at home.

Muslims make up nearly 88 per cent of Indonesia’s 250 million-strong population, but despite an extremist rebellion in the 1950s, which ended in the execution of its leader, Indonesia has resisted further, peaceful efforts to undergo a conversion to an Islamic state.

Muslim activism was largely suppressed during the 32-year authoritarian rule of former president Suharto, but flowered again from the start of the democratic era in the late 1990s, a period marked by economic hardship.

But the revival – which brought militant leaders such as Abu Bakar Bashir back from exile – also fuelled a renewed outbreak of Islamic-inspired terrorism. Over the next decade, more than 290 people died in a series of bombings in Jakarta and on the tourist island of Bali.

Thousands more were killed in Muluku and Sulawesi, two of the largest islands in eastern Indonesia, where previously peaceful relations between Muslim and minority Christian communities broke down with both sides engaging in horrendous massacres.

The bloodshed was finally brought under control, but the struggle against extremist terrorism goes on, prompting much soul-searching among responsible religious leaders with concerns about the threat to Indonesia’s reputation for tolerance.

Indonesia may be the world’s most populous Muslim country, but its clerics and scholars are often made to feel inferior to their Middle Eastern counterparts because they do not come from the proximity of Islam’s birthplace.
Now, with much of the Middle East torn apart by war and internecine conflict, NU and its fellow urban-based organisation, Muhammadiyah, are effectively saying the legitimacy of Islam as a peaceful religion has been undermined.

In Indonesia, Christians and followers of the Ahmadiyah sect have been the targets of persecution. But the events in the Middle East have also deepened distrust and hatred between hardline Sunni groups and the tiny Shiite minority, which is concentrated in eastern Java, the country’s most populous island.

By mounting more concerted efforts to stem Wahhabism and Salafism, Indonesia’s moderate Muslim leaders hope to instil a new belief in local forms of Islam, which entered the country as early as the 8th century.

Instead of a strict adherence to text, NU believes the key to peaceful coexistence is equally to be found in the unwritten tenets of venerated leaders of the past, including former president Abdurrahman Wahid, an avowed pluralist.

“Islam Nusantara should be embraced as a symbol of peace, diversity, tolerance, and distinctiveness in how Muslims implement their faith in Indonesia,” says Mufizer Mahmud, a conflict resolution specialist and a devout Muslim from Aceh, the only province allowed to practise sharia because of a long history of rebellion against the central government.

“In no way should it interfere with the principles taught in Islam, but Indonesia has always been the most tolerant country in the Muslim world, having adopted the notion that customs can’t be separated from the religion. It is these strong historical factors that have formed and built this nation.”

That is a view shared by Natalia Soebagjo, a member of the international board of Transparency International. “Islam Nusantara reflects the richness of Indonesia’s cultural heritage,” she says, “the heritage of a society which throughout its history has always been open, inclusive and accepting.”

Ms Soebagjo notes that before the arrival of Islam, “by way of trade and not the sword”, Indonesians were exposed to the teachings of Buddhism, Hinduism, indigenous belief systems and philosophies which remain strongly rooted in the country’s ecology.

“Hence, how we interpret and practise the teachings of Mohammed is distinct from how Islam is understood in the Middle East or, for that matter, any other part of the world,” she points out.

For all that, NU has had to fight an uphill battle so far, because of a lack of cooperation from the three sharia-based political parties and the tendency towards conformity among Indonesian Muslims, with far more women wearing the hijab than ever before.

The religious affairs minister, Lukman Saifuddin, may belong to the sharia-based United Development Party (PPP), but he has proved a refreshing change from a long line of
ineffectual predecessors, who neither defended minorities nor faced up to growing radicalism.

Mr Saifuddin bemoans the widely held perception that only Middle East traditions are legitimate. “Yet anywhere in the world, Islamic values are based on local culture,” he says. “In India, Egypt, Sudan and China, for example, Islamic values are all part of the local culture.”

Given the stagnant support for sharia-based parties, which never garner more than 12-13 per cent of the vote, the willingness of legislative bodies to pass laws and regulations that enforce puritanism and restrict personal freedoms point to a failure by politicians to understand the evolving nature of Indonesian society.

In about a third of Indonesia’s 33 provinces, a proliferation of sharia ordinances prevent women from venturing out at night and demand everything from full Islamic dress to mandatory prayer and Quranic study sessions.

The reason why many of the by-laws have been passed is because they received the support of the largest sectarian parties seeking to curry favour with conservative clerics who are often wrongly perceived to have an influence on voters.

That is despite the fact that they contravene the country’s constitution and are against the spirit of Pancasila, the state philosophy which acts as the ideological foundation of Indonesia as a secular state.

Still, even those Indonesians who consider themselves modern and progressive are not always enamoured with Islam Nusantara. “When you start compartmentalising Islam and its followers, you start creating divisions within Islam,” says Fajar Reksoprodjo, a tech-savvy entrepreneur in his late 30s. “I think that’s plain wrong, whether it is based on ethnicity or whatever.”

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