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THE ILLUSION OF AN ISLAMIC STATE

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Chapter III

THE IDEOLOGY AND AGENDA OF EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS IN INDONESIA

Prefatory Remarks

Virtually every Muslim is convinced that the God he or she worships is the All-Knowing, Omnipotent, Loving, Merciful and Compassionate One. Nothing in this world is concealed from His knowledge, or beyond the realm of His love and authority. In brief, God knows and dictates every aspect of His creatures' lives, including humans. However, His omnipotence is tempered by His loving kindness (*al-Rahmân 'alâ al-'arsy-istawâ* [Qur'an 20:5]).¹ Given His omnipotence, Allah—Pure and Exalted is He!—could easily have made all humans members of a single community and religion (Qur'an 11:118), but this is not what He has done. Instead, He allows His creatures to choose whether or not to have faith (Qur'an 18:29), and has even decreed that there may not be any compulsion in religion (Qur'an 2:256).

For the well-being of humanity, God teaches—via His messengers—the distinction between things that are good (*haqq*) and bad (*bâthil*); that which we should do (*wâjib*) and that which is forbidden (*haram*); behavior which humans are well-advised to emulate

1. "The Beneficent One is firmly established on His throne." Within the exegetical traditions of Islam, and especially those with an *isyârî* orientation, this Qur'anic verse is generally considered to indicate that God tempers His omnipotence with loving kindness and mercy. *Al-Rahmân* [one of the ninety-nine "beautiful names of God"] is a term that explicitly means beneficent, merciful and full of loving kindness, while *'arsy* means "the throne," which is universally regarded as a symbol of power. Thus, although God (swt.) is omnipotent, His power is effectively tempered and directed by His loving kindness.

(*sunnah*), and that which is inadvisable (*makruh*); as well as that which people are free to do or not do, as they please (*ibâhah*). These provisions represent a first step for humans to approach God (swt.). Only by growing progressively more intimate with God may one know what He actually desires, and what one must do, moment by moment, to live in accord with His will. In this regard, the Prophet Muhammad—may God bless him and grant him peace—has narrated that God (swt.) decreed, “My servant keeps himself in a state of constant intimacy with Me by performing pleasing acts (*nawâfil*), so that I may love him. And when I love him, I become the ears with which he hears, the eyes with which he sees, the tongue with which he speaks, and the feet with which he walks.”²

When God becomes His devotee’s ears, eyes, tongue and feet, His humble servant’s actions are naturally confined to, and focused upon, that which God Himself wills. In other words, God dictates every aspect of the true devotee’s [i.e., the saint’s] life. To achieve complete self-transcendence and become a genuine servant of God—Pure and Exalted is He!—should be every Muslim’s highest aspiration. Strangely, however, extremist agents—who assume an air of sanctity, and behave as if they know God’s will for all humanity—are consumed by a passion to dictate and control every aspect of human life, in accord with their own partial, rigid and inhumane grasp of religious teachings.

Moderate Sunni Muslims (*ahlussunnah wal-jamâ’ah*) understand the phrase “God dictates every aspect of human existence” in light of the profound religiosity that always and forever exists in the Divine presence (*ihsân*), as described above. A genuine servant of God [i.e., a saint], who has achieved a state of purity without blemish (*mukhlis*), is capable of fulfilling the role of caliph [God’s vice-regent], to enrich the earth and act as a true blessing for all His creatures (*khalîfat Allah fil-ardl*). This ability is not derived from intellectual processes, nor a textual understanding of religion, nor the possession of political power. Rather, it arises from a profound

2. In Arabic, the complete *hadith qudsî* reads: *Lâ yazâl al-‘abd yataqarrabu ilayya bi al-nawâfil hatta uhibbahu. Fa-idza ahabtuhu, kuntu sam’ahu alladzi yasma‘u bihi, kuntu ‘ainâhu allati yubshiru biha, kuntu lisanahu alladzi yanthiqu bihi, kuntu rijlâhu allati yabthisyu biha.*

spiritual awareness, and an expansive heart that is capable of accommodating the presence of God.³ Unlike those who proselytize merely with words, or seek to impose their understanding of Islam upon others by force, the “religious proselytizing” (*da‘wa*) conducted by saints—who have attained an exalted state of awareness, in which good deeds arise spontaneously from pure devotion (*ihsân*) to God—consists of efforts to raise the spiritual awareness of others, so that they, too, may directly experience the illuminating presence of God—Pure and Exalted is He!—and spontaneously bring every aspect of their lives into conformity with Divine will, moment by moment, in a state of true and complete surrender to God (*islâm*) as His humble servants (*muslimîn*).

Those immersed in pure devotion to God (*muhsinîn*) realize that *shari‘a* is not a goal, but a path. A person’s level of spiritual awareness determines whether he or she will choose the path that is true (*haqq*), or misguided (*bâthil*).

The world view and religiosity of extremist groups is completely different from that of moderate Muslims. As a result of their narrow-minded and literal interpretation of Islamic teachings, they focus on the exoteric aspects of religion and ignore its inner, spiritual dimensions.⁴ Symbols, identity and quantity are far more im-

3. Another *hadith qudsî* relates that God (swt.) has proclaimed, “Heaven and earth cannot accommodate Me, but the heart of my faithful servant (easily does).” Perfect faith leaves no room for anything unpraiseworthy, and all that it receives is in accord with the Divine will.

4. In this context it is important to note that extremist movements in general ignore spirituality, and even mistakenly regard it as an innovation (*bid‘ah*) and/or occult practice (*khurafat*) strictly forbidden by Islam. This is a direct result of their obsession with politics and worldly power, in addition to their literal, narrow-minded and limited understanding of the sources of Islamic teaching. For example, one of the Wahhabis’ primary objectives is to attack and destroy Sufism. Global Wahhabization is, in fact, a systematic effort to render Muslims’ religiosity shallow and superficial. The Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, is primarily obsessed with implementing *shari‘a* as positive law, and acquiring political power. As for Hizb ut-Tahrir, its primary objective is to seize power and establish an international caliphate. Of these three transnational Islamist organizations operating in Indonesia, not one is oriented towards—or devotes any effort to—raising Muslims’ spiritual awareness. If they do not demonize and seek to annihilate Sufism, at a minimum they ignore and divorce it from the Muslim community’s religious traditions.

portant to them, than spiritual awareness and the quality of one's religious experience. This explains why they wish to impose their views of Islam upon everyone else, by formalizing and implementing Islamic law, establishing an Islamic state or caliphate, and other related goals the extremists share.

They presume that God will be satisfied if human beings exercise political power, or rule, in His name. They imagine that God—Pure and Exalted is He!—will be pleased, if their version of Islamic law becomes the formal law of the land. In fact, many extremists are subconsciously convinced that God is so pitifully weak that Islam actually needs to be defended—although, of course, this may simply be an excuse for their hidden agenda to seize power. All of this is inextricably linked to [the extremists'] religious and spiritual ignorance. A little bit of knowledge is indeed highly dangerous. Ignorance often causes people to become arrogant and reject the truth,⁵ precisely because they are incapable of comprehending or sensing its reality.⁶ In this context we may grasp the significance of the traditional sayings, “Seek knowledge, even (if you must go) to China!” (*uthlub al-‘ilm walau bi al-shîn*),⁷ and “knowledge is light (*al-*

5. [Translator's note: one who rejects the Truth is by definition an infidel—an obvious implication of this passage that is not lost upon Muslim readers.]

6. Jalaluddin Rumi tells the story of a bat that denies the sun's existence, because he has never witnessed it. Once upon a time, while dozing between wakefulness and sleep, a bat overheard a congregation of birds praising the beauty of the Sun, the Source of Light. The bat arose and tried to find the sun, but because of the blinding brightness of its rays, he closed his eyes and promptly went back to sleep. At midnight, he arose again to search for food and for the sun, which had already set. Not finding it, he sneered and yelled at the birds, “You're all fools and liars! The Sun you praise doesn't exist. It's just an illusion. I've looked everywhere, and there's no sign of it.” Anyone who has ever known a fool realizes that they're generally unaware of their ignorance. Arrogantly convinced that they know more than everyone else, and are always right, fools reject the truth whenever it doesn't coincide with their own views and feelings.

7. This tradition is extremely popular, to the point of being regarded as a *hadith*. It is valuable in this regard to mention another tradition associated with the act of study: “*Man thalab al-‘ilm li arba‘in dakhala al-nâr—au nahwa hadzih al-kalimah—: li-yubâhiya bih al-‘ulama, au liyimâriya bih al-sufahâ’, au liyashrifâ bih wujuh al-nâs ilaih, au liya’khudza bih min al-umarâ’*” (“Those who study for four purposes will enter hell”—or, according to a different version:—“for the sake of feeling pride before the *ulama*, to be able to debate with ordinary people, to attract others’

‘ilm nūr), while ignorance is darkness.” There is nothing one may expect from darkness except deviation and error, and a partial and shallow understanding of reality.⁸

When formalization of religion becomes a goal, along with the nominal embrace of Islam, then formalism and religion become a new god and the primary object of one’s efforts, to the point that there is no longer a path (*shari‘a*) to attain the level of actually knowing, and fulfilling, God’s will (*ridlâ*) through spiritual apprehension. This constitutes a theological error that must be corrected, and indeed firmly opposed if disseminated to other people for the purpose of corrupting their understanding of Islam. Every attempt to formalize religion [through the imposition of Islamic law, and the establishment of an Islamic state, and/or caliphate] has a pure political objective: viz., to seize power. When extremists claim that their actions are based on the fact that God (swt.) dictates every aspect of human life, this constitutes a blatant theological error that must be refuted and rejected. No specific form of government, nor the formalization of religion, is needed to create a good *muslim*. All that is actually required is self-transcendent spiritual awareness, so that one may constantly feel the presence of God (*ihsân*). Thus, extremist claims that they will create an “Islamic society” by implementing *shari‘a* or establishing an Islamic state or caliphate are nothing more than political maneuvers employed to justify the seizure of power.

