NUS National University of Singapore

Source: *The Straits Times*, pA34
Date: 17 March 2018

The Indonesian Muslim dilemma – how to define Islam

Norshahril Saat

For The Straits Times

Recently, the Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University of Indonesia in Yogyakarta issued a ban on the niqab.

The rector of the university, Professor Yudian Wahyudi, imposed the restriction on the Arabic-style dressing – a full veil which covers all parts of the female body except for the eyes – claiming that it was necessary to foster a "conducive academic climate".

He also maintained that students on campus should observe a moderate form of Islamic dress code. The university also intended to introduce a counselling programme, targeting those who were already putting on the niqab.

The niqab ban was overturned after the university received complaints from civil society groups and legal experts.

Leaders from the conservative Ulama Council of Indonesia were vocal in condemning the ban. They considered it to be a violation of freedom of religion.

The episode reflects the dilemma facing Indonesian Muslims; they are keen to retain their Islamic identity, but how is that to be defined? Related to this is the concern over the impact of external influences, in particular the "Arabisation" of the country's religious discourse. The question is: Is Arabisation really happening in Indonesia? And if it is, does it really matter?

ISLAM NUSANTARA

During its national convention in 2015, Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation Nahdlatul Ulama discussed the importance of promoting Islam Nusantara (Archipelagic Islam) in the country. The theme of that convention was "To strengthen Islam in the Indonesian Archipelago".

The term remains contested and open to interpretation, but it generally means the teaching of Islam that respects the local Indonesian context and culture.

For many observers, the distinction between "Arab" Islam and Islam Nusantara is a simple one. The former is seen as puritanical and exclusivist while the latter is tolerant and respectful of diversity.

The term Islam Nusantara is popularised mainly to counter the threat of radicalism and other Middle East influences deemed incompatible with Indonesian society.

Its promotion comes at a time of anxiety over the threat posed by terrorists, such as those behind the 2016 attacks in Jakarta, and the lure of extremist ideology that has drawn Indonesians to head off to the Middle East to fight for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Yet, it would be wrong to conclude that the individuals who champion Islam Nusantara are automatically moderates, pegged to the opposite end of the spectrum from the ones who favour the Arabised version.

In fact, some of the advocates of Islam Nusantara have been known to reject the rights of religious minorities such as the Shi'ites and Ahmadiyahs.

Some were responsible for mobilising the protest rallies last year aimed at toppling former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, popularly known as Ahok, after he was accused of violating Indonesia's blasphemy laws. He not only lost the Jakarta gubernatorial election but was also convicted and sent to prison despite an apology and calls by human rights activists for the principle of freedom of speech to be respected.

Ironically, the same elites who objected vociferously to the university rector's decision to ban the niqab on the grounds of human rights and freedom of expression saw no contradiction in their agitation against Basuki.

The term Islam Nusantara is popularised mainly to counter the threat of radicalism and other Middle East influences deemed incompatible with Indonesian society. Its promotion comes at a time of anxiety over the threat posed by terrorists, such as those behind the 2016 attacks in Jakarta, and the lure of extremist ideology that has drawn Indonesians to head off to the Middle East to fight for ISIS.

Such behavioural inconsistencies call for a rethink of what the labels "Islam Nusantara" and "Arabised Islam" entail.

RETHINKING ARABISATION

First, one should move beyond the idea that all religious discourse emanating from the Middle East is negative, backward and puritan.

The Muslim community in the Middle East is not homogeneous. There are progressive groups there articulating alternative discourses despite severe pressure from the dominant conservatives.

Second, Islamic discourse originating from South-east Asia may not necessarily be progressive. In the first instance, religious elites there quite often look to conservative elites from the Middle East as their mentors, and they fail to articulate ideas in accordance with the regional context.

Third, there has to be a distinction between an affinity for Arabic culture and an unquestioning attitude towards conservative Arabic discourse.

A person who enjoys wearing Arabic garb or the veil may not necessarily hold conservative views on religion. This fascination with Arabic fashion is not unusual; Western forms of dressing have impacted Indonesians in the past and present, and the young today are also keen on Korean culture.

However, problems arise if Arab culture is treated as synonymous with Islamic piety. I reckon that the groups championing the niqab believe that the mode of dressing will bring them closer to God, and not because it is fashionable. In principle, there should not be a problem with such an association, but given the current security climate, the niqab has come to be a source of tension and a symbol of division within the community.

To sum up, we must respect freedom of expression and the right to belief; people have the right to determine how best to dress but one should be mindful not to allow exclusivist conservative groups to hijack this principle to further their own agenda.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Norshahril Saat is fellow and co-coordinator of the Indonesian Studies Programme at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. He is also adjunct lecturer with the Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore.

Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Permission required for reproduction.