Source: *TODAY*, p28-29
Date: 15 February 2017

SOUTH ASIA, MIDDLE EAST HOLD CAUTIONARY TALES FOR THE REGION

S-E Asia's Muslims must guard against championing narrowly-defined identities

FANAR HADDAD

It is easy for us in South-east Asia to think of the tensions between the two main branches of Islam — Sunnis and Shias — as the exotic stuff of the distant and ever-turbulent Middle East: Something for Arabs, maybe Pakistanis too, but surely not for us in this part of the world. After all, South-east Asian Islam is supposedly tolerant, fluid and almost entirely Sunni (Shias constitute less than 1 per cent of the region's Muslims).

Nevertheless, the gulf separating South-east Asian Islam from its Middle-Eastern or South Asian cousins should not be overstated — certainly not to the extent of lulling us into a false sense of security borne of the potentially dangerous belief that things will remain statically benevolent.

We often take our certainties — the certainties that make daily life that much easier to navigate — from religion and religious identities. Many take these to be timeless and unchanging, inherited over countless generations all the way back to antiquity.

Centuries ago, the faithful listened to their Prophets imparting the divine and sagely wisdom that would order society and give the faithful a sense of community. And so it is today — or so we would like to believe. Of course, reality is far messier and societies can shape religion as much as religion can shape society.

Hardline Muslim groups protesting against Jakarta's Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama last year. South-east Asia is no less susceptible than the Middle East to the entrenchment of sectarian identity. PHOTO: REUTERS

What passes as the taken-for-granted "norm" of a particular religion changes across time and space according to context.

Which brings us back to Sunni-Shia relations. I can remember a time in the 1980s when Arabs looked aghast at Sunni-Shia sectarian violence in Pakistan and presumed that such a phenomenon would be impossible to replicate in the Middle East. "We are not like those Pakistanis ... our sects intermarry", and so forth. This truism was seen as the antibody that made Arabs immune to the sort of intra-Muslim sectarian violence that was taking place in Pakistan in the 1980s.

Later on, Iraqis objected to fears that their country could descend into a cycle of intra-Muslim sectarian violence if the regime of Saddam Hussein was toppled ("we are not Yugoslavia" and "we are all brothers" were common refrains).

Later still, Syrians objected to those who predicted that sectarian violence of the Iraqi variety might sweep Syria ("we are not like Iraq").

Alas, the past 14 years have shown the folly of thinking that these certainties cannot be disturbed.

Now, the good news is that it really is unlikely, to the point of near-impossible, for Sunni-Shia violence to take place in South-east Asia on a scale of any significance. How could it when there are so few Shias in the region? The bad news, however, is that, even without sectarian violence, South-east Asia is no less susceptible than the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 29

Source: *TODAY*, p28-29
Date: 15 February 2017

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 28

Middle East (or anywhere else) to the entrenchment of sectarian identity.

Here is where the recent history of the Middle East can be instructive: Syrians and Iraqis were not wrong when they celebrated their societies' resistance to sectarian division; they were wrong only in thinking that nothing could weaken this resistance.

Any number of factors may conspire to make a society more rigid in its self-definition and in the boundaries it sets up around and within itself. In this, South-east Asia is no exception.

A recent workshop at the Middle East Institute (MEI), National University of Singapore, looked at the emergence of Sunni identity as a category of social and political relevance in the 21st century — or, in other words, the transformation of "Muslims" into "Sunni-Muslims".

The common pattern that was found across several case studies stretching from the Middle East to South-east Asia was an increasing rigidity in how Muslims defined themselves and their communities.

Across the world, we are seeing examples of ever-thicker boundaries being erected within the Muslim world between "us" and "them". This has been accompanied by increasingly puritan readings and definitions of Islam.

Similar to the rising xenophobic nationalism we see in Europe, the United States and elsewhere, these processes have invariably involved the vilification of an "other" and, in the case of Muslims, it is often an Islamic "other".

It would seem that it was easier to be a plain old Muslim in previous generations: Today Muslims often feel the need to hyphenate their identity (Sunni-Muslim, Sufi-Muslim, Shia-Muslim and so forth).

Due to the geopolitical contests of the Middle East and the heightened transnational connectivity of the modern world, this hyphenation often mirrors contemporary Middle Eastern upheavals. As such, one very real danger is that South-east Asian Muslims become more susceptible to being anti-Shia as a way of defining their religious identity.

Here is where the Middle East and South-east Asia do not seem all that far apart: The growth of a bigoted, puritan, insecure and aggressive form of Islam that is inherently belligerent towards those who fall beyond a narrowly defined conception of "true Islam". Such readings of Islam are as old as Islam itself, but what is new today is the amplifying effect that geopolitics and transnational connectivity — from social media to budget travel — have had. Hence the baffling spectacle of anti-Shi'ism in a region where Shias form barely 1 per cent of Muslims.

In the case of South-east Asia, the fear is not of Sunni-Shia violence but of the spread of a puritanical sect-centric conception of Islam that revolves around a narrowly defined "Sunni-Islam". Even if this does not lead to violence, it is still a recipe for strained communal relations. Cases in point: The protests against Jakarta's Governor, Mr Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (popularly known as Ahok), anti-Shia activism in Malaysia and Indonesia; even more bizarrely, one of the contributors to the MEI workshop described how the increasingly rigid lines of self-definition and increasing tenor of anti-Shi'ism can be witnessed even among Cambodia's miniscule Muslim population, an estimated 1.6 per cent of the total population.

No one should assume that the force of benevolent traditions will automatically save the day — after all, even what qualifies as "traditional" is liable to shift over time. South-east Asia is not immune to the turbulence of the Middle East — indeed, Islamic State (IS) has its very own Katibah Nusantara, or military unit, in South-east Asia. Nor are some South-east Asian Muslims alone in regressing into intra-Muslim factionalism and puritan introversion.

The attempt to mobilise a narrowly defined Islamic or Sunni-Muslim identity has been witnessed across the Muslim world; those wishing to emulate that here in South-east Asia would do well to look at the consequences suffered by those who preceded them elsewhere.

Fanar Haddad is a senior research fellow at the Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore. He is the author of Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity.