



CIVIC REASON

AND

ISLAMIC DEBATE

ESPOUSING RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

SOURCE

ORGANISATION: THE WAHID INSTITUTE RESOURCE PERSONS: AHMAD SUAEDY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, DR. RUMADI, SUBHI AZHARI AND ALAMSYAH DJA'FAR, RESEARCHERS AT THE WAHID INSTITUTE MORE INFORMATION: WWW.WAHIDINSTITUTE.ORG

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CONTEXT & BACKGROUND:

WHICH ISSUE IS BEING ADDRESSED?

As a religiously-based NGO, the Wahid Institute works on the development and dissemination of a plural and peaceful Islam while espousing tolerance among different religious groups in Indonesia. The work of the Institute is inspired by the views of Abdurrahman Wahid, the former President of Indonesia and leader of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest mass organisation of Indonesian Muslims. The institute is concerned about the mainstreaming of radical Islam, which is occurring not only in Indonesian society at large, but also within government institutions. There are frequent violent attacks on religious minorities, such as the Ahmadiyah, as well as on other so-called 'deviant' sects within Islam, and on other religious minorities. The Wahid Institute believes that one of the causes of radicalisation lies in the increase of international fundamentalist and conservative influences on Islamic thought in Indonesia. Nowadays, modern technologies simplify direct international communication; the role of local, moderate intermediaries has been reduced. Foreign influences also interfere in local traditional practices of interreligious dialogue and cooperation. The Wahid Institute supports religious leaders and local communities in dealing with these influences.

STRATEGY AND ACTIVITIES: HOW ARE YOU TRYING TO CHANGE THIS SITUATION?

One of the programmes of the Wahid Institute entails the training of religious leaders – particularly those within the NU network who have not studied abroad – about possible responses to fundamentalist influences in society. *"We discuss foreign Islamic methodologies and provide training toward the analysis, comprehension and solution of social problems without the gravitation towards Islamic fundamentalism."* Another relevant issue is that of 'religious maturity': religious leaders are introduced to the idea that *"leaders of mass Muslim organisations like NU and Muhammadiyah should not seek provocation, but call on their people to remain calm and engage in dialogue."* The Wahid Institute actively engages in debate between different Islamic groups. *"We try to reinterpret religious freedom from an Islamic perspective. In our book Islam, Constitution and Human Rights, we deal, for instance, with problems of religious freedom in Indonesia."* The Wahid Institute describes its approach as the 'promotion of Indonesian Islam'. *"Indonesian Islam is different from Middle Eastern or European Islam. Since Islam came to Indonesia, Islam and Indonesian culture have influenced each other. Indonesian Islam can be typified as cultural, open and dialogical. Many people are not aware that it is one of the world's most open and tolerant forms of Islam."*

SUCCESSSES AND CHALLENGES: WHAT HAVE YOU ENCOUNTERED ALONG THE WAY?

The Wahid Institute is very well embedded in the NU network. This network has provided them with access to many communities across Indonesia, even to a high level among the *kiais*, or religious leaders, in *pesantrens*, the traditional Indonesian Islamic boarding school. This network provides many opportunities and resources for pluralism and religious tolerance. An example is the cooperation with the *kiais*, who have a strong influence on the interpretations of Islam within their communities. Moreover, within the *pesantrens* and the NU in general, there are many scholars who

have studied both in the West or Middle East and in Indonesia. These scholars and the *kiais* play an important role in the mediation of foreign influences on Indonesian Islam within their local contexts.

Yet there remain challenges to the work of the Wahid Institute. Religious freedom at the level of national and local regulations present many problems. Moreover, law enforcement agencies often lack the capacity to enforce existing regulations. Constitutional guarantees of religious freedom are regularly violated. Several anti-pluralism cases involving rights violations, violence and conflict have yet to be satisfactorily resolved. Radical Islamic social movements continue to grow. The government, as well as the police and the courts, appear to be increasingly vulnerable to pressure from radical groups. Certain new government regulations are regressive, such as the joint decree on Ahmadiyah, which was introduced following pressure from radical groups and the decision of the Constitutional Court to uphold the blasphemy law. The polarisation between pro- and anti-pluralist groups in civil society directly affects the work of the Wahid Institute. During the 'Bloody Monas Tragedy' (see Suedy 2010), for example, members of the National Alliance for Freedom of Religion and Belief were attacked by an Islamic militia who interpreted the rally to be in defense of the Ahmadiyah. Many people were severely injured, amongst them staff from Wahid Institute who had participated in the rally.

CIVIC REASON: IN WHAT WAYS COULD THIS EXAMPLE BE RELATED TO CIVIC REASON?

The promotion of 'Indonesian Islam' is a way to deconstruct exclusivist interpretations of Islam through internal discourse within Islamic groups. The Wahid Institute argues that Islam has different cultural roots across the world. From the time of its introduction in Indonesia, Indonesian Islam has been pluralist, reflective of the coexistence of different interpretations and practices of Islam. The Wahid Institute stimulates ongoing internal debate among Islamic groups and

espouses moderate and tolerant understandings of Islam. Furthermore, like An-Na'im, the Institute believes that Islam can flourish best within a state that is neutral towards all religions, and there where those who work within the state bureaucracy are able to apply civic reasons to the decision making process.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- The Wahid Institutes refers to the idea of 'religious maturity' and the strategic role of religious leaders in defusing provocations by radical groups. How would you define 'religious maturity'? Are NGOs which are not religiously based also able to play a role in the promotion of 'religious maturity'?
- In order to build tolerance and solidarity between Indonesians, the Wahid Institute trains religious leaders, but also recommends the inclusion of inter-religious education in the pesantren. Children will learn, thus, to understand and coexist with the traditions, customs and doctrines of other religions and groups. Is this a feasible way to promote and safeguard religious freedom, pluralism and tolerance? Please explain your point of view.
- If religious conservative, foreign ideas can be promoted through the internet, so can the moderate ideas of Indonesian Islam. How do you see the role of social media in promoting ideas and mobilizing people? How could pro-pluralist movements in Indonesia make better use of modern means of communication to espouse their views? Is your CSO using new media and what are the effects of it?

