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Trust as a Factor in the War Against Terror

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(The) issue on terror is orchestrated by the West to clobber Islam as it is impossible to attack [the Muslim world] directly as in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq. The Islamic world is cornered (so as) to be made a common enemy and then dominated particularly by a country which claims itself super power (sic) and world police.

M. Amien Rais

Introduction: From Tranquility to Ferocity?

In Indonesia, Islam has been generally viewed as moderate and tolerant. Many have even suggested that Indonesian Islam represents a different kind of Islam compared to that of the Middle East. This, however, does not mean Indonesian Islam is to be viewed as a religious sect or denomination. Similar to the Islam that came to other parts of the world, Indonesian Islam has its origins in the Islamic heartland where the religion had grown and developed since the early seventh century. Hence, both Indonesian Islam and Middle Eastern Islam share the basic teachings of Prophet Muhammad and regard the Qur'an and Sunnah as the two most important sources of Islam.

In spite of this, like Islam in many other 'converted' regions, Indonesian Islam was a product of the history of proselytisation. In this context, the coming of Islam was very much influenced and shaped by the very nature of its stakeholders — the bearers, the audience, and the socio-cultural, economic and political contexts of the area. Primarily because of this, Islam — through the interpretations of its preachers (da'is) — had to adjust itself to the local circumstances, without giving up its main and basic religious tenets. This was a major factor for Indonesian Islam being different, in its particular or detailed outlook and orientation, from Islam developing elsewhere, including its point of origin.

Historians and students of Indonesian Islam are generally in agreement that religious proselytisation via trading activities had contributed to the peaceful character of the country's acceptance of Islam. Penetration pacifique, as they often described the nature of the spread of Islam in the Nusantara world, was the general assessment of anyone examining the main characteristics of the development of Islam in this area. Of course, this does not mean that trading or commercial activities proper had automatically led to the peaceful acceptance of Islam by the local inhabitants. Instead, the circumstances which Muslim traders had crafted — settling down in the region, mingling with, and marrying the locals, and preaching religion — were the main elements that paved the way for Indonesia's tranquil conversion to Islam.

Tranquillity then perhaps is the distinctive character of Indonesian Islam. Though a certain degree of schism had been in existence, which led to bitter religious-political conflicts between coastal and hinterland Islam, in general, Islam as practiced in the country has been docile, tolerant, and friendly.

This benign standing was shattered by recent events involving a number of Indonesian Muslims who have been perceived to have had links with international and/or regional radical Islamic organisations. Never in the history of the archipelago's Islam has it ever been connected with terror. Following the Bali bomb-blasts of October 2002, which killed nearly 186 innocent people and injured more than 300 others, Indonesian Islam had come to be suspected of having a ferocious side to it. The suspicion grew as more and more violent acts took place in surprising numbers — the bombing...
of the J W Marriott Hotel in early August 2003; the Kuningan bombing in September 2004; the Bali bombing II in 2005; and other terror acts carried out in many other areas in the archipelago.

**Bases of Uneasiness**

In itself, this development startled many Indonesian Muslims. Reading about the history of Islam and its thinkers and activists in the archipelago, one cannot conclude with certainty that the whole issue of terror is a home-grown phenomenon which matches nicely with the character of Indonesian Islam. Obviously, many Indonesians were not aware that some of their fellow Muslims were exposed to international experiences different from their own. Sadly, some of those experiences, especially evolving around the Afghanistan and/or Southern Philippines networks are now known to have been connected with terrorism. While the terrorists’ roles in carrying out horrible terrorist acts must not be trivialised, to understand these acts requires more than what has been revealed and presented by the mass media to the public at large. More importantly, trust and transparency are necessary among the parties involved — the state as well as the international coalition of the willing — to solidify existing efforts to combat terrorism.

