

The Modernity of Southeast Asian Islam

Be that as it may, Southeast Asian Islam deserves more attention than it receives today. Its claims for attention are not based purely on number or quantity. There are other more compelling reasons. First: the characteristic uniqueness of Islam in the region was due to its spread and penetration by peaceful means. The 14th century traveller Muhammad Ibn Batutta attested to a high level of cultural tolerance in the process of Islamisation in South East Asia. T. W. Arnold in his *Preaching of Islam* stressed the role traders and Sufis rather than conquerors as prime agents for the spread of the faith. When Muslim conquerors invaded India, temples were pulled down. But in Java, the Wali Songo, the Nine Saints, used puppet shadow play, wayang kulit, with themes from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, as medium of propagation.

Secondly, the region's transition to democracy, this is an attention-grabbing issue. It is the issue of the day. In fact the issue of terrorism should be subsumed under it. There is a big on-going debate among the academia whether Islam is compatible with democracy or not. The Southeast Asian case, primarily Indonesia, has effectively debunked the notion that Islam is inherently anti-democratic. After the financial crisis of 1997 that toppled Suharto's three decades of dictatorship, Indonesia is now the biggest Muslim democracy.

The case of Indonesia is interesting especially in the light of Iraqi path to democracy. Indonesian Muslims did not have to wait for foreign troops or a road map to make a leap into freedom. Here is the most populous Muslim country that has been under the iron hand of Suharto for three decades. Previously the mercurial Sukarno, affectionately called by the Indonesians as the proclaimer of Independence, derailed the nascent Indonesian constitutional democracy into a "guided democracy". This was a euphemism for his own self-styled dictatorship. Now you will find that Indonesians are on their own initiative dash headlong into democracy. However, Indonesia's experiment with elections and constitutional democracy goes back to 1955, preceded by vibrant debates among political and religious leaders. And the late Herbert Feith credited the role of Masyumi, an alliance of Muslim political parties under the leadership of Mohammad Natsir, as the anchor of the republic first experiment on democracy. Similar experiments, under more complex multiracial and multi-religious setting, would have been carried out in Malaysia under the leadership of Burhanuddin al-Helmy if he was not detained by the British and his grand multi-racial coalition was not banned. Nonetheless a relatively free and fair election and nascent democracy was put into practice under the leadership of first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, though short-lived.

From the point of view of the history of ideas in the Islamic world Southeast Asian Islam is uniquely important because of its less traumatic passage towards modernity. This subject has not been sufficiently analyzed. There is again a Middle-Eastern bias in the study of Islamic modernism. Too often it is traced to Afghani's Pan-Islamism, Abduh's reformism and the al-Manar journalism. Modern ideas of reform and renewal of Islam in the rest of the Islamic world are seen as derivative of ideas that first took shape in Cairo. I think this requires revision.

It is far from my intention to belittle the impact of Afghani, Abduh and Rasyid Rida. Their influence is massive in Malaysia and Indonesia. But for the Malay-Indonesia archipelago there is a kind of modernity that precedes the impact of Pan Islamism and Abduh's reformism. And this pre Pan Islamist modernism prepared the way for Malaysians and Indonesians to embrace more readily Abduh's modernism than its reception at its own place of birth. Abduh's project of modernity in the Arab world lost its energy by the second half of last century whilst it is accepted as mainstream Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia. Because of this, one does not find the situation where the Islamists and the secularists are ranged into two separate battle lines as was the case in the Middle East. This is primarily, as noticed by Fazlur Rahman and Ismail al-Faruqi, due to the modernizing influences of new schools pioneered by Muhammadiyah as well as the traditional pesantrens or madrasahs operated the conservative Nahdatul Ulama. One only has to read Deliar Noer's *Modern Muslim Movement in Indonesia 1900 - 1940* to appreciate the role of political parties and grassroots organizations as the greatest instrument of modernization. This modernism of "high Islam" - to borrow the expression of Ernest Gellner from Post Modernism and Religion with some qualification, provided the impetus or the guiding ideas for progress and development. It is "high Islam" in the sense that it is scripturalist, strong emphasis on the Text. But it is Text plus the rationalism of Islamic philosophy and the realism and flexibility provided by Islamic jurisprudence during its golden age.

Because the ulamak themselves are proponents of modernism, rather than its implacable adversaries, as often the case in Arab world, the new generation of Indonesians who received western education through Dutch schools do not harbour antipathy towards Islam and the ulamaks. Take the extreme case of Tan Malaka, considered the founder of Indonesia communism and a member of Communist International. He is perhaps one of the most arresting figures in Southeast Asian communism. He saw Sarekat Islam, the Islamic chamber of commerce and labour union as its strategic partner rather than enemy.

