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ISLAM, STATE AND SOCIETY IN DEMOCRATIZING INDONESIA:
AN HISTORICAL REFLECTION

Taufik Abdullah

REFLECTIONS ON THE MYSTICISM
OF SHAMS AL-DĪN AL-SAMATRA'Ī (1550?–1630)

A.H. Johns

SYMBOLIC AND IDEOLOGICAL CONTESTATION
OVER HUMANITARIAN EMBLEMS:
THE RED CRESCENT IN ISLAMIZING INDONESIA

Hilman Latief

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Document

Promoting Multiculturalism
in Southeast Asia: Is There a Lesson
We Can Learn from Canada's Experience?

Dina Afrianty

With the support from the Embassy of Canada, the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) and the Graduate School (SPs) Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University (UN) Jakarta has successfully convened an international conference on "Promoting Multiculturalism in Southeast Asia: Is there a lesson we can learn from Canada's Experience" in Jakarta on March 23-24, 2011.

This conference was organized with the idea to discuss some crucial issues that challenge global society, in particular, state-government in facing an increasingly globalised world. Society becomes more diverse and complex as a result of infiltration of other cultures and people movements. This situation poses serious challenges for state-government and civil society to ensure that complex social cohesion will not lead to tension and conflict both among members of the society and between the state and the society.

Countries in Southeast Asia are not excluded from this development. With hundreds of ethnic groups who believe in different religious beliefs, state governments are challenged to create unity and harmony. However, problems of nation building in countries in Southeast Asia become more complex with the history of colonization and decolonization. The movement of ideas and cultural norms has posed additional challenges in building social cohesion among members of

the community. Government and public officials have the responsibility to ensure that societies with different backgrounds embrace the sense of unity so that everyone shares their prides and attachments to their community and the nation.

In the context of Southeast Asia, there have been cases where the state uses the ethnic or racial elements to win its political interests. The experience of Indonesia under the New Order government, for example, showed how the state used Islam as the predominant religion to win their political interests. Same thing happened, for example, in Thailand and the Philippines where religions and ethnicities were also used for political interests by the state.

This observation has led us to see how other countries respond to the above challenge. In particular, we consider the experience of countries in the West as something that Southeast Asian governments can look at. By looking at the experience of other countries does not mean that we are trying to duplicate policies that have been implementing and introduce it in Southeast Asian countries. We acknowledge that each society has different historical, cultural and social backgrounds, which is unique to each one of it.

One particular country that we consider important to be looked at is Canada. In recent years, Canada has often been associated as one of the most important models for a modern state to successfully promote tolerance and equality in the community. In the literature of sociology, education, and political science, Canada has been applauded as the first immigrant country to become thoroughly pluralistic in guiding philosophy as well as the obvious fact of a culturally diverse population. What is important to note is the fact that the evolution of multiculturalism in Canada provides us with a fascinating experience of the state-initiated transformation of an idea for “social reform” based on the premise of equality of *opportunity* for *individuals* regardless of biological inheritance or ancestral history into its precise opposite: the idea of equality of *results* for *ethnic groups*, at the price of sacrificing hard-won individual rights.

We learned that the origins of this transformation can be traced back to the early 1960s. At that time, the overriding concern among the governments of Canada was the issue of “Canadian identity”. And then during the late 1970s, official reference to the contrasting concept of “*multiculturalism*” was expressed in the report of the Royal Commission

on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. The Commission was the response of the government of Pierre Trudeau to the “Quiet Revolution” among the Francophone in Quebec which had resulted in the beginnings of a demand for sovereignty. This demand owed as much to the general recognition by the Quebecois of the hopelessness of persuading the economically powerful Anglophones within the province to live and work in French as it did to the freeing of the Francophone themselves from the authoritarian power of the Church. The response of the federal government at that time was to emphasize the need for those changes deemed necessary to satisfy Francophone aspirations *within a united Canada*. The governing Liberals liked the idea of “biculturalism”—a term first introduced by Graham Spry in 1929 in a speech referring to Canada’s two-fold cultural character.

In general, the discourse of Canada’s multiculturalism amplifies that Canada represents a country that is officially bilingual but fundamentally *multicultural*. The term bicultural covers two main realities. The first is the state of each of the two cultures [of the founders of the confederation from 1791 to 1867] and the opportunity to exist and flourish. The second is the coexistence and collaboration of those two cultures: the basically bicultural nature of our country and the subsequent contributions made by other cultures. It is thus clear that we must not overlook Canadian cultural diversity *keeping in mind that there are two dominant cultures, the French and the British*.

