

## MULTICULTURALISM, ISLAM AND ETHNIC'S DIVERSITY: THE CASE IN INDONESIA

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the Islamic concepts of multiculturalism in connection with the fact that humans are created coming from various religious and cultural backgrounds. By taking the Indonesian context as the case study, the author explores how any attempts at implementing the multicultural values in the societies face obstacles and difficulties due to the high number of religious conflicts that occurred in many parts of the country. The author nevertheless presents some evidence that the Islamic propagation concepts developed by the main Indonesian Muslim organisations, that is Nahdhatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, can be used as the basis for the strengthening of multiculturalism in the Indonesian public sphere. In this article, the authors argues that the achievement of the Indonesian founding fathers in uniting hundreds of ethnic groups into one nation cannot be separated from Islamic beliefs they adhere to that promote moderate and inclusive values.

**Keywords:** Multiculturalism; Unity in diversity; Religious violence; Freedom of religion; Pluralistic society

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## INTRODUCTION

This article examines experiences in developing an awareness of multiculturalism based on the Islamic understanding proposed by some Indonesian scholars, in connection to its implementation in modern Indonesia. Ethnic and religious diversities constitute commonplace throughout the world, especially in big countries like Indonesia. The awareness that people come from different backgrounds and cultures is called *multiculturalism*. In this regard, *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines multiculturalism as 'the practice of giving importance to all cultures in a society.'

In the Indonesian context, multiculturalism has been transferred into Bahasa Indonesia and becomes part of its vocabularies: *multikulturalisme*. In the official Indonesian dictionary, *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*, *multikulturalisme* is defined as tendencies on people or certain communities whose habitual attitudes are constructed from more than one culture (*gejala pada seseorang atau suatu masyarakat yang ditandai oleh kebiasaan menggunakan lebih dari satu kebudayaan*). Nevertheless, this term in some ways correlate to the term 'pluralism', and that both terms have been interchangeably used to refer to the same phenomena. The official Indonesian dictionary defines the latter term as the condition of a complex community based on its socio-political systems (*keadaan masyarakat yang majemuk bersangkutan dengan sistem sosial dan politiknya*).

The term *multikulturalisme* has been linguistically used to refer to two categories: descriptively and normatively. As a descriptive term, it commonly refers to the evidence of a diversity in a society or country. As a normative term, *multikulturalisme* refers to ideologies or the government policies that promote a diversity of its institutionalising process. In this regard, this term accommodates a situation in a given society where any individuals tried to express their own identities in socially appropriate ways.

Two different and –seemingly – inconsistent paradigms have developed through different policies and strategies proposed by different regimes. The first paradigm focuses on interactions and communications among the existing different cultures. In this regard, daily contact allows interactions among people whose backgrounds are different in their environment to create multiculturalism. This approach is called inter-culturalism. The second paradigm focuses on a diversity and gives importance to any specific cultural practices. The way of giving importance to any specific cultural characteristics and practices in some ways can protect the uniqueness of local cultures in a given country and also contribute to the creation of a diversity in the global level. Multiculturalism is frequently contrasted with the concepts of assimilation, and that scholars commonly call this cultural phenomenon as a cultural mosaic, rather than a melting-polt phenomenon.

Indonesia is among countries that has a diversity in cultures, languages and ethnic groups. The founding fathers of this country fully realised this fact.

In their attempt at uniting all the ethnic groups in one nation, they have conceptualised a national motto: *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*. In this paper, I argue that the achievement of the Indonesian founding fathers in uniting hundreds of ethnic groups into one nation cannot be separated from Islamic beliefs they adhere to that promote moderate and inclusive values.

### **Islam as the Ideological Basis of Multiculturalism**

Some verses in the Qur'an clearly acknowledge the fact that humans are created as having different backgrounds, and that the God mentions this phenomenon as part of Divine Laws (*sunnatullah*). It means that humans remain diverse in respect to their cultures and religious beliefs. This certainly opens spaces for any individuals to interact and even influence each other. In *Sūrat al-Hujurat* [49]:13, the God says:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (Not that ye may despise (Each other)). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).

The famous Indonesian scholar, Nurcholish Madjid (d. 2005), states that one of the obvious perennial characters is that humans always remain different at all times, indicating that it is impossible to imagine that humans can become one or the same in any aspects of their life. The concept of humans as one only applies to human dignity and values. For this reason, it is forbidden for any individuals or nations to unfairly treat any humans or nations worse or better than any other groups. It is within the God's judgement that humans can be differently treated based of their levels of piety.

