

RSOG SEMINAR

Religion, Politics and Public Policy-A Comparison between Indonesia and Malaysia

with

Dr. M. Syafi'i Anwar

When : 4th December 2014
Where : Razak School of Government
Speakers : Dr. M. Syafi'i Anwar

About the Session

Indonesia and Malaysia are predominantly Muslim countries and the majority of their people are associated with Sunni madzhab (school of thought). In terms of culture and religion, both countries have engaged with the shared tradition and system of belief, which are strongly influenced by Islamic underpinnings. In general, both countries are widely regarded as the place of moderate Islam compared to the Middle East states. Since the last two decades, the religion-political development of these two countries have shown to a certain degree similar characteristics as well as differences. Therefore, it would be useful to critically analyse the policies of building religious harmony in Indonesia and Malaysia. In this respect, this planned presentation will demonstrate and share experiences as well as discuss possible solutions to resolve this crucial and complicated problem.

Summary

The recent political landscape has shown a rise in political Islam and Islamist ideology through the growth of Islamic States (IS). Though this raises valid concerns, it is important to analyse and understand the underlying factors contributing towards this trend. Indonesia and Malaysia are two Muslim-majority countries seen as the place of moderate Islam compared to their Middle Eastern counterparts. However, recent incidents have also shown a tendency towards Islamic conservatism despite both governments' efforts in promoting Islamic moderation. The indigenization of Islam and the transformation of local practices in Malaysia and Indonesia have given the population multiple identities, hence bringing moderation and tolerance. By and large, both countries observe the Shafiite school of thought as well as the ahli Sunnah wa

jamaah (aswaja), indicating those who follow the path (sunnah) of the prophet Muhammad and hold fast to the unity of Muslims.

In explaining religious extremism, the Militant-Exclusive Islam model is used to demonstrate religious exclusivity. It comprises of three important factors which is Religion (Din), Life (Dunya) and State (Dawla). It also puts huge emphasis on 'us' (minna) vs. 'them' (minhum). On the other hand, the Moderate-Inclusive approach puts emphasis on justice (maqasid al-Sharia) and al-adalah, as well as most of the common rights that have often been criticized as lacking in the Muslim world. These include pluralism, tolerance, freedom, human rights and democracy. The Moderate-Inclusive Approach makes moderation or Al-washatiyyah as the core value, hence the promotion of ummatan wasatan or "The Community of the Middle Path". For many moderate Muslims, jihad is a struggle to purify oneself and to establish social justice whereas jihad akbar (jihad against one's own bad influences such as ego) is the biggest form of jihad. The misused interpretation of jihad as qital or killing is to most Muslims not just a global fitna (crisis), but is also corrupting the essence of Islam.

The challenges in combatting religious extremism are largely due to growing religious conservatism. Literal-textual interpretation of the Quran and Islamic teaching has contributed to a sort of justification to the manifestation of violence which hampers mutual dialogue and discourse. According to Dr. M. Syafi'i, the dominant motive for religious extremism can be traced back to spiritual ideology (very radical), emotional (radical) as well as material (less radical). On a structural perspective, the motive is strengthened with a weak state, lack of law enforcements as well as economic turbulence that may magnify the whole problem. Cultural issues like the weakness of Islamic textual civilization, globalization and identity crisis are also important factors that need to be taken into account. This leads to the ideologization of Islam that may have huge repercussions. The network of jihadist on the other hand is comprised of the core group (most radical), operational group (very radical), supporting group (radical) and the sympathizers/ followers (less radical). Many use strong ideological basis, the reproduction of tough ideas and movement as well as modern sophisticated recruitment skills to incite violence and terrorism.

As a multi-religious society, Malaysia and Indonesia have often underlined the importance of peaceful co-existence and interfaith understanding. However, recent terrorist activities as in Indonesia are igniting huge debates about the longevity of religious pluralism in the country. Just as Indonesia, some may argue that Malaysia is also experiencing increasing trends of religious conservatism, as depicted through the recent debates in issues as the use of the word 'Allah' as well as the implementation of hudud. In addition to that, the support for religious conservatism is high especially among the youths.

In addressing this critical and challenging issue, Dr. M. Syafi'i highlighted the need to not only have a comprehensive securitization policy through strict, 'zero tolerance' extremism laws and consistent policies on building religious harmony, but also through the bottom-up approach of public engagement. This can be achieved through the

support of ulama (religious leaders) and interfaith leaders as well as people from grassroots levels and civil society. Utilizing the soft approach strategy of de-radicalization of religious extremists, former jihadist and terrorists as well as involving the civil society will lead to better results than merely the implementation of laws and policies.

Issues Raised

1 The effectiveness of foreign policies of the West such as United States can sometimes be counter-productive; hence the need for better policies that can gain the support of the Muslim world. The United States for instance should support groups based on principles and values such as 'democracy' instead of ones that can only benefit their long term stability and interest

2 The extent of freedom of expressions in a democratic and open society was questioned in relation to the promotion of religious intolerance. Some have argued that a free media and society have somewhat encouraged disrespect for another religion (e.g.: cartoons depicting prophet)

3 The role of Islam in the reigniting and rejuvenating moderation was asked in relation to governance. Whether it be a liberal democracy or a less version of liberalism, the role of Islam should not be overlooked and downplayed

4 The pertinence of ideology in comparison to actions has been a common denominator among many IS movements. This has led to failures that is worth reconsidering. The principle focus should be placed on the promotion of Islamic values in creation of an Islamic society instead of an Islamic state

About the Speaker

Dr. M. Syafi'i is Resident Faculty of Ghazali Syafie Executive Enhancement Program, University Utara Malaysia. He is also Visiting Associate Professor at School of International Studies, at the same university. Prior to his current position, he was Senior Research Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School, Ash Centre for Democratic Governance and Innovation. Dr. M. Syafi'i was also former Executive Director of the International Centre for Islam and Pluralism, and lecturer at Graduate School, Interdisciplinary Studies and Faculty of Social and Political Science, Department of International Relation, State Islamic University, Jakarta, Indonesia. He holds a PhD in History and Political Sociology from the University of Melbourne. He used to be a Columnist with the Jakarta post; a leading English newspaper in Indonesia.

Contact

To get more information on this event, you can contact us via email at programmes@rsog.com.my