Is Religious Intolerance Going Mainstream in Indonesia?
By Syed Farid Alatas

Indonesia’s state ideology, Pancasila, recognizes six religions or faiths. The country’s motto, ‘Unity in Diversity,’ enshrines tolerance. But Indonesia’s traditional reputation for religious tolerance is being undermined by the growing clout of Muslim extremists. Syed Farid Alatas examines the roots of this growing menace and warns the government and the country’s religious leaders to act more resolutely against it.

MUSLIM REVIVAL or resurgence or reform, as it is variously known, is not peculiar to the modern period. The idea of reform in Muslim societies dates back to pre-modern times. In a broad sense, we may define Muslim revival as a social and intellectual movement that seeks to correct what is perceived as wrong or lacking in the social, economic, political and cultural life of Muslims. Sometimes, these movements and the ideologies behind them have been seen as extreme by Muslims themselves. They were seen as outliers, what early Muslims referred to as the ghulat, the adjectival form of ghulaww, often translated as “zealotry.” Classical Muslim sources use the term to describe minority Muslim groups that exaggerate in matters of belief or doctrine. An example would be those who defy the Prophet Muhammad or member of his family such as Sayyidina Ali.

Another possible term is hashwiyyah, a reference to “vulgar anthropomorphism,” because of the way in which basic beliefs were deformed in the tendency to compare and reduce God to created things. These are theological dimensions of extremism. There are also the social dimensions of extremism that have implications for relations between Muslims and non-Muslims or among Muslims who belong to different sects or schools of thought.

In July 2005, the Indonesia Council of Ulema (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, or MUI) issued 11 fatwas. One concluded that religious pluralism, liberalism and secularism were contrary to Islam. The council also ruled that Muslims, in matters of religious belief (aqidah) and worship (ibadah), were to take an exclusiveist position in the sense that it is unlawful (haram) to incorporate the beliefs and worship of other religions into Islam.1

Another fatwa reiterated an earlier 1980 fatwa to the effect that the Ahmadiyyah, who do not consider Muhammad to be the last prophet, were to be considered as outside the fold of Islam and that Muslims who joined them were deemed to be apostates.2 These, and other fatwas, immediately resulted in a series of commentaries and criticisms among various scholars, activists and civil society groups in Indonesia. Many came out strongly against the fatwas.

For example, Indonesian Muslim scholar Azymardi Azra dismissed the fatwa against pluralism as “ineffective and even counterproductive.” Not only did he disagree with the fatwa, but he noted that the state could not enforce it because it was not legally binding and Muslims could choose to ignore it.3 Nonetheless, while fatwas may not be legally binding, they do affect people’s outlook and have an impact on political decision-making. Fatwas and other religious opinions and views feed into existing discourses and orientations, some of which are sectarian and extremist.

EXTREMIST OR ACCOMMODATIONIST?
While extremism among Muslims has existed from the early days of Islam, its current roots are found in the modernist orientations that began to appear in the 19th century. Contemporary extremist orientations such as Wahhabism and Salafism are really forms of modernism. In this case, modernism refers to orientations that tend to neglect the centuries-old tradition of Muslim learning and cultural development. There are, broadly speaking, two streams within the modernist orientation, accommodationism and extremism. For the accommodationists, Islam should inform public life, but is interpreted as being congruent with Western systems and ideologies such as democracy. They advocate a return to the Quran and Sunnah to find new interpretations compatible with modern times.

The other modernist stream is the extremist one. Modernist extremists share the relative neglect of tradition, in that they limit the sources of authority to the Quran and Sunnah. They are, however, far less accepting of Western systems and ideologies and adopt an intolerant stance towards Muslims who disagree with them. An example of an extremist orientation is Wahhabism. The main traits of extremism include the following:

- Literal interpretation of texts.
- Non-contextual/non-historical interpretations of aqidah and worship.
- Forbidding beliefs and practices allowed by the Quran and Sunnah.
- Over-emphasis on rules and regulations at the expense of spirituality.
- Intolerance of others, particularly Muslims who criticise them for their extremist positions.
- Strong isolationist stance.
- Ideology to “vulgar anthropomorphism,” because of the way in which basic beliefs were deformed in the tendency to compare and reduce God to created things.

The founder of the Wahhabi orientation, Muhammad Ibn ’Abd al-Wahhab, saw himself as returning Arabs to the true monotheistic teachings of Islam. In his time, the veneration of not only saints but also trees and other objects was common. These were all manifestations of unbelief (kufr) and polytheism (shirk), and Ibn ’Abd al-Wahhab saw his role as rooting out these practices by emphasizing the unity of God and returning the people to the true beliefs and practices of Islam. He enforced rules and punishments consid-
Modernist extremist discourse also directs its energies against certain sects or schools of thought within Islam as well as other religions. In the case of Indonesia as elsewhere, reality usually contradicts theory. Indonesia’s official state philosophy, Pancasila, recognizes six religions or faiths — Buddhism, Confucianism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam and Protestantism — and the Indonesian constitution protects the communities that belong to these faiths. The values underlying the motto of Indonesia, “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” or “Unity in Diversity,” was historically lived and experienced. The Malay world, of which modern Indonesia is a part, was founded on various Sufi traditions such as the Qadiriyyah and ‘Alawiyyah and was extremely accommodating to diverse beliefs and practices. However, this more spiritual and tolerant approach to Islam has increasingly given way during the last two decades to a more tradition-rejecting modernist discourse that has extremist tendencies. For example, the rights of both Christians and Shi’ites have been severely violated in the last few years in Indonesia.

In August 2012, a deadly anti-Shi’ite rampage in Sampang on the Javanese island of Madura turned houses into ashes and left many Shi’ites homeless. Sunni leader, Rois Al-Hukama of the Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia’s largest Muslim organization, was charged with having participated in the arson and destruction of property. However, the Surabaya District Court acquitted him of the charges, citing a lack of evidence. It was said that there were no witnesses who directly saw Rois participate in the attacks. At the same time, the Shi’ite community of Sampang was apparently being forced to take an oath of allegiance to Islam. Although the Sampang District Court did not declare Shi’ism to be a deviant sect, government officials and religious leaders took it upon themselves to urge the Shi’ites on Madura to “convert” to Sunni Islam as a condition for returning to their homes. Sampang Legislative Council member Aksan Jamal had the audacity to say that the so-called reconciliation process could only work if the Shi’ites returned to the right teachings and became Sunnis; only then would they be welcomed back to Sampang. There have also been incidences of church burnings and closures. Many churches with licenses to operate have been closed as mayors bowed to pressure exerted by Islamists. Members of the Christian minority HKBP Filadelfia in Cikeuting, Bekasi, a suburb of Jakarta, were attacked and their church destroyed before Christmas in 2012. In March, another HKBP church in Bekasi district was ordered by the Bekasi Public Order Agency to be demolished as members of the congregation helplessly watched. This was apparently as a result of objections made by an extremist group, the Taman Sari Islamic People’s Forum. More recently, in August 2013, Molotov cocktails were thrown into the premises of a Catholic high school in Jakarta. A total of 289 acts of terrorism in Indonesia were recorded as having taken place between 2000 and 2013. These included plans and threats to bomb churches.

Buddhists have also not been spared from religiously-motivated violence. A day before the incident at the Jakarta Catholic high school, a bomb exploded in a Buddhist temple during a service, apparently in retaliation for Buddhist violence against Myanmar’s Rohingya Muslims.

In a speech earlier this year, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is reported to have said: “It cannot be justified if an individual or a group forces its beliefs onto others, and certainly not with threats, intimidation or violence.” He reminded Indonesians that the state guarantees the rights of individual and minority groups and urged Indonesians to avoid violence for the sake of safeguarding the social fabric and national unity. Nevertheless, human rights organizations and observers have said that the government has taken a passive stance with regard to growing religious intolerance in the country. This has allowed zealous vigilantes among some Muslim extremist groups to move against their targets.

Solahudin, an expert on terrorism in Indonesia, said in The Australian on Aug. 19, 2013, that 95 percent of the 800-plus terrorist suspects arrested by Indonesian police were self-identified “Islamic activists.” They believe that what we call terrorist attacks are legitimate acts of jihad. At the same time, a great many Indonesians live in denial, holding that there is no connection between religious teachings and terrorism. This is partly because, as Solahudin notes, it is difficult for Muslim leaders to admit to the link for fear of offending fellow Muslims. Of course, the link is not between Islam per se and terrorism, but between certain utopian orientations among Muslims, justified on religious grounds, and terrorist acts. For example, two of the perpetrators of the 2002 Bali nightclub bombings, Imam Samudra and Mukhlis, cited verses from the Quran and the words of the Prophet Muhammad (hadith), and interpreted them in such a way as to justify killing. It is time for political and religious leaders to educate the Indonesian public to make a distinction between Islam as a revealed religion, on the one hand, and ideological or utopian interpretations of Islam that are human creations and subject to error, on the other. If they avoid such a program of education and the development of conscience, the fear of offending Indonesia’s Muslims will only result in the gradual mainstreaming of extremist orientations and their intolerant beliefs and actions.

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