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Flagship of Scholarship on Indonesian Islam:
In Memoriam Azyumardi Azra (1955-2022)
Flagship of Scholarship on Indonesian Islam: In Memoriam Azyumardi Azra (1955-2022)

Oman Fathurahman

Almost everybody who knew him is convinced that Azyumardi Azra, CBE has left us much too early. This Professor in History at the Faculty of Adab and Humaniora at the State Islamic University Syarif Hidayatullah in Jakarta passed away on 18 September 2022 in a hospital in Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia. Inna lillāhi wa inna ilaihi rāji’un.

Two days earlier, Professor Azra suffered from health issues while traveling by airplane to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He was not on his way for holiday purposes after travel restrictions had finally been lifted after the pandemic. Rather, he was invited by the Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) to speak at an international seminar about “Cosmopolitan Islam, Inspiring Awareness, Exploring the Future” at the Bangi Avenue Convention Centre (BACC), in Kajang, Malaysia.

Azra was widely known as an extremely prolific Indonesian Muslim intellectual who was active in many scholarly forums in Indonesia and in the world at large. Some of his colleagues indeed saw him as a wandering intellectual much like Ibnu Batutah. He devoted most of his time and dedication to the study of Indonesian and Southeast Asian Islam and he was one of the most brilliant Islamic intellectuals of the century in this field.
Azra’s productivity can easily be seen from the dozens of books he left behind that show the wide horizon of his thinking and the number of his writings is staggering. In any given amount of time he would manage to write six to eight books simultaneously and as late as 2020, for instance, he launched eight books under the general theme of Indonesian Islam. Idris Thaha has been instrumental in collecting, compiling, editing and otherwise assisting in the publication of Azra’s works.

Azyumardi Azra not only succeeded in building his reputation in the field of scholarship but also in that of leadership. His contribution to the institutional transformation of Islamic higher education became manifest when he acted as the Rector of the State Institute for Islamic Studies that later became the State Islamic University (UIN) Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (1998-2006). During his tenure, the Faculty of Medicine and various other faculties of general sciences were established and autonomous campus research institutions filled with young teaching staff were also founded.

Prior to that, in 1997, Azyumadi Azra was also entrusted to develop the Center for the Study of Islam and Society or Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat (PPIM) of UIN Jakarta, where he acted as the vice director before the rector of UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta at the time, Prof. Dr. Quraish Shihab, appointed him as the first vice rector of the University responsible for academic matters.

In the national level, Azra acted as expert staff member of vice-president Yusuf Kalla (2014-2019), and he was famous for his active role in offering suggestions and making descriptions and analyses of issues among the Muslim community and social and religious matters, and some months before he passed away, he was chosen as member of the Press Council (Dewan Pers) to represent informal leaders and he was installed as Chair of the Press Council for the period 2022-2025. In the international level, he was the first person outside the Commonwealth to receive the title of Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) from the Queen of the United Kingdom.

Azyumardi Azra died at the age of 67 and he left behind a wife, Ipah Farihah, and four sons and daughters: Raushanikri Usada, Firman El-Amny Azra, Muhammad Subhan Azra, and Emily Sakina Azra.
Scholarly Lineage

Azyumardi Azra belonged to the intellectuals of the “Ciputat School (Mazhab Ciputat)”. His youthful enthusiasm grew in the intellectualism and activism of the IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah campus that, in the 1980s, had become a kind of “training camp” (kawah candradimuka) for Muslim intellectual thinkers in Indonesia.

From 1979 to 1982, Azra was the chairman of Student of the Tarbiyah Faculty and he also was the chairman of the Ciputat branch of the Muslim Students’ Association (Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam (HMI)) (1981-1982). At the same time, he wrote for the journal *Panji Masyarakat*. His leadership strength quickly came to the fore when he was the rector of his alma mater from 1998 to 2006 when the institute transformed into the State Islamic University (UIN) Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta.

Azyumardi's scholarly acumen in the study of Islam in Indonesia and Southeast Asia started in 1986 when he studied for his Master degree at Columbia University in New York. Armed with a Fullbright scholarship, Azra finished his first academic work, his MA thesis, entitled “The Rise and Decline of the Minangkabau Surau: A Traditional Islamic Educational Institution in West Sumatra during the Dutch Colonial Government” in the Department of Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures (1988).