Outside human right values that have a direct relationship to the human's dignity, humans are certainly different each other. This fact is certainly a fate for all the creations as indicated in *Sūrat Hūd* [11]: 118-119:

If thy Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind one people: but they will not cease to dispute. Except those on whom thy Lord hath bestowed His Mercy: and for this did He create them: and the Word of thy Lord shall be fulfilled: "I will fill Hell with jinns and men all together.

Responding this verse, Madjid emphasizes that it is important for people to be aware of a diversity and to be respectful of everyone's background at the attempt of generating a harmony among them. In his attempt at understanding this verse, Madjid draws on some conclusions. First, the God does not create humans as only having one cultural background and – even – religious affiliation. Second, humans remain having conflicts each other. Third, those who live in harmony are those who receive God's blessings. Fourth, the God creates

humans to make them being involved in any kinds of life condition and situation. Fifth, the God's words are eternal and impossible to change. Sixth, goodness and happiness are eternal in relation to any differences and conflicts among them.

According to Madjid, it does make sense that the God's sayings on brothership in faith are given on the framework of diversity, not oneness, because human characters and attitudes are designed to be different from one to another. The God's law of nature also applies to believers themselves. It is true that Muslims come from various social and cultural backgrounds. Brotherhood in faith (*ukhuwah Islamiyah*) on the framework of diversity is clearly stated in some verses of the Qur'an. One of them is *Sūrat al-Hujurāt* [49]: 10 as follows:

The Believers are but a single Brotherhood: so make peace and reconciliation between your two (contending) brothers; and fear God, that ye may receive Mercy.

Aside from that, Islam guides people to always work hand in hand in all aspects of human life. This is for the sake of developing civilization and producing a welfare regardless of what people's belief and their religious affiliation are. In this regard, Islam encourages people to keep peace and harmony based on human relationship (*ukhuwah insaniyah*) and diversity by freeing people to choose their beliefs and religions that – in their opinion – are appropriate to them. In this regard, in *Sūrat al-Baqarah* [2]: 256 the God says:

Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects Evil and believes in God hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. And God heareth and knoweth all things.

According to Sukarja, the above verse connects to freedom of choice in converting to Islam or other religions. In the implementation of this verse, it is evident that the Prophet Muhammad did not force Meccans to convert to Islam. But, he just propagated Islam and revelation to the people where the problem of converting is based on their consideration. This is absolutely contradictory to the policy made by the Byzantine King who forced certain religion that became official belief to the people under their colony.

Furthermore, Islam appreciates and recognises the existence of Non-Muslim groups on a condition that they implement their teachings and do good things. In *Sūrat al-Baqarah* [2]: 62, the God says:

Those who believe (in the Qur'an), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians, any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward, with their Lord: on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.

If we refer to the lifetime period of the Prophet Muhammad, especially at the formation of Medina, we see the picture of diversity among the Medina citizens. The Prophet Muhammad gave an example on how a unity can be achieved in a diverse community while at the same time recognising the existence of different groups of people. At that time, the inhabitants of Medina comprised of groups other than Muslims. Some are the indigenous people like Jews and the Arabs who did not convert to Islam.

The Prophet Muhammad faced crucial problems of reconciling and uniting tribes to become one society and to maintain mutual relationship. The Prophet Muhammad began with identifying both religious and social demographic composition through the conduct of census. Through the conducted census, it was informed that there were 10,000 people living in Medina, comprising of 1,500 Muslims, 4,000 Jews and 4,500 Arab Polytheists. Outside Medina, there were other religious group, that is Christians. Each group of these Medinan people comprised of tribes and sub-ethnics. The 7<sup>th</sup>-century Medina Charter clearly mentions groups of people and tribes as a proof that the document recognises the existence of those groups in the city. The Prophet Muhammad also made policies in determining the borderlines of the city. With this, he specified the area of what is called city-state that receives protection as indicated in the charter.

### **Multiculturalism in Indonesia**

As a diverse country, Indonesia comprises of ethnics and social groups that are in many ways distinct from one to another. Aside from that, they do not always have the same interest and orientation. The government currently recognised six official religions. As a matter of fact, the country is home to hundreds of religious practices that have been long established for centuries. Furthermore, Indonesia is famous for having a diversity in language where more than three hundreds languages exist throughout the country as their first languages for the majority of the Indonesian people.