Unfortunately, as will be clearer in the following pages, these are factors that are missing in the still unstructured war against terror. This void not only hampers our endeavours to fight terrorism, but also raises unnecessary questions — if not suspicions — with regard to the whole issue of terror. The above statement of Amien Rais, the former chairman of Muhammadiyah and People’s Consultative Assembly of the Republic of Indonesia, issued in a public dialogue on Kontroversi Gerakan Teroris di Indonesia: Mengapa Harus Umat Islam? (The

**Controversy of the Terrorist Movement in Indonesia: Why [it] Must be Muslim Communities?) can be regarded as a reflection of his uneasiness, uncertainty, and perhaps even distrust on the issue of terror. Of course, this does not imply that he condemns such dreadful acts. The fact that contemporary discourse on terrorism, the campaign against terrorism or even the acts of terrorism evolved in such a way only encouraged Amien Rais to react the way he did.

And for reasons not too difficult to understand, Amien Rais is not alone in embracing such a perception. Many Indonesian Muslims, both at the elite as well as grassroots levels, share the same feeling — though perhaps at different degrees of intensity. Syaffi Maarif, Hasyim Muzadi, and Hidayat Nurwahid, to mention only a handful of them, are among those who share comparable unease and a sense of uncertainty with respect to the issue of terror.

In the international context, the bases of unease are by and large cultural and political. The former refers to the cultural perception of the West towards Islam. The horrible acts carried out by Muslims only solidify many Westerners hostile perception of Islam especially after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and more importantly, the dreadful attacks of Sept 11. 2001 on the World Trade Centre. Fawaz Gerges wrote that ‘most Americans’ cultural perception of Arabs/Muslims is that they are dangerous, untrustworthy, undemocratic, barbaric, and primitive. [And] since the early 1980s, events in the Muslim world have become traumatic news in the United States.’

As reiterated by Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies: ‘From its seventh-century breakout from the Arabian peninsula until the late 17th century, Islam advanced at sword point, spreading from the Pyrenees to the Philippines. The tide was checked only at the gates of Vienna. From the decline of the Ottoman Empire until the 1970s, Islam ebbed. Today — fuelled by oil wealth, surplus population, immigration and the rise of
fundamentalism — Islam is resurgent. Instead of wild horsemen, its banners are carried by guerrillas, terrorists, theocrats and tyrants.3

This cultural perception of Islam gained its practical relevance when a number of American religious leaders echoed similar sentiments. Jerry Falwell, for instance, issued a statement on CBS's 60 Minutes saying that ‘Muhammad was a terrorist.’ In a similar vein, Pat Robertson portrayed Muhammad as ‘a robber and a brigand’ and declared Islam to be ‘a monumental scam.’ And Franklin Graham characterised Islam as ‘a very evil and wicked religion.’4 All of these represented the inherent and much deeper perceptions of the West toward Islam. These cultural perceptions, though not always in their consciousness at all times, emerge if windows of opportunity are presented to them. And the event of Sept 11 did play such a role!

In spite of the formal recognition by some Western leaders that Islam is not the target, there is evidence that many Muslims in Europe, North America, and Australia have become victims of such cultural perceptions of Islam. And because of this cultural perception many Westerners seem to see terrorism in a less complex way than the Indonesian Muslims. While the latter have not been reasonably convinced about factors leading to terrorism, the former have been able to pinpoint with relative certainty that ‘Saudi Islam’ is the root-cause of terrorism.5

Though the more authoritative and responsible analysis has yet to be made, it is only logical to assume that a similar cultural perception of the West has also been entertained by many Muslims. Indonesian Muslims are no exception, and the evidence of this cultural sentiment can be found in the way they reacted to America’s war on terror. Instead of seeing the United States’ strike on Afghanistan as a necessary campaign against terrorism, many Indonesian Muslims regarded it as a rampage on the Muslim world. And primarily because of this, they staged demonstrations and even threatened to carry out sweeps to expel US citizens and US allies from Indonesia.6

The (re)proliferation of this cultural perception of Islam has resulted in the emergence of mutual distrust and hatred between Indonesian Muslims and Americans, which made terrorism more difficult to comprehend. Substantively speaking, however, Indonesian Muslims seemed to be less bothered by such commentaries than they are by the possible ramifications of US policies toward the Muslim world. Many believed that the horrible attacks of Sept 11, 2001 ended the 12 years of the post-cold war era. Though what will follow is still less certain, the event has ‘transformed the international security environment and dictated a new “grand strategy” for the United States.’7

In this respect, what makes many Indonesian Muslims worried is not the campaigns against terrorism per se, but how such campaigns are defined and realised. And the unilateral stance held dearly by the Bush administration only strengthened the apprehensions of many Indonesian Muslims against the US viewpoint, thus preventing them from following the US lead and strategy in combating terrorism.