Another case is Indonesian progressive intellectual and historian Soejatmoko. Despite his thoroughly western education, his alienation was with the secular and demagogic nationalism of Sukarno rather than with leaders of Islamic parties. One of my treasured moments of my younger days was an encounter I had with him. In our exchanges he acknowledged the crucial contributions of Islamic leaders like Mohammad Natsir in sowing the seeds of democracy in the republic. For the struggle of these leaders to keep democracy alive in the face of Sukarno's dictatorial tendency I must again refer to the exhaustive study by Herbert Feith, *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia*.

Because of these conditions, there was already a modernity in Southeast Asia before the Middle Eastern modernity reached the scene, and because of this, the much more rigorous and sophisticated Abduh's project of modernity was much more readily embraced by the religious leaders. Invariably, the modern mind created by the Dutch and English educated felt less alienated. Indonesian philosopher, Sutan Takdir Alisyahbana – perhaps the Taha Hussein of Indonesia – did not elicit angry rejection, perhaps because he, being not a scholar of Islam, avoided making controversial remarks on Islam. Some aspects of his thinking were absorbed by the mainstream in Indonesia while the more extreme ones, such as his call for outright westernization during his younger days, were discarded. He himself in his mature age is equally appreciative of the role and contribution of Islam to civilization including the Malay-Indonesian civilization.

This rapid accommodation of Southeast Asian Islam to modernity, or Islam as an instrument of modernity itself, is perhaps the reason why Islamic radicalism is less successful in Southeast Asia. Radicalism seeks to change or overturn society in order to create a utopia even through violence means if necessary. Radicalism became an option if the society is rigid and not responsive to demand for change or if ideas for reform are declared as dangerous, as we observed in Aceh, southern Thailand and southern Philippines. Partly the repression in these countries, though significant is nowhere compared to the brutal atrocities perpetrated by many of the Arab dictators.

In an interesting and challenging theory, Prof. Syed Naquib al-Attas asserted that the seed of modernity in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago was sown even before that arrival of Western imperialism. He rests his theory on extending Henri Pirenne's thesis, the intellectual and spiritual revolution among the Malays brought about through the writings of poet-mystic Hamzah Fansuri in northern Sumatra, and the ensuing debate between his followers and Nuruddin al-Raniri, the sheikh al-Islam of the Perlak State in North Sumatra. According to Prof. al-Attas the debate is unprecedented in the region and it opens a new era of metaphysical speculation in the region and was instrumental in the development of the Malay language and culture.

However, Prof. al-Attas's theory is in fact a counter theory. It was a response to the theory of Ismail Hussein that the father of modern Malay literature was a 19th century writer; Abdullah bin Abdul Qadir Munsyi, perhaps a Malay equivalent of Rifat Tahtawi. I like to see both theories as complementary. While al-Attas's theory has the great merit of emphasizing on the role of intellectual speculation, expanding the Malay mind to great ideas of universal import, it is indifferent to the social and political dimension of modernity. Here comes the seminal contribution of Abdullah bin Abdul Qadir Munshi in *Hikayat Abdullah* and *Hikayat Pelayaran Abdullah*, a nineteenth century traveller and Malay language teacher to Stanford Raffles and Christian missionaries. What was modern in Abdullah Munsyi that makes him a modern self?: It was his consciousness of his self, his social criticism, his observation of slavery and slave trade in Singapore, his criticism of feudalism and his notion of oppression in the Malay States as the source of social backwardness of the Malays.

In the Arab world modernity came as a rupture. Opposition was strong and strongly articulated. There was opposition to Abduh's ideas on reform for example. Partly because modernity did not come in its benign image; it was entangled with the politics of the time. It came at the highest watermark of European imperialism, at the time of when the Ottoman Empire was called “The Sick Man of Europe”, and these powers are grabbing for their own the former possessions of Ottoman Turkey. The early modernist saw the light of knowledge emanating from Europe; they saw the dynamism and the passion for knowledge as the roots of European progress. But later, the Muslim intelligentsia increasingly saw that these powers of knowledge and technology are all subservient to European greed and the desire to dominate the Muslim world. This to their mind was confirmed by the betrayal of the Arabs in Paris during 1919 where the promise of independence from Turkish imperialism was substituted with European imperialism. Awareness of past greatness vis-à-vis impotence in the face of Europe made a deep cut in the modern Arab psyche which is yet to be healed until today.

Southeast Asia is less prone to nostalgia of past greatness, perhaps, there was no such greatness in the past. The potential greatness of Malacca was nipped in the bud by the Portuguese in 1511, resulting in the scattering of the Sultanates. Despite European powers controlling of strategic ports and locations, the Malay Muslim civilization survived and to some extent thrived – transforming, through peaceful means, the Malay world view; intellectual and spiritual revolution and consolidating social and political institutions of the Malay civilization. The Malay civilization never rose to the splendour of the Abbasid, the richness of Cordova or even the Mogul or Safavid. Yet the Islamisation of Malay-Indonesia archipelago is a defining moment in the history of Southeast Asia. Because the Malay world did not have the chance to become great in the past, it does not harbour any nostalgia towards the past. As such it can deal with issues at hand with much more pragmatism and rationality.

Let me conclude by saying that the Southeast Asian Islamic modernism is a process that is continuing. The collective responses to the imperatives of contemporary life are so diverse that it betrays sharp generalizations. In Malaysia, because of the authoritarian nature of the political system, one has to be very critical of what appear in the daily press which is obsessed to exonerate the establishment and to vilify the opposition. The truth it that there is so much diversity of views be it among members of the opposition or the ruling parties vis-à-vis the public role of Islam. The government's articulation of Islam seems to miss, perhaps deliberately, the most crucial issues of the current debate, which is the issue of freedom, good governance and credibility of public institutions. Islam remains relevant if it

avoids the defining issues of the day and takes flight into nostalgia of past greatness? It is certainly a commendable effort to emulate the past civilization of Islam. But the gap between pronouncement and action is left wanting. Islamic civilization was created by sultans and princes vying one another to patronize the best philosophers, scientists, poets and scholars. What we have today is the patronage of mediocrity, anti-intellectualism, tolerance of corruption and substituting merit with political compliance. It is unfortunate that some foreign observers confuse this mediocrity with moderation, perhaps due to the fear of Islamic parties and under the pretext of the war on terror.

For decades the project of modernity in many Muslim countries suffered setbacks because of its complicity with power without legitimacy. The great suspicion of modernity by Muslims is often because it came without liberty; it came with exploitation and brutal oppression first with colonialism, and later with indigenous military or civilian authoritarianism. In the debate between Sukarno the secular nationalist and Natsir the Muslim nationalist over the secularization of Mustafa Kemal Attaturk, it is patently clear that the Muslim leader's rejection of Kemal was not his modernity, but his repressive behaviour. It is strange that a scholar like Samuel Huntington, in his earlier thesis; *The Soldier and the State* became an apologist for military dictatorship because to him it is an agent of modernity. This condescending attitude, that only tough and uncompromising leaders could lead their reluctant people into modernity and complicity with oppressive power is the main reason that delayed freedom and democracy in many Muslim countries. This complex chain of cause and effect may have result in the misleading conclusion that Muslim are resistant to democracy. This is certainly an absurd proposition. No one would prefer slavery to liberty.

Democratization in Indonesia offers new challenges. There is an acute sense for the need for *aggiornamento*, to bring Islam up to date, so to speak, not only to ensure its relevance under liberal democracy, but also to remain a powerful guiding element. "To bring the Qur'an down to earth" — *membumikan al-Qur'an*, is a title of a book by Quraish Shihab, who also wrote a voluminous commentary of the Qur'an. This is very much in the tradition initiated by Hamka, another major figure in 20th century Southeast Asian Islam, whose *Tafsir al-Azhar* is seminal in deepening and consolidating Malay-Indonesian perspective on Islam. There is here a creative fertilization of the great tradition of the Quranic hermeneutics with Malay Indonesian sense of realism and moderation of which Hamka, being a novelist in his younger days, has an acute understanding.

The religious life and self-understanding by Southeast Asian's Muslims of their religion; are shaped by multiple influences and forces as well as the works of commentators and writers who have to respond to the spiritual need of their community. The region has a different social, political and economic dynamics from the Middle East. Dazzled by the various strands of contemporary thought; younger thinkers are attempting to reconcile their faith with more current thought such as post-modernism, deconstruction and feminism. What is interesting is that the responses of the elderly *ulamak* are more sober and measured. This remind us of the response of Muhd Rasjidi, an elderly and respected Islamic scholar, who himself a modernist, to the advocacy of secularization by a young Muslim activist Nurcholish Majid in the 1970s. How the Indonesian Muslims, the largest community of the faith in the world, navigate their faith and practice of Islam under a republic of freedom would be the most interesting drama to observe for decades to come. This is the true and unprecedented drama of faith and freedom for Islam in modern time.