The collective attempt at uniting all the cultural, social, and linguistic differences found in all parts of Indonesia was successfully made almost two decades before the Indonesian independent day. It as in 1928 where representative groups of people declared the unity of the nation as having one land, one nation, and one language. It is worth noting that Bahasa Indonesia was taken as an official language of the country at the time when the Indonesian people were still under the Dutch colony.

### ***Difficulties of the Multiculturalism Project in Indonesia***

Attempts at maintaining a unity in the framework of diversity in Indonesia have been facing many difficulties. During the Old and New Order Regimes, conflicts and disputes over ideology frequently happened in many parts of the

Indonesian provinces. In reconciling any conflicts, the country hold strong commitments to receive *Pancasila*, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, *Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia*, and Undang-Undang 1945. The Indonesian people agree to be bound with those concepts while they are living in the multicultural milieu. With regard to the official language, the use of Bahasa Indonesia and local languages has been interchangeably used in daily conversations.

Various ethnic conflicts, religious radicalism and extremism, gender discrimination are currently factors that make multiculturalism considered a problem. Aside from that, there is an assumption among the public that the implementation of multiculturalism is considered to bring the interests of Westernisation. In the Indonesian social and political context, the 1998 reform period and after witnessed a development of regional autonomy that focused on establishing religious-based regulations, particularly Islamic sharia. The issue of freedom in practicing religious beliefs, especially for minority groups, is increasingly causing conflicts. This is also coupled with some fatwas issued by the Indonesian Council of Ulama which in many ways voices orthodoxy views in responding to ideas related to secularism, pluralism and liberalism without providing clear terminological clarifications. Worse than that, there have been an increasing number of cases in the Indonesian public sphere where progressive scholars or scholars whose thoughts are considered heretical are accused of being apostate and infidel. The adoption of the concept of multiculturalism then becomes an approach or policy that is considered intolerant and – therefore – discriminative. Therefore, its implementation does not provide a sense of justice for marginalised people.

Like many countries, Indonesia also has a record of various conflicts and violence that happen to the religious minorities. In some periods, the number of violence recorded that occurred against the minorities shows a high number. In 2009, for example, SETARA Institute recorded about two hundreds cases of violence related to freedom of religion. To put this in detail, the document reported that there were 57 cases of violence related to religious freedom in West Java. 38 and 23 similar cases were also reported in Jakarta and East Java, respectively. Meanwhile, 10 and 9 cases of religious violence were reported in Banten and West Nusa Tenggara, respectively. Some provinces recorded a few number of cases such as South Sumatera, East Java and Bali that account for 8 cases, while South Sulawesi and East Nusa Tenggara recorded 7 cases. Nevertheless, the number of unreported cases is believed to be higher than the reported ones.

Certain government policies or regime orientations in the process of building national identity to some extent have an impact on the reality of a multicultural nation like Indonesia. Soekarno's – the first Indonesian president – vision on the united Indonesian nation, for example, refers to the legacies of powerful kingdoms such Sriwijaya and Majapahit in some ways



caused the awareness of multicultural phenomena insignificant. Meanwhile, the New Order regime policies pertaining to ethnicity, religion, race, and inter-group relations (*Suku, Agama, Ras & Antar-golongan*, or SARA) have resulted in any discussions around the topics of diversity and multiculturalism under scrutiny. Attempts at promoting multicultural values have been also facing obstacles and difficulties due to the fact that the Indonesian people are suffering inequalities in economic condition and welfare. Moreover, inequalities also occur in the political contestation where certain ethnic groups seemed to monopolise many important positions both in the national and local governments. These inequalities undoubtedly lead to social issues that in turn potentially trigger conflicts among any individuals in the given societies and institutions.

One of the government policies that play a role in strengthening the understanding of multicultural values in societies is the transmigration program. Such programs nevertheless are often carried out without having a comprehensive blueprint so that the process of assimilation or intercultural contacts between those who migrated to the new place and local ethnic groups does not go well. Even, such an assimilation project does not exist at all. These facts caused some conditions where the immigrant communities are not able to mingle with the local inhabitants. Some reported bloody horizontal conflicts were sometimes triggered by the pure criminal cases and that these cases are not related at all to the racial hostility. But, the case becomes more serious and caused more deaths from both conflict groups.