The political solution eventually arrived at by the advocates of multiculturalism was that battle was required on two fronts. The first step was to demand the equality of opportunity that would in time—according to the premise of the essential equality of cultures—provide minorities with “proportional representation” in the board rooms and universities and governments of the nation, and until this goal was achieved, race- or ethnicity-based affirmative action programs would be necessary. Secondly, these same minorities would seek the right to the type of governmental support that would enable them to retain their cultures intact and free from alteration from without.

Having said that we consider it important for Southeast Asian nations to learn from the experience of Canada in how it manages multicultural society and to resolve the problems of ethnic, cultural and religious diversities so tension or conflict are not surfaced. It is for the above reason that we, from the Center for the Study of Islam and

Society (PPIM) at State Islamic University, organize this international conference with the objective to create a forum for scholars, politicians, activists and academia to engage in a discussion on how to challenge the increasing diverse and complex society. Having the support of the Canadian Embassy is a privilege for us considering that Canada has been at the forefront in promoting multicultural society and has proven to be successful in preserving the country's cultural harmony.

With above background we outlined several key areas of issue to be discussed. We invited fifteen scholars who have worked on the issue of Multiculturalism from countries in Southeast Asia and Canada. The Keynote speech is specifically designed to provide a framework to the overall the two days conference. Professor Jacques Bertrand, from Toronto University, delivered a very thought provoking theoretical analysis on the idea of Multiculturalism. In his view, promoting multiculturalism in modern state require both the States and groups of society to work together. The state governments need to adequately fulfill the pre-requisites or sufficient glue to ensure that societies who have different backgrounds can live together in a stable situation. In addition, he also pointed out the need of groups to generate their powers, resources, institutional representations and rights to address any potential grievances. These groups, according to Bertrand also need to be granted the freedom to express their political views. Professor Bertrand also pointed to the challenge of modern state in its nation-building project. In relation to Multiculturalism, the nation-building project has to refer to three forms of entities of the nation, which include the indigenous groups, the sub-national groups and the immigrants. These are points relevant to frame the discussion on how countries in Southeast Asia who are struggling with nation-building.

After having Professor Bertrand delivered his keynote speech, we have Professor Azyumardi Azra, the Director of Graduate School UIN Jakarta, Associate Professor Ken Miichi of Iwate University Japan, and Dr Zainal Abidin Bagir of CRCS UGM Yogyakarta. These three distinguished scholars talked about cross national comparison of countries in the world in tackling the issue of multiculturalism, nation-building and preserving social cohesion among the society.

On the second day, we had a more specific discussion on the issue pertaining to Multiculturalism in Southeast Asia. Six speakers representing countries in Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Malaysia and the

Philippines elaborate the particular challenges that these countries are facing in promoting a harmonious community. In the case of Indonesia, Professor Bahtiar Effendy, Dr Luthfie Assyaukanie, Dr Irman Lanti and Dr Setiono Sugiharto address some of the pressing issues that still linger Indonesian society to build a tolerance and understanding among different religious and ethnic groups. These problems range from politics, ethnicity, religious and economic factors. Dr Raihanah Mohd Mydin from the National University of Malaysia discussed how the Malaysian government worked with both the ethnic and religious minorities while at the same time also considered the majority ethnic and religious groups as important to be consulted. The different political landscape between Malaysia and Indonesia, as these speakers discussed showed that confronting the problem of religious, ethnic and economic differences need careful measures in order to promote equality among the community. In addition, Professor Leslie Bauzon showed that in the case of Philippines, with Catholicism as the major religion, problems face by the government to promote tolerance and harmony is quite difficult. The problem also stems from the ethnic and historical differences that each which similarly challenges all the state government in Southeast Asia to form a multicultural society.

The conference was a great success. Both participants and speakers who participated have continued the network. We develop mail list for all the speakers to get themselves connected for the benefit of future research. The Canadian Embassy has continued its commitment to promoting Multiculturalism in Indonesia in particular and Southeast Asia in general. For PPIM, this is an important step to continue our commitment in promoting a quality research and advocacy in the future.

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