Partly because of this, while sharing the grief of the victims and condemning the attackers of the World Trade Centre, many Indonesian Muslims could not accept the US war on Afghanistan. The war caused casualties comparable to those in the dreadful event of Sept 11. Indonesian Muslims criticised the attacks on Afghanistan quite harshly. Even the soft-spoken Mustofa Bisri, a leader of an Islamic boarding school in Rembang, Central Java, and one of the most notable figures in Nahdlatul Ulama, argued that the attack on Afghanistan was a terror act in itself. In his view, the United States needed to conduct ‘self-introspection or be resisted by powerless people worldwide.’8 Thus, despite her pledge of solidarity with the United States uttered in front of President Bush during her visit to Washington, D.C. in 2001, President
Megawati felt obliged to re-accept her own views for domestic (Muslim) consumption: to dissent from the American willingness to use force and to regret the civilian casualties that ... resulted from it.\textsuperscript{9}

Certainly there are differences between Indonesians and Americans with regard to the way they view terrorism. In addition to differing on how terrorism should be defined and how it should be fought, many Indonesian Muslims also believe that Indonesia should not be viewed as a hotbed for terrorism. Like the United States, Indonesian Islam and Muslims are victims of terror. The Bali bomb-blasts of October 2002, the bombing of the JW Marriott Hotel in early August 2003, the Kuningan bombing of September 2004, the Bali bombing II of 2005, and other terror acts carried out in many other areas in the archipelago and the fact that those who are responsible for such horrible acts claimed to be Muslims are all undeniable proof that Indonesian Islam has been actually hijacked by terrorists. Therefore, it is unfair to relate Indonesian Islam to terrorism.

Unfortunately, many countries — even neighbouring ones — conveniently perceived Indonesia as a country where terrorism has found its natural ground. Partly because of this, Indonesia is continuously denied the right to question, let alone detain, two major players: Umar Al-Faruq and Hambali. These two figures were responsible for many terrorist acts carried out on Indonesian soil, so such denial has contributed to the rise of suspicions with regard to certain aspects — if not the whole — of terrorism. And Al-Faruq’s recent escape from the US-run maximum security prison in Bagram, Afghanistan, only adds mystery to the issue of terror.\textsuperscript{10}

Given the above circumstances — culturally as well as politically, it is understandable that many Muslims still have some reservations with regard to the whole story of terrorism. There have been speculations as to whether the Bali bomb-blasts were actually carried out by individuals such as Imam Samudera and Amrozi both whom were suspected to have had connections with Jemaah Islamiyah.\textsuperscript{11} Much has been said with regard to this organisation, and yet many Indonesian Muslims have little knowledge about it. Because of that, as suggested by Sydney Jones, ‘some still doubt JI’s existence as an organisation.’\textsuperscript{12} This, however, does not mean that Muslims do not want to believe in the existence of Jemaah Islamiyah. It is the cultural and political circumstances described above which seem to prevent the victims — both Indonesians and Americans — from having a unified and shared understanding of terrorism, its organisational networks, and on how to fight it.