Extremist ideology, which is totalitarian and centralistic by nature, positions religion as a mere theological reference helpful in achieving worldly goals. In other words, the theological claims asserted by extremists are, in fact, blatant political maneuvers designed to attack and discredit whoever dares to oppose them, or refuses to go along with their agenda, while simultaneously shielding them from attack by their political opponents. Far from “defending Islam,” or implementing its teachings, Muslim extremists

attention, or to acquire government favoritism” (Abu Muhammad ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Abdurrahman ibn al-Fadl ibn Bahram al-Darimi, *Sunan al-Dârimî* (Kairo: Mauqî‘ al-Wizârat al-Auqâf al-Mishriyah, undated.), vol. I, p. 410).

8. The tale “Touching an Elephant in the Dark” explicitly addresses this matter, and is related in the epilogue to this book, written by Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri.

shamelessly transform Islam into a tool for the acquisition of power. Extremist agents are devilishly clever at exploiting Muslims' belief that God (swt.) dictates every aspect of human life, and use this belief as an entry point through which the extremists themselves can dominate and rule the masses. Meanwhile, their true agenda is to acquire unlimited power, by becoming God's vice-regents on earth (*khalifat Allāh fil-ardl*). When in reality, the only people who can truly become God's vice-regents on earth (caliphs) are those who have attained the status of *muhsinīn* (those of pure devotion) and *mukhlīshīn* (those whose purity is without blemish), namely, the beloved friends of God—Pure and Exalted is He!⁹

Most Sufis regard *shari'a* as a path, and not a goal. Hence, they are generally tolerant and inclusive whenever they encounter those traveling along a different path. They realize that anyone who sincerely journeys along a religious path (whatever the faith involved) wishes to approach God, the Origin of all that exists. This awareness of sharing a common goal makes them tolerant of differences. Of course, artificial differences do exist—not only between those of different faiths, but also between the adherents of one and the same religion. Yet substantive commonalities also exist between, and may unite, those who truly seek God. That is why Sufis—religious believers who strongly emphasize the spiritual dimensions of faith—never think about forcing others to travel the same path as they, for no matter what path one takes, the goal remains the same. Sufis are generally convinced that every individual has his or her own path, suitable to his personal tendencies and beliefs, through which to approach God. For Sufis, *shari'a* constitutes not one but *many* paths which, if followed correctly, will lead whoever travels along them to the Source of all that exists, and the Goal of all paths, i.e., to Allah—Pure and Exalted is He!

Similarly, in reverse: if the path (*shari'a*) that should be followed as a tool (to aid in approaching God) is altered and regarded as a goal, travelers along that path will be treading in place, and not reach the final destination. In the midst of their confusion,

9. [Translator's note: the Muslim term for saint is *wali Allah*, which literally means God's representative, but is also understood to mean "beloved friend of God."]

they may seek to invite, or even force, those traveling on different paths to join them in transforming the path into a goal, because they wish to have many companions and not feel left behind in the journey. They do this without ever realizing that they themselves are neither advancing along the path, nor approaching their true and final destination.¹⁰

As can be seen from the following report—which describes extensive field research conducted by LibForAll Foundation—the rhetoric employed by extremist agents, in analyzing the problems that confront Muslims, diminishes and distorts Islam’s primary message, and even its sublime nature, which is meant to be *rahmatan lil-‘alamîn*, or a blessing for all creation. For example, extremists denigrate, and even brand as infidels, anyone who does not share their understanding, beliefs or religion. In addition to overturning and mutilating the sublime majesty of Islam’s teachings—a travesty that must be corrected—their actions also threaten Pancasila, and the unity and security of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI). It is vital to realize that extremist rhetoric, with its devious theological packaging, serves as a prelude to violent actions expressed in various ways.

Totalitarian/Centralistic Ideology and the Politicization of Shari‘a

An ideological approach to *shari‘a* that is totalitarian and centralistic in nature, will inevitably encourage the implementation of laws that are similarly totalitarian and centralistic. Those who advocate such an approach to *shari‘a* maintain that the law should dictate every aspect of a religious community’s life, without exception, and that government should determine and control the precise understanding and application of Islamic law. Thus, according

10. The literal meaning of *shari‘a* is “water path,” or river. Water flows in a spontaneous manner along this path in keeping with its nature, and will continue flowing until it reaches the sea, which is both its source and destination. According to this fundamental understanding of *shari‘a*, all who follow a path correctly will reach their Source and Destination (*al-Awal wal-Akhir*), although not everyone is aware of their Origin and Divinely-intended Goal (for a complete explanation of this principle, see: Muhammad ibn Mukrim ibn Manzbur al-Ifriqi al-Mishri, *Lisân al-‘Arab* (Beirut: Dâr al-Shâdir, undated.), vol. 8, p. 175).