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Islam, democracy and good governance

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There are various Islamic countries with a democratic political system, just as there are various Muslim countries which have a dictatorship. The same applies to non-Muslim countries: some are democracies; others are dictatorships, irrespective of the religions prevalent amongst its rulers.

To me this just indicates that Islam and democracy can go very well together, just as the opposite may be the case.

Therefore one might conclude that in practice there is no specific link here with either democracy or dictatorship. The same applies, I think, to whether or not good governance is being applied.

During the Second International Conference of the Training Indonesia's Young Leaders Program the central theme is "Islam, Democracy and Good Governance in Indonesia". It is an important subject, which is to be discussed amongst experts, and therefore should be considered as being entrusted into good hands.

At the same time, however, the Conference should, I think, not be restricted to only being a purely academic affair.

The ideas exchanged during the Conference and its conclusions should preferably also be made of practical use to policy makers, both within the Islamic world as well as in contacts between the so-called Islamic and Western worlds.

I personally do not have to be convinced of the compatibility between Islam and democracy. The existence of democracy in Indonesia, for instance, is enough proof in itself. Nevertheless it can be useful for others to be also scientifically convinced of this issue.

It would be useful if the Conference could also give attention to some recent developments in Indonesia, such as the newly adopted Sharia bylaws in Aceh which would make it possible to stone people to death (rajam). I do not have to be convinced that these bylaws have been democratically adopted in Aceh.

But are they in conformity with good governance and respect for human rights? Are they compatible with human life in the 21st century? And what about the many Indonesians which

are against such regulations? Both within Aceh itself and in the rest of Indonesia? And what about the application of these Sharia regulations on non-Muslims?

Both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars have a common responsibility not only to explain many relevant issues about Islam. They should also make clear what is not related to Islam, but rather to other factors, such as politics, culture and local traditions.

Or, how Islam is compatible with 21st century society and today's modern standards. In doing so, academics can not only help contribute to bridge misunderstandings and correct wrong perceptions. They can also create a better social and political climate which encourages mutual respect and tolerance and prosperity.

Finally: one cannot simply blame those in the West who perceive Islam as a religion which encourages extremist actions and violence. One of the simple reasons is that Islamist extremist actions and statements are often perceived much more clearly than are moderate actions and statements.

This phenomenon is generally only strengthened through the media, which pay more attention to "bad news" than to "good news", if only because they know that this will attract the attention of their readers or viewers much stronger and easier.

In addition to that there are politicians and other people who on purpose try to even further stimulate hostile views of Islam and Muslim countries, simply because this suits their political aims.

Therefore, it is very important for the more moderate Islamic parties to let their voices and views being heard much clearer and louder, so as to help correcting the false image of Islam which prevails among some people and in some parts of the world.

This is part of a lecture delivered (in Indonesian) by Dr. Nikolaos van Dam, Ambassador of the Netherlands, at the 2nd International Conference within the framework of the Training Indonesia's Young Leaders Program, Semarang, on Oct. 6, 2009. The Conference Theme was Islam, Democracy and Good Governance in Indonesia.