In addition to the cultural and political factors that have created uneasiness amongst the Indonesian Muslims with regard to terrorism, there is one domestic factor which is worth putting into the equation: the old practices of the New Order’s intelligence agency in orchestrating and masterminding subversive activities in order to legitimise the use of force so as to domesticate Muslims. The circumstances surrounding Umar Al-Faruq’s involvement in terrorist acts makes one think these horrible acts went beyond Amrozi, Imam Samudera or even Jemaah Islamiyah. As such it is not entirely an illusory stand point as certain apparatus of the New Order government has had a history of engineering activities to (to borrow Amien Rais’s phrase) ‘clobber, corner and then dominate’ Muslims. Even former Indonesian intelligence chief Z.A. Maulanli has shared this concern.\textsuperscript{13}

Some Indonesian Muslims are very aware of such subversive activities as they have been exposed to the political history of Islam in the country. For many years Indonesian Muslims had been at an impasse in terms of their political relationship with the state. The regimes of both Presidents Soekarno and Soeharto regarded political parties based on Islam as potential power contenders capable of undermining the nationalist basis of the state. Primarily because of this, for
more than four decades, both governments worked to contain and domesticate Islamic parties. As a result, not only did leaders and activists of political Islam fail to make Islam the state ideology and religion in 1945 (on the eve of Indonesia's independence) and again in the late 1950s (during the Constituent Assembly debates over Indonesia's constitutional future), but they also found themselves repeatedly labelled minorities or outsiders.

In short, as some have suggested, political Islam has been constitutionally, physically, electorally, bureaucratically, and symbolically defeated. Most distressing, political Islam has frequently been a target of distrust, and suspected of being opposed to the state ideology, Pancasila. For their part, politically-active Muslims have looked with suspicion upon the state. Thus, in spite of the willingness of the state to recognise and assist Muslims in the practice of their religious rituals, the latter believe the state is manoeuvring to dethrone the political significance of Islam and is embracing the idea of a secular polity. In this respect, suffice it to say that mutual suspicion between Islam and the state exists in a country in which the majority of the population is Muslim.14

In the heyday of New Order authoritarianism, organisations comparable to Jemaah Islamiyah, such as Komando Jihad (Jihad Command) and many other radical groups were believed to be state-sponsored organisations. The sole purpose of their existence was to enhance the legitimacy of the state in suppressing political Islam and its activists. Under the shadow of such history, to connect Jemaah Islamiyah with Abdullah Sungkar and/or Abu Bakar Baasyir — proponents of the Islamic state idea of the early 1980s — would only cast further doubt among many Indonesian Muslims, even more so as the trial of Abu Bakar Baasyir could not render a guilty verdict.

In short, Muslim suspicion remains. Although the country has undergone regime change, this does not seem to have any bearing on the suspicions of many Muslims towards terrorism in a democratically-governed Indonesia. On the contrary, certain manoeuvres of the government in its fight against terrorism have cast further doubts. In this regard, many Muslims have failed to understand the fact that Imam Samudera’s ‘testimonial’ was allowed to be published.15

Concluding Remarks: Soft Power Enhancement and Mutual Trust Development

Indonesia is still in too weak a position to establish balanced and less skewed relations with many other countries, let alone with the United States! It is important to note that in spite of the fact that Americans are now entertaining a unilateralist stance in their foreign policy execution, there is no guarantee that they can survive by depending solely on their hard power — economically as well as politically. As Joseph S Nye has suggested, there is so much of the US soft power that needs to be re-explored and redeveloped.16

Furious as it may be, the United States should not lose sight of the significance of its soft power in country-to-country as well as people-to-people relations in its fight against terrorism. Ambassador Ralph Boyce has undertaken certain meaningful measures to develop US soft power. He not only organised regular digital conferences which have enabled Indonesians to communicate with their fellow Americans on certain issues, but he also arranged for many Muslim leaders, including those who administer Islamic traditional educational institutions, to visit the United States to have a first hand experience of the values and traditions of the American people. Similarly, he travelled quite extensively, and met and talked to many Indonesians, so as to know more about Indonesia, including life in Islamic boarding schools.17
All of these measures, however, are difficult to assess at a time when ‘normalcy’ has yet to unfold in Indonesia’s as well as the United States’ socio-economic and political conditions. Given the efforts, however, one can expect that some day, somehow, they will yield something. Putting all the available cards on the table, especially those which are related to the war against terror, will only speed up the development of mutual trust between the Indonesians and Americans.

NOTES:

12. S. Jones, ‘Jemaah Islamiyah: A Short Description.’