

Islam, Democracy and Good Governance in Indonesia

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**Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests and
participants of the conference.**

Islam is a hot topic

Islam is a hot topic both in the West and in the Islamic world
itself. Many people talk about it, but much fewer people are
knowledgeable about it. If you want to organize a seminar on
"Democracy in South East Asia", it may not be that easy to
raise funds for it. But if you add the word "Islam", and make it
about the role of democracy and Islam in South East Asia, the

chances become much better. This is because many people are focused on Islam, sometimes to such an extent that a danger exists that Islam becomes a kind of *fixation*. (A similar *fixation* can sometimes be found with respect to democracy as an ideology). Such a fixation may even add to misunderstandings between Muslims and non-Muslims or between so-called Muslim countries and non-Muslim countries. And sometimes even within Muslim societies themselves. Because by overstressing the factor of Islam a kind of polarization may be stimulated, exactly there where we do not want such a polarization. It is as if people talk themselves into it.

After the 11th of September many people in the West thought they could have a much better understanding of what were the deeper backgrounds of what had happened in New York by reading the Qur'an. I was posted in Berlin at the time, and found out that for that reason the German translation of the meaning of the Qur'an in this period had become one of the most widely sold books in Germany. But could it help its readers much further in understanding what had happened? I personally do not think so. It may of course be very instructive to read the Qur'an, particularly for those who have not done so

yet, but it is a different matter to better understand what is really happening in the world.

To fully understand the Qur'an one needs additional explanation and clarification of the text. This applies also to those who are well versed in Qur'anic Arabic.

Sometimes one needs to read a lot of books in order to discover only afterwards that one would not have had to read them after all. Sometimes things are much easier and simpler to explain.

Some have noted that "*the Islam*" does not really exist, because there are so many forms of Islam. I would argue, rather, that although Islam does have so many varieties and while there is such a rich diversity in Islamic communities, this does not exclude "*the Islam*" from existing. It merely means that there are many different interpretations of it. Certain basic principles of Islam, however, remain the same everywhere. What is different are the regional and cultural diversities amongst Islamic communities, both within Indonesia and elsewhere.

What is Islamic and what not?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is not only important to explain what Islam really is, but it is also important to make a distinction between what, in fact, involves Islam, and what people have incorrectly associated with and attributed to it.

What is the relation between Islam and the actions of people that practice the Muslim faith? In my opinion there are various things which have little or nothing to do with Islam as a religion, but are nevertheless ascribed to it because the persons who are linked to it happen to be Muslims. It should also be taken into account that certain radical actions have been carried out by Muslim individuals or groups “in the name of Islam”, but that those actions are not supported by the majority of Muslims, and are generally disapproved of by them, although sometimes the position of their disapproval is not explicit enough to create the impression that these radical Muslims who carry out these actions do not in any way represent any Muslim majority.

All this has contributed a lot to existing misunderstandings. Nevertheless, 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 or shattering the false image of Islam which prevails among some people and in some parts of the world.

Islam in the translation 21st Century

To come back to the theme of today: 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 this *Second International Conference of the Training Indonesia's Young Leaders Programme* the central theme is "*Islam, Democracy and Good Governance in Indonesia*". It is an important subject, which will 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 Shari'ah 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 as in the rest of Indonesia? And what about the application of these Shari'ah regulations on non-Muslims?

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars have a common responsibility not only to explain many relevant issues about Islam. They should, however, 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.

I wish you a successful conference and I thank you for your attention.

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