



India-Indonesia Interfaith Dialogue

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During the maiden visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Indonesia in May 2018, it was agreed upon by both sides to organise the first-ever Interfaith Dialogue in early October 2018. This dialogue between India and Indonesia would be held in the Indonesian city of Yogyakarta¹ which will be followed by a similar dialogue in India the following year. The two leaders during the Indian Prime Minister's visit shared their views on the urgent need to address the issue of growing radicalism and terrorism, and to promote peaceful pluralism.² Faced with the increasing incidence of radicalism and extremist violence in the name of religion, it provides both the nations a partnership for promoting a culture of peace and harmony.

Significance of the Interfaith Dialogue for Indonesia

Indonesia has the largest Sunni Muslim population in the world and recognises six religions – Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian – of equal status, based on the country's ideology of *Pancasila*.³ Indonesia has been partnering with like-minded countries that also face similar challenges in the containment of tension and violence caused by religion-based non-state entities. The Interfaith Dialogue becomes one of the essential platforms for Indonesia towards addressing this challenge, apart from the various bilateral and multilateral security partnerships being undertaken. Two underlining factors threaten the status-quo of the Indonesian society, which make the interfaith dialogue significant.

Role of Islam in the Indonesian Republic

The first President of Indonesia Sukarno⁴ had a vision of an independent Indonesia which was to be a secular republic, rather than a monarchy or a theocracy. For Sukarno, the identity of an independent Indonesian state was not to be defined in terms of any religion. The BPUPKI or Committee for the Preparation of Indonesian Independence, with 21 members, was set up in March 1945. The committee discussed formats for the establishment of an independent

government had representation from all the major ethnic groups of the archipelago as well as the Chinese. Sukarno's groups that dominated the committee talked of the five principles or *Pancasila*, which was formulated by Sukarno and Muhammad Yamin⁵ in June 1945 as the basis for organising the new country. These five principles were national identity, a place in the international community, people's sovereignty, social justice, and belief in one God.⁶ The Islamic group represented by Mohammad Natsir⁷, rejected Sukarno's notion of an Indonesian state. For him, Islam was more than just a system of theology, but a complete civilisation comprised of general principles which regulates the interaction among individuals and between individual and society. In Natsir's view, the idea of unity between religion and the state was imperative and maintained that the affairs of the state is an integral part of Islam. Thus, a compromise amongst the two groups in the committee had to be adopted in order to find an acceptable solution. The compromise was fully achieved in July 1945 and was based on the tenet that the new Republic would take neither a secular nor a theocratic identity. The new Republic would be a state based on *Pancasila* in which "belief in one God" constitutes one of the principles.⁸

Both Sukarno and Suharto⁹ were aware that Indonesia being a Muslim majority state would find it hard to separate religion from politics. However, both emphasised on the principles of *Pancasila* as the guiding force towards ensuring religious freedom by creating an atmosphere of peace, tolerance as well as of mutual understