‘Raison d’etre’ of Islam Nusantara

Deny Hamdani, Jakarta | Opinion | Thu, August 06 2015, 6:42 AM

The theme for the 33th congress of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), i.e. Islam Nusantara, has sparked a controversy among Indonesian Muslims. Most critics have expressed worry that the idea will degrade the greatness of Islam into a mere local-scale religion. Some do not find the significance of Islam Nusantara as an alternative Islam that differs from Islam in other parts of the world.

Those who reject and challenge the idea often wonder and ask: Why Islam Nusantara and why is it important to promote it?

On a certain level, Islam Nusantara is promoted to respond to the local and global challenges of Muslim practices, which have been frequently perceived to be strongly biased toward radical and intolerant movements. The current image of Indonesian Islam has been marked by unfriendly and intolerant acts in responding to social and political realities.

Such acts of violence have often been perpetrated by hard-line Muslim groups, such as the Islam Defenders Front (FPI), Jihad Paramilitary Force (Laskar Jihad), Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI), Islamic Reform Movement (Garis) and the like. This deplorable trend has particularly arisen following the fall of the New Order regime.

The growing radicalism and terrorism in the Middle East committed by the Islamic State (IS) movement has also given cause for concern among Indonesian Muslims. The apprehension of NU agents to the possibility of accepting violence-based ideas among Indonesian Muslims is certainly realistic.

There is a lot of evidence showing young Muslims’ support for the violence-based movements.

The involvement of Wildan Mukholad, Abu Muhammad and Salim Mubarok Attamimi in the campaign for IS is a recent example of the susceptibility of young Muslims to the violence-oriented movement.

This trend has encouraged Muslim ulema to find a strategic concept to counter the contemporary development. As NU is against radicalism and terrorism it will continue to campaign for friendly and non-violent Islam and consider terrorism a common enemy. In this case, Islam Nusantara is presented to ward off any ideas that threaten peaceful and moderate Islam in Indonesia.

Since Indonesian Muslim traditions have been attacked by certain groups of Muslims, the Islam Nusantara aims to defend good traditions that do not contravene Islamic teachings. “Islam has been propagated by the approach of respecting local cultures, not eradicating them,” chairman Said Aqil Siradj once remarked.

With the agenda of certain Muslim groups to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia looming and strengthening, NU has shown its commitment to reject the idea.

The concept of Islam Nusantara basically strengthens the idea of Islam and nationalism in the framework of Pancasila, the state ideology.

A reference about Islam Nusantara, which is found in the Islamic thought of Muslim scholars, showed
how Muslims should be nationalist.

The late NU cleric Wahab Hasbullah’s opinion about Islam and nationalism is a good example. He said “nationalism plus basmallah is Islam. A Muslim who implements Islamic teachings must be a nationalist”.

At this point, confirming Islam as friendly, tolerant and patriotic religion is exigent. As Muslim scholar Azyumardi Azra argues, Islam Nusantara is an empirical and practical Islam that has survived through vivid interaction, contextualization, indigenization and vernacularization of universal Islam with Indonesian social, cultural and religious realities.

Azra specified the concept with Nusantara Islamic orthodoxy, which is based on Ash’arite theology, the Shafi’i school of law and Ghazalian Sufism. He also added its characteristics to the principle of wasatiyyah, a justly balanced and tolerant Islam.

This characteristic is basically a practiced Islam among NU people and other groups of traditional-moderate Muslims. The population of these traditional Muslims is approximately more than a half of Indonesian Muslims.

Unlike the Islam practiced in other parts of the world, Indonesian Muslims have successfully produced a variety of cultural practices. The halal bi halal (mutual forgiving) practice, for example, has been a uniquely Indonesian cultural religious event in which religious values are manifested in a tradition that has never been found in the Islam’s origins.

The tradition of tahlil (prayers for the dead) also reflects how Islam Nusantara accommodates the local habit of respecting and praying for beloved deceased people with the combination of a cultural and religious approach. These practices reflect the living Islam with a rich expression and sympathetic perspective, which becomes an important characteristic of Indonesian Islam.

Another significance of promoting Islam Nusantara deals with the project of strengthening the intellect. There have been serious efforts to formulate a body of knowledge based on the indigenous perspective in NU’s institutions. As the idea of indigenization of Islam proposed by Abdurrahman “Gus Dur” Wahid, the project of absorbing Islamic values into local entities needs further attention.

This effort is important not only to develop important ideas of local Muslim scholars, but also to interpret Islamic teachings in accordance with the social and cultural context. In the graduate program of Islam Nusantara in STAINU (the Islamic College of Nahdlatul Ulama), for example, there have been various efforts to develop an alternative discourse to enrich and reconstruct theories in social and religious themes.

As an alternative discourse, not only is Islam Nusantara the practiced Islam, but it is also a paradigm that stemmed from the legacy of Muslim ideas and practices in responding to various problems. That’s why Islam Nusantara is not merely a geographical concept, but is developed as an intellectual framework that has a greater benefit for Muslim civilization.

For this purpose, Islam Nusantara is formulated as the body of knowledge that has an epistemological, axiological and ontological basis to challenge the paradigm of positivism that is perceived by scholars as its limit.

This project is intended to develop self-potency and the resources of Islam Nusantara, which harbors a variety of valuable legacies for intellectual advancement.
Given the notion of academic colonialism and the irrelevance of Euro-American social sciences, the emergence of Islam Nusantara is expected to gradually establish an autonomous perspective of scientific analysis.

Considering the need to respond to global and local challenges, continuing the agenda to defend local traditions and developing intellectual framework, the reason to promote Islam Nusantara in this congress of NU is very sensible and timely.

But discussion on Islam Nusantara should not stop after the NU congress has finished. It should be continued in a more extensive forum, as Islam Nusantara will keep searching for its form and keep transforming in accordance with society need.

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