ThePrint

Islam Nusantara saved Indonesia's Muslims from ISIS. It can help India too

Religious leaders will assemble for the first 'R-20' at the G20 summit in Bali later this year and work to form a guideline to tackle extremism.

by **HADZA MIN FADHLI ROBBY** | 7 July, 2022

Girls at the Mustiqlal Mosque in Jakarta, Indonesia, 2006 | Wikimedia Commons

In 2015, a group of Islamic scholars under the banner of Nahdlatul Ulama declared that an alternative vision of Islam was needed to protect the concept of nation-state and the moderate value of Islam against the violent teachings of the ISIS caliphate. This teaching would be introduced as Islam Nusantara (Archipelagic Islam). As elements of ISIS began to gain followers

in Indonesia, the government soon sanctioned Islam Nusantara as the country's official religious discourse.

Since then, Islam Nusantara has been seen as a model for various Muslim countries facing inter-ethnic conflicts, and difficulties in balancing religious needs and political democratisation. One of the elements of this model by Nahdlatul Ulama was that national consciousness be made part of religious doctrine. The Indonesian government and Nahdlatul Ulama have conceptualised several projects to propagate the doctrine of Islam Nusantara in Afghanistan. A call for the Indian Muslim community to emulate Islam Nusantara was also recently made by Ram Madhav.

This brings us to two important questions: What makes Islam Nusantara distinct from other models in the Islamic world and how can Islam Nusantara work to solve religious conflict in India?

Islam Nusantara—harmonising religion

The formation of Indonesian Islam heritage always involved cultural elements from various civilisations—Arab, Turkish, China, and India. This is evident in the traditional puppet theatre play called wayang, a Javanese Islamic adoption of Mahabharata created by Sunan Kalijaga who was a part of the wali sanga—the 'nine saints of Islam'—on the island of Java.

Wayang not only includes characters from Mahabharata but also local characters called Punakawan. The traditional art form has played an integral role in harmonising Islamic values with the Hindu civilisational heritage and made it an integral part of the Javanese culture. To date, many Javanese and Indonesians with varied cultural backgrounds are still familiar with the moral values in the wayang stories. The cultural inclusions, which happened during this era, can be compared to the case of Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb and Deccan Muslims' attitude of toleration towards their Hindu counterparts.

After Indonesia's independence, the political leadership decided that the country should neither be a 'theocratic' nor a 'secular' state. This decision was driven by lessons that Indonesian nationalists had learnt from Turkey's ardent secularism and the development of a 'two-nation' narrative in the Indian subcontinent.

The groundbreaking agreement, which was achieved between nationalist and Islamist politicians, stated that Indonesia should instead be a 'religious' State. According to the agreement, the moral framework of Indonesia's constitution should take a foothold in religious teachings followed by the Indonesian populace. This is the reason Indonesia put 'belief in one God' as the utmost principle of the national ideology 'Pancasila'.

During Indonesia's democratisation, the Islamic discourse found a new challenge—the Wahhabi movement that preached jihadism in conflict-prone areas such as Maluku. The two Bali bombing incidents prompted the government to formulate new discourses of Islam that would stop further radicalisation. The effort came to fruition at Nahdlatul Ulama's 2015 conference with the concept of Islam Nusantara.

Islam Nusantara has two main aspects. It envisions constructive engagement between Islam and local culture. The doctrine cannot simply have 'Javanese, syncretic and Sufi' characteristics. It must also embody various cultures of Indonesian people. Islam Nusantara also aims to transform the role of religion from being a source of conflict and hatred to a wellspring of compassion and collaboration.

India's problems similar to Indonesia

By following the Indonesian example, India can benefit in two major areas — reduce extremist tendencies and ensure harmony between Hindus and Muslims.

It has been seriously argued that madrasas in India have influenced Muslims towards radicalisation. Some say the Deobandi school of thought is responsible for radicalisation, others argue it's because of clericalism and madrasas abandoning secular knowledge. India can look at how Indonesia handled its madrasas, helping them integrate with the society at large.

Madrasas in Indonesia, state-owned or private, are managed and supervised by a directorate at the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This helps madrasas not only develop their capacity but also scrutinise the extremist tendencies in their curriculum. Indonesian madrasas owe their moderate character to the Bahtsul Masail model in its fiqh education, which is led by a religious scholar and attended by both male and female students. This learning model enables Indonesian Muslims to interpret the fiqh in their local context. A notable difference is that Indonesian Muslims do not call non-Muslims kafir.

Madrasas in Indonesia are also known for their openness toward local culture. Some of them, Pesantren Kaliopak (Kaliopak Madrasa) for example, have even made cultural education a central part of their curriculum. In Kaliopak, kyai (or the leader of the madrasa) teaches Islam through traditional dance forms and wayang.

The increase in violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims in India is also a source of concern. The Udaipur killing shows how a local issue can spark nationwide protests. In the late 1990s, Indonesia also faced a similar conflict between Muslims and Christians in the Maluku province. But the religious leaders resolved it by establishing the Maluku Interfaith Commission (Lembaga Antariman Maluku) to ensure common prosperity, a tolerant education model and equal economic opportunity for the people affected by the conflict.

Indonesia's example shows India that an institutionalised approach, government's commitment to faithfully uphold the Constitution and engage with related civil society organisations could work to decrease the influence of extremist elements.

Way forward for India

So, what is India's takeaway from the Indonesian example? During the course of the Indonesian presidency of the G20, two urgent steps were discussed.

First, Nahdlatul Ulama, under the leadership of Yahya Cholil Staquf, decided to conduct a first-of-its-kind Religious-20 (R-20) event. Indonesia and India should utilise the R-20 forum to help create a global, groundbreaking framework to tackle religious violence and extremism. In this aspect, R-20 should translate the 'normative' Document on Human Fraternity signed by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed Muhammad Al-Tayeb and the Catholic Church into a more practical guideline. This will provide countries facing problems of religious violence to create policies on religious harmony and a global curriculum on interfaith engagement. This global curriculum could take the case of Indonesian Islam as an inspiration and could be applied in India as well.

Second, the existing work of the India-Indonesia Bilateral Interfaith Dialogue, established in 2018, should continue to enable an effective way of learning from each other. Furthermore, the creation of a permanent bilateral interfaith commission should be considered in order to further the interfaith exchange and cooperation between the people of India and Indonesia.

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(Edited by Srinjoy Dey)

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