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Islam and the State

LSE Ideas

By Dr Munir Majid

Mention Islam and there is suspicion, fear and outrage in many non-Muslim countries particularly in the West, based on misrepresentation, not least by Muslims themselves. It is seen as some dark influence and threat incompatible with democracy and with the modern state system.

It was not surprising, therefore, that there was a large audience at the seminar on 9 November 2010 organised by the Southeast Asia Programme at LSE IDEAS on "Islam and the State: A Southeast Asian Perspective." And it was apposite that the discussion should expand beyond the solid base of the paper "Islam and the State in Indonesia" presented by well-known authority on the subject Dr. Bahtiar Effendy.

Dr. Bahtiar traced the history of the relationship between political Islam and the state in Indonesia since its independence in 1945, and found that in the Indonesian modern state system the secular force always kept the upper hand even if the term "secularism" was not used so as not to antagonise Islamic sensitivities. There was a selective application of shariah laws, a partial accommodation with Islamic predisposition, applicable largely to personal but not criminal law. In the long 30 years of Suharto's rule up to 1998 particularly the influence of Islamic political forces was kept under strict check if not exactly for reason of secular instinct alone: Suharto would not accept any challenge to his primacy, not least from the fountain of Islamic appeal. Even when he was deposed in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis the so very many Islamic parties that sprouted did not find the kind of support that could challenge the established order.

Professor Gilles Kepel, in his commentary, found some similarities in the Indonesian secular order with that in Turkey and Egypt. He held that an authoritarian order seamlessly categorised Islam as a dangerous threat and made it a scapegoat both for its rule and for its deficiencies. On the other hand, the opposition to this order found it efficacious to use the vocabulary of Islam against the established order whether or not truly driven by the call of the religion. Thus Islam gets a bad name in any case.

The containment of the challenge of Islam therefore was not strictly ideological as was not its assertion. So what has it all been about, all the rot we hear about Islam, and all the harm it has ostensibly caused? In countries where Muslims are in a majority, this force called Islamic whatever its basis and whatever it fought for has been kept in check, partly by authoritarian force and partly, as Dr. Bakhtiar contends, by economic satisfaction. Yet in countries where Muslims are in a minority assertion of Islamic right seems to be more strident and effective.

This speaks to a greater democracy in Islamic-minority countries but also to a more intense insistence by minority communities. There is greater abuse both of situation and of religion. In this instance the only weapon of argument can only be better understanding and wider exposure. Certainly a more difficult proposition than the hard fist of authoritarian rule. There is no alternative in the West, if democracy is its credo, to argument about Islam and how it is being misrepresented.

Islam is a tolerant (refer to the Al-Kafirun) and moderate (refer to the Al-Baqarrah) religion and the very often extremist expression is its deviant side, not the other way around. Form and hate are no substitute to substance and love. While there is a place for rituals under fardu 'Ain there is at least equal emphasis in the religion to fardu Kifayah (social obligations, duties and contribution to society). In talking about Islam and the state, while there is obviously need to relate the politics and the history, there cannot be avoided a discussion about Islam itself and how it is being practised.

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