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Ihsan Ali-Fauzi

TOWARDS A MIDDLE WAY ISLAM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE GÜLEN MOVEMENT
Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman

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The Jakarta Workshop Dialogue across the Cultural and Religious Divide in Southeast Asia

In recent years, the thrust of international relations has been undermined by growing fear of transnational terrorist groups and the fights against them such as the US-led global war on terror and all the consequences that entailed. In Southeast Asia, following the September 11, 2002 attack in the US and after many other terrorist attacks in the region itself, regional diplomacy and peace-making initiatives underwent and are undergoing extensive and fundamental changes. In this constellation, it is unclear how we are to envision the future of political stability and regional security amidst the ever-increasing influence of religion in international politics? What issues should policy and decision makers in Southeast Asia accentuate in order to be able to re-enact their significant convening powers as regional and international peace-makers? Is Southeast Asia still an important proactive power in multilateral institutions in the global context today?

Many doubt the relation between religion and diplomacy, but others suggest that a country's foreign policy failures may be due to inadequate understanding of the roles of religion in the country concerned. The failure of US foreign policy in Iran, for instance, has been attributed to the fact that US policy makers had systematically ignored the tremendous impact of religion in that country. While international relations encounter ever-changing dynamics in Southeast Asia, emerging democracies in the region such as Indonesia and Malaysia should find their own significant voice in regional diplomacy and their own proactive power in multilateral institutions. Primary among the catalysts of change in this region

is the positive growth of regional economies, its increasingly significant position in international relations, and the rise of new leaders such as Soesilo Bambang Yudhoyono (Indonesia) and Abdullah Badawi (Malaysia) with idealistic notions of democratic freedom and, as seen by many, by being respected modern Muslim leaders.

While separatist movements in Indonesia, Southern Thailand, and the Philippines erupt in conflicts, the predominant trend in Southeast Asia is the emerging desire to create an extensive web of mutual interdependence among states, governments, and non-government actors. The international community would hope that, as suggested by some observers, major countries in the region could not only use their significant convening power but also should translate their ideas in constructive and yet concrete actions such as peace-making initiatives and creative regional diplomacy.

Overview of the Project

The overall aim of this research project has been a) to examine the implications of recent international tensions for multi-ethnic, multi-faith societies, notably in Australia and Southeast Asia; b) to evaluate the adequacy of the responses to these tensions; and c) to consider, in the light of that experience, the contribution that the dialogical approach could make to the easing of societal and international tensions. The project focused on the role of governments, media, civil society, and regional organizations.

For this purpose, the project selected Australia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines as case studies, and organised two regional workshops providing a forum within which researchers, experts, and practitioners drawn primarily from these four countries were able to share their insights and analyses of the situation in their respective countries

The first workshop was hosted in Manila by the Ateneo de Manila University in August 2007 to examine how these four culturally and religiously diverse societies, some with majority and others with minority Muslim populations, have handled the events of September 11 and the ensuing 'war on terror'. The papers focused on external relations (foreign policy) as well as on the treatment of ethnic minorities and the fabric of community relations more generally (domestic policy).

The Centre for the Study of Islam and Society in Jakarta hosted the second workshop in October 2008. It addressed similar issues

but put the spotlight on future scenarios and policy options. The specific theme of the workshop was "Developing Constructive Responses to Tensions in the Domestic and Regional Environment: Dialogue across the Cultural and Religious Divide".

The Issues explored

The workshop (roundtable, presentations, and discussions) focused on two key areas of tension (and the interaction between them): (1) ethnically and/or religiously based tensions in each of the four countries, and (2) geopolitical tensions, with particular reference to: (a) the policies of the *leading power* in the region (the United States) as it seeks to maintain its influence and to secure its interests, and (b) the role of the *emerging power* in the region (China) as it seeks to utilise its soft power more effectively.

In the post-September 11 environment, these two sets of tensions have come together around international terrorism and the 'war on terror', two manifestations of globalised violence that have the potential to deepen the divide between the West and the Muslim world. Recent developments in the Middle East (Israel-Palestine conflict, Lebanon, Iraq, and most recently Iran) have had, and continue to have, wide-ranging international ramifications. The escalation of violence within Pakistan and Afghanistan shows no signs of abating, and the continued military presence of the United States and its NATO allies in Afghanistan and military incursions across the border into Pakistan threaten to cause continued disturbance and polarisation.

By and large, our region (Southeast Asia and Australasia) has managed not to be engulfed by these conflicts, although a number of countries have been directly involved in one or other of these conflicts (in particular Iraq and Afghanistan), and some continue to have a direct and possibly increasing military involvement (e.g. Australia in Afghanistan).

Many countries have a close military relationship with the United States (especially Australia, Singapore, and the Philippines), and these strategic connections probably limit the capacity of these states to pursue independent policies, whether in relation to these conflicts, the wider 'war on terror', or the regional security landscape (here we have in mind Southeast Asia in particular and the Asia-Pacific region more generally). On the other hand, no country in the region can ignore the increasing economic weight and political influence of China, both regionally and globally.

At the same time, most countries in the region, and certainly the four countries which are the focus of this project (Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Australia), are experiencing profound domestic tensions, which are partly connected to the polarised external environment, but which also have important roots in the domestic social and political fabric of the countries in question. Ethnic and religious tensions (and, in the case of the Philippines, an unresolved civil conflict) have become entangled with domestic politics and international connections, which quite often involve explicit military connections or other security arrangements, but just as often operate at a less overt or formal level, and at times involve not so much governments as media, religious organisations and networks, or even financial interests.

Each of the four countries is therefore confronted with a complex mix of interacting domestic and international challenges, which raise difficult questions about the capacity of governments, civil society, and the media to interpret the nature of these challenges and to devise effective responses. This project is especially concerned with the role of culture and religion. Can culture and religion be said to be part of the problem, or are they, at least potentially, part of the solution?

The Jakarta Workshop: A Forward Looking Perspective

The workshop focused on constructive responses to the tensions outlined above. The presentations in Jakarta and the discussions that followed were invited to consider the following points:

(1) The potential for dialogue across religious, cultural, geopolitical, and civilisational differences, both domestically and regionally. Here, a number of key questions suggested themselves:
  - What are the kinds of discourse that can make sense of current tensions and conflicts?
  - To what extent has the dialogical perspective informed existing government, media, and civil society responses to ethnic, cultural, and religious polarisation?
  - What policies and initiatives, especially in the context of internal and external security institutions, are likely to foster the healing of social conflicts, and greater trust and cooperation within and between the countries of the region?

. What are the implications of the dialogical approach for the use of language in the public domain? For policy debate and development? For public policy articulation and resource allocation? For the role of the security forces and other institutions?

- What are the implications for relations with the great powers, in particular the United States and China?

(2) The role of governments and civil society. The key questions were:

- What is the responsibility of political leadership in promoting dialogue? How can political leadership be more effectively exercised? What are the major stumbling blocks? Can these be overcome? If so, how?
Can we identify with some clarity the policy options and practical measures that can help to reduce or resolve ethnic, religious, and intercultural tensions, both domestically and internationally? To what extent do we need to take specific account of the particular circumstances (political, social, economic, and religious) of each country?

- Who, other than governments, can make a useful contribution to analysing the challenges referred to above, proposing remedies, and initiating action?
Can religious and community leaders, the media, educational institutions, professional bodies, and NGOs play a constructive role? What kind of role might this be? What are the obstacles? How might they be overcome? Are there any useful models of social or political action, which can be refined or further developed?

(3) Regional possibilities. This issue dealt with the following points:

- What can be done to promote greater regional collaboration, involving governments, religious organisations, universities and other educational institutions, and media?

- What, if any, is the likely contribution of existing regional institutions (e.g. ASEAN, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN+3, East Asian Summit)? How well-equipped are they to take initiatives that can foster dialogue domestically or regionally in response to cultural, religious, and/or geopolitical tensions? How might ASEAN and other regional bodies be able

to handle relations with the great powers, in particular the United States and China?

- To what extent can these regional institutions work in collaboration with civil society generally, and particularly with regional non-governmental bodies with experience and expertise in the dialogue of religions, cultures, and civilisations?
- What useful initiative might one or other of these regional organisations take over the next five years?