### *Awareness of multiculturalism and the role of education*

Educational institutions play an important role in opening the horizons of multiculturalism for the Indonesian youth generation. In the educational environment, the youth generation can be trained to more easily receive insights and perspectives on the importance of living in diversity. Aside from that, students can be trained to be able to build mutual understanding and relationship although they come from different social and religious backgrounds. Any efforts at building the awareness of multiculturalism in the educational environment are very important because these educated people will later become leaders and determine the future of nation. Religious-social institutions that have been established since the pre-Indonesian independence greatly contributed to the formation of a moderate and accommodative understanding of local and traditional values. These become added value for the sustainability of a pluralistic Indonesian society.

Nahdlatul Ulama's—the biggest representative groups of Indonesian traditionalist Muslims—efforts to propagate Islam for example provide spaces for an understanding of Islam that is accommodative to local values that have been embedded for a long time. This certainly benefits Muslims because Islam

eventually has been widely-spread throughout Indonesia without causing prolonged social and religious conflicts. Islamic values then becomes firmly embedded in society and therefore they are able to provide inspiring insights for the survival of the multicultural Indonesian people.

Muhammadiyah as the biggest representative group of Indonesian modernist Muslims also greatly contributed to promoting multicultural values. One of the methods used to promote these values is through dialogue. One example is the dialogues initiated by the founder of the Muhammadiyah organization, K.H. Ahmad Dahlan (d. 1923), with several Christian figures that in some ways were not actually intended to propagate Islam. Rather, these activities were more emphasized to promote the spirit of inter-faith dialogues. When the Muhammadiyah hospital was firstly established in 1923, the doctors were predominantly young people and Non-Muslims who enthusiastically supported the operation of the hospital. In some cases, they even donated their own medical equipment. The Muhammadiyah schools and universities also accommodated many Non-Muslim students. Among the most obvious ones are the Muhammadiyah educational institutions located in East Nusa Tenggara, one of them being the Muhammadiyah University of Kupang. It is within this university that moderate Islamic values that ultimately contribute to maintaining the unity and integrity of the Indonesian nation.

Abdul Mu'ti & Fajar Riza ul Haq states that the openness of the Muhammadiyah institutions to the adherents of other religions as the above case with Christians also occurs in many parts, especially in the areas where Non-Muslim populations are dominant. The openness of the Muhammadiyah institutions certainly leads to the emergence of sociological co-existence between Muslims and Christians. Their examination reveals that this co-existence has in turn generated a new variant in the groups of people who received and followed Islamic values promoted by the organisation, that is the Muhammadiyah Christian (*Kristen-Muhammadiyah*, or KrisMuha). This group is Christians who are commonly enrolled at the Muhammadiyah educational institutions and understand the institutional platforms. While their population has not reached a significant number compared to the total Christian population in its entirety, the trust built between these different communities in respect to religious affiliation generated a convergence of social identities among the people in the given environment. This can be considered added value in our attempts at promoting multiculturalism in the Indonesian societies.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have highlighted the Islamic concept of multiculturalism and its implementation in the Indonesian context where Muslims are dominant in this pluralistic country. The existence of diversity in this country is an undeniable fact. Many verses of the Qur'an, especially those already mentioned, emphasises



that the diversity of human culture is a certainty. Islam encourages humans to communicate with each other and get to know each other so that a mutual understanding and inter-cultural relationship can be established. Any attempts at forcing a person or group to follow the way other groups live and believe can be considered a violation to the rights for humans to live according to their own ways and cultures.

Indonesia has a high level of diversity in respect to languages, religious beliefs, cultures and ethnic groups. Meanwhile, Islam constitutes a religion with the highest number of adherents in Indonesia that nowadays makes this country as having the biggest Muslim population in the world. The unification of the Indonesian people under the Republic of Indonesia and the survival of various ethnics, tribes and cultures in it indicates that Islamic values adopted by the majority of Indonesian Muslims have strengthened the values of diversity in the country. This is certainly an important point in the ways in which the unity and integrity of the nation can be strengthened. More importantly, such moderate Islamic values need to be maintained so that the reflected Islam in the Indonesian public sphere continues to provide peace and grace for humanity.

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