Subsequently, he had the honor to receive a Columbia University President Fellowship to continue his studies at the Department of History at the same university. Azra obtained his second MA and simultaneously the title of Doctor in History. He voraciously absorbed many theories on history with a focus on critical and interpretative history rather than old history. Columbia University is one of the universities of the Ivy League, the league of the most prominent universities in Northeast America and it is the second oldest university in the United States after Harvard. It has its own special features and strengths in historical studies.

Azyumardi Azra’s place in historical studies could no longer be questioned. He studied with William R. Roff, the specialist on the history of Southeast Asia, especially for the period of the end of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From Roff, the author of *The Origin of Malay Nationalism* (1972), Azra learned about the comparative study of Muslim societies and the historical-sociological comparison between
Muslim societies in the world. And, to set himself apart and to build his own reputation, Azra specifically choose the comparison between the intellectual and scholarly traditions between ulama from Arabia and those from the Malay-Indonesian world or Nusantara.

All this is confirmed by his masterpiece The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia (2004), which up to the present is the main reference for scholars in the field. This book stems from his dissertation, which is entitled “The Transmission of Islamic Reformism to Indonesia. ‘Ulama in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries” (1992). Its Indonesia version has been reprinted repeatedly under the title Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah dan Kepulauan Nusantara Abad XVII dan XVIII, which was published for the first time in 1994 by Penerbit Mizan in Bandung after which its publication was continued by Penerbit Kencana (starting in 2013).

The authority of Azra’s academic work can be measured from the fact that in more than two decades, “Jaringan Ulama” became a source that was mostly quoted in the study of Islam in Indonesia. The book contributed greatly to the study of socio-intellectual life in Muslim Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia. Some people even consider the work a “classic” in its field and simultaneously as a “perennial” because of the continued challenges it poses to the study of ulama networks.

This is not an exaggeration when we keep in mind that the work not only studies the roles of Nusantara ulama in the global cosmopolitan networks, but also the dynamics of Islamic thoughts they produced especially in relation to the wider Muslim World. The book shows that these networks exist at various local, national and international levels and that they also cross ancient and contemporary history.

The readers of the book are introduced into the way Indonesian and Southeast Asian Islam was constructed by ulamas whose scholarship and scholarly networks were rooted in the Islamic tradition, reformation and activism as it was in another part of the Muslim world. Azra analysed the contributions of three of these ulamas in the seventeenth century: Nur al-Din al-Raniri (d. 1658), ’Abd al-Ra’uf al-Sinkili (d. 1693), dan Yusuf al-Makassari (d. 1699). Of course, this masterpiece also pays attention to, and analyses, other prominent Nusantara ulamas such as ’Abd al-Samad al-Palimbani (d. about 1789), Arsyad al-Banjari (d. 1812), Dawud al-Patani (d. 1879) and others.
One historian who had a profound influence on Azyumardi Azra is Richard W. Bulliet, the specialist on the early history of Islam and more specifically on the conversion, and the Muslim religious movements in Middle Eastern societies. Bulliet is especially known as the first scholar to apply the method of quantitative history to explain these conversions in Islam as evidenced in his work *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* (1988). He also emphasized the importance of the study of the presence and role of Muslim enclaves outside the Arab world which some researchers had considered marginal in the history and historical study of Islam.

By observing these two prominent teachers we can understand Azyumardi Azra’s character and his historical scholarly inclinations which he incorporated in the study of Indonesian and Southeast Asian Islam. Azra constructed his own incomparable expertise of the modern context and socio-political life of his time in Indonesia by using the historical perspective to observe and understand other fields of scholarship. Unsurprisingly, Azra was very vocal in discussing issues like democracy, gender, extremism, law, and socio-political and other public issues.

On one occasion, Azra said: "Because of my intellectual and scholarly experience, once again, I am increasingly more convinced that I am indeed very fortunate and that it has been a blessing in disguise for me to have delved into history. With a historical perspective, I feel more confident in my observations and understanding of other scientific fields. Perhaps this is where the truth lies of the claim of historians that history is the mother of all knowledge."

In the Indonesian socio-cultural landscape, Azyumardi Azra was a typical example of the successful upward social and intellectual mobility of a remote village boy through education, adherence to scholarly ethics and extraordinary dedication. He was born on 4 March 1955 in a modest family in Pasar Lubuk Alung in West Sumatra. His mother, Ramlah, was a religious teacher who had finished her education in Madrasah Al-Manar and she was the product of the innovators in West Sumatra whose ways of thinking were profoundly influenced by the modernization movement of the Egyptian Rasyid Ridha. His father, Bagindo Azikar, was a carpenter and a copra and nutmeg merchant whose profession had nothing to do with education but who was adamant that his children should go to school.
The Distinction of Indonesian Islam

Endowed with the knowledge gained from the primary sources he had read, Azyumardi Azra was one of a small number of scholars who was self-confident about the special characteristics and the preeminence of Indonesian, or Nusantara, Islam (Islam Nusantara). For his dissertation on the ulama networks he used no less than 28 manuscripts of their works and from the start he was convinced that the members of Nusantara Muslim society were not merely the consumers of Islamic knowledge and scholarship from Arabia but that they were the active producers of outstanding works much like those of scholars from Arabia, Persia and other places in the Muslim world.

Long before it was debated in public in a more partisan and even political way, academically Azra formulated Nusantara Islam as:

Distinctive Islam which is resulted from the interaction, contextualization, indigenization and vernacularization of universal Islam with the social, cultural, and religious context in Indonesia. Nusantara orthodox Islam (Ash’ari theology, jurisprudence of the Syafi’i School and Ghazali’s Sufism) developed into a moderate and tolerant character. Nusantara Islam has a rich Islamic legacy and has become the hope of a global Islamic civil renaissance.

In academic circles, Azra was relatively successful in communicating his definition of Nusantara Islam as a distinct Indonesian Islam. In a number of his articles, including those in popular mass media, he often gave concrete examples of how Indonesian Islam indeed has its own expressions and interpretations of issues in the Islamic world.

In Sufism, for instance, Azra stressed the presence of an increasing reconciliation and rapprochement between Sufi and Shari’ah approaches that were developing in Nusantara. Nusantara Sufi ulama are even actively involved in in public matters and do not stand alone in their Sufi way of looking at things. In his dissertation, Azra elaborated on the thoughts of Yusuf al-Makassari as an example of the neo-Sufi movement in Nusantara. Coming from Gowa in South Sulawesi, al-Makkasari joined the struggle of Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa in Banten in West Java causing him to be exiled by the Dutch initially to Ceylon, Sri Lanka and later to Cape Town in South Africa.

In the context of Islamic political sciences, Azra saw that although it followed various basic principles of the ahlusunnah wal jamaah, Indonesian classical political sciences did not adhere to Sunni concepts.
and principles. For instance, in Indonesia no distinction is made between *dar al-islam*, *dar al-harb* and *dar al-kufr*.

In classical Islam in Fiqh Siyasah this distinction was customary under many dynasties such as the Umayyah and the Abbasiyah. The kings and sultans in the Nusantara Archipelago did not apply this and thus there was no practices of the use of the concept of *dzimmi* (protected non-Muslims). In the Islamic sultanates in Nusantara, non-Muslims were treated in the same way as Muslims and they were not required to pay the *jizyah* (tax per person).

Azra often emphasized that classical Indonesian Fiqh Siyasah allowed women to be at the apex of the power system. Women, like Sultanah Nahrasiyah was head of state in the Sultanate of Samudra Pasai (1406-27), much like Sultanah Syah Barisah Alam in the Kingdom of Perlak in the Malay Peninsula. And even more spectacular, four consecutive sultanahs ruled the Sultanate of Aceh from 1641 to 1699. The golden era of the Islamic intellectual tradition in Aceh was even under queen Sri Ratu Tajul Alam Sultanah Safiyatuddin Syah (1641-1675).

This is the story of Indonesia’s Islamic socio-intellectual history that has its own distinct merits which are an indivisible part of every aspect of Azyumardi Azra’s way of thinking. This is not only inherent in his writings but also in his behavior, his academic activities and even in his meritorious work of founding, leading as editor-in-chief and leaving behind Studia Islamika which, until now, is consistent with the scope of his interdisciplinary studies on Indonesian Islam in particular and Southeast Asian Islam in general.

Now, Azyumardi Azra is no longer among us and his academic and humanitarian tasks have been completed. Rest in peace, Pak Azra! We are convinced that your legacy in historical and socio-intellectual studies on Indonesian and Southeast Asian Islam based on reliable primary sources will not end here. There are still many things our predecessors have done that need more exploration and completion and even need to be criticized. *Selamat berpulang, Pak Azra.*
Guidelines

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The journal invites scholars and experts working in all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences pertaining to Islam or Muslim societies. Articles should be original, research-based, unpublished and not under review for possible publication in other journals. All submitted papers are subject to review of the editors, editorial board, and blind reviewers. Submissions that violate our guidelines on formatting or length will be rejected without review.

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