



Middle East influence boosts Islamic conservatism in Aceh? by Aguswandi

The fundamental problem facing Muslims and others seeking to understand Islam is not that there are too many versions of Islam. There is only one Islam, but there are a thousand possible interpretations of its texts and precepts. All lay people claim to possess the indisputable truth, all claim that no version but their own can be true. An unfortunate omission in current critiques of Islam is that they usually ignore the fact that competing interpretations of the faith have caused more conflicts within Islam than outside of Islam.

Setting aside the nuances, the most important division for challenging intolerance and antidemocratic beliefs is the divide between moderate and conservative adherents of the faith. In contrast to the latter, moderates advocate a civil Islam based on tolerance, an Islam compatible with democratic ideas and modern life.

Moderates versus conservatives

This division has given rise to an often hidden war between moderates and conservatives throughout the Muslim world. Sadly, this is increasingly the case in the devout province of Aceh. The majority of Acehnese have long believed – and practiced – a faith that is based on persuasion rather than top-down enforcement of a restrictive interpretation of the faith. Healthy competition between conservatism and moderate interpretations is on the wane as Islamic conservatism gains ground. Moderates are on the defensive, scared to speak out, and increasingly unable to be heard.

Consider a new *qanun* (local regulation issued by the Sharia authorities) implemented as of this month. The new prohibition legislates that Muslim Acehnese women must wear head scarves and may not wear tight clothes. The foundations of this ruling lie in extremely conservative interpretations of Islam. This is not the moderate Islam that has existed in Aceh for centuries.

Historically, Acehnese Islam was a tool for combating injustice and oppression. If you look at pictures of Aceh's heroine Cut Nyak Dhien, you see a woman that took up arms against colonial oppression in defense of Acehnese cultural and religious identity, yet she did not wear a *jilbab* (head scarf). Historically, Islam in Aceh was about living by core values, not the superficial appearance of principle.

In contrast to their self-proclaimed agenda of defending Islam, today's conservatives are actually diminishing Islam, reducing it to small things that are inadequate or irrelevant in the face of the challenges of modern life or development. Ask conservatives questions that reach beyond their favorite topics – gambling, alcohol, and head scarves; for example, about how their interpretation of religion can promote or support the

reconstruction of Aceh, or Aceh's political and economic development – and they are unable to answer.

Arabization

Given this lack of substance, how have conservative interpretations of Islam come to dominate public discourse in Aceh, to the extent that conservative interpretations are being adopted in law and imposed on the majority – the moderate Acehnese?

The rise of the conservatives can be attributed to multiple factors. One important element is that rising conservatism reflects national trends in religious and political discourse in Indonesia. This nationwide trend is largely attributable to the dominant position given to Middle Eastern interpretations of Islam. What can be seen to be happening in Aceh, as well as other places in Indonesia, is not actually "Islamization" as it is often called, but "Arabization." Aceh's unique experience of Islam is being subsumed by conservative elements of the Arab world.

The dominance of this approach has, in large part, been driven by outsiders entering Aceh with an agenda to promote Arabic interpretations of Islam. This agenda has been strengthened by local religious conservatives with an eye on political power. The central government's tacit encouragement of these groups has allowed them to flourish, thereby distracting attention from more important social, development, and justice issues.

Restricting debate

In Aceh, Islamic conservatives are setting limits on all areas of discussion. They are closing the space for public debate about important issues and damaging our ability and prospects for *ijtihad* (critical thinking mandated for Muslims in the Koran) about our own development and future.

It is important to help moderate Muslim voices in Aceh. Support must come from Indonesia's other Muslim communities and other non-Acehnese, given that the current conservatism in Aceh is an import. This is not simply a provincial issue. It is a problem for all of us, whether in Aceh or elsewhere in Indonesia.

If conservative Islamic groups go unchallenged in Aceh, not only will this promote oppression of the Acehnese, particularly woman, but it will also prevent development within a cultural and historical framework that is appropriate to Acehnese Islam. Muslims in Indonesia should be aware that this imported, conservative view not only insults the Acehnese people, but our collective history and Islam itself.

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