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CHAPTER 2

Political Modernity and Indonesian Islam:

A Manifesto

Azyumardi Azra and Wayne Hudson

Indonesian Islam is essentially a tolerant, moderate, and ‘middle way’ (*ummah wasat*) Islam, and differs significantly from the Islam found in the Middle East. In Indonesia, Islam spread peacefully, and in forms which took account of diverse ethnic, cultural and social realities of the region. Further, the vast majority of Indonesian Muslims belong to moderate mainstream organizations such as the Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah and many other regional organizations throughout the country which support modernity, and democracy and oppose the establishment of an Islamic state.

All of these moderate and mainstream organizations are basically civil society organizations, and they play a crucial role in the development and enhancement of democracy. These organizations are also very active in the dissemination of ideas of democracy, human rights, justice and gender equality that are crucial for a modern society. It is true that there are small and fringe groups of radical Muslims which have captured a lot of media attention such the Islamic Defense Front (FPI), the Jihad Troops (Lasykar Jihad), the Council of Jihad Fighters (Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia), and the Party of Liberation (Hizb al-Tahrir), but these groups, which are mainly led by non-native Muslims, have limited influence in Indonesian as a whole. In these circumstances, there are reasons to believe that political modernity can be realised in Indonesia in a form which is fully compatible with Islam, especially if there is a critical reception of the main concepts of Western political thought.

Firstly, universalism can form the basis for contemporary Islamic approaches to democracy and the generation of a modern civil society. There is ample precedent for a concept of universal human rights in Islamic tradition and no justification for attempts to promote distinctive Islamic human rights. Secondly, Indonesian Islam is compatible with pluralism and actually requires pluralism for its own self-development. The version of pluralism advocated by Isaiah Berlin is particularly relevant to the problems Indonesia faces in reconciling harmony and diversity. Berlinian pluralism is primarily about the plurality of goods, not cultures. It implies a general imperative to promote a diverse range of goods, an imperative which serves as a critical standard for the performance of particular cultures. Such a perspective is relevant to concrete situations in Indonesia and not an alien import from the West.

Thirdly, Indonesian Muslims can accept and embrace personal autonomy as a political ideal of universal application, even though this may involve some modifications of traditional attitudes. Although some argue that the personal autonomy celebrated by Mill and other liberals is not a genuinely universal good, but rather an ideal appropriate to only one kind of culture, this is not the case, and Indonesian Muslims can fully embrace the concept without in any way losing their Islamic identity. Indeed, it is arguable that a high degree of personal autonomy actually makes a Muslim's submission to God more sincere and meaningful.

Fourthly, Indonesian Islam can endorse a strong human rights regime in both traditionally Islamic and less traditional forms. International experience suggests that there may be serious problems associated with attempts to institute *shariah* law, and it is fair to say that an excellent modern way to institute *shariah* has not yet been found. However, here too Indonesian Islam can be flexible. Thus, for example, Indonesian

Muslims can consider a version of *shari'ah* law based on and compatible with universal human rights. Such a regime would obviously need to protect the rights of non-Muslims. It might also be socially radical when compared with any thing found in the contemporary Middle East, but it need not be identified with theocracy or with discrimination in a negative sense, even though many Western political theorists seem not to grasp this. Indonesian Islam is not incipiently theocratic, although there is a danger that less-tolerant voices will be popular with mass audiences. In this context, there is a case for a 'substantification' of politics with reference to the universal values of Islam such as equality (*al-musawa*), justice (*al-adalah*), deliberation (*shura*) and tolerance (*tasamuh*), but not the supposed unity of religion (*al-din*) and the state (*al-dawlah*) demanded by traditionalists.

Fifthly, Indonesian Islam has no objection to the adoption of Western-style law over a wide area and no problem with using Western jurisprudential principles to handle difficult issues in *fiqh*. Once the conflictual character of *fiqh* is acknowledged, there are no obstacles in the way of a genuinely modern Indonesian legal order, even if some conventional features of Islamic tradition may require amendment, including perhaps the traditional ban on Muslims converting from Islam which made absolute sense in the time of the prophet but now is in tension with modern conceptions of freedom of conscience.

Sixthly, there is nothing in Islamic history which compels Indonesian Muslims to uncritically accept historical *ad hoc* arrangements as normative for present and future political and social arrangements. Of course, it is true that historically Muslims, as subjects of the ruler, had duties defined by Islamic concepts rather than positive rights acquired as members of a political community. Nonetheless, the Islamic injunction to

exercise intelligence requires Muslims to develop new arrangements when historical circumstances make them necessary and appropriate.

Seventhly, although Islam obviously has a richer understanding and practice of community than is always found in the West, Indonesian Islam is entirely compatible with a strong form of individualism, even though religious voluntarism may still sometimes be counter-factual in Indonesia, and much remains to be done to protect individual citizens both from the state and from those who demand religious group rights which they do not justify in discursive rational terms. It does not follow that Indonesian Islam has to accept a form of secularism, or that it must uncritically adopt American constructions of the public-private distinction. On the contrary, Indonesian Muslims should contextualise what they borrow from the West in every instance.

Finally, Indonesian Muslims should be resolute in defending and modernising their Islamic heritage, especially in contexts in which it is superior to or at least a major correction to Western political thought. Indonesian Muslims should not tolerate the agnosticism or the nihilism which has shaped much of the Western tradition in political thought. They should be fearless in arguing the superiority of Islam in its commitment to justice as a universal ideal, in its insistence on the transcendence of God, and in its demand that political and social arrangements should actively promote human flourishing. In the twentieth century Indonesian Muslims have to embrace change, along with every one else, but there is no need for them to accept a new neoliberal colonialism. Rather they should be independent rational thinkers, concerned to learn from other peoples and traditions and from Western political thought in particular, in ways which promote the deepest ethical insights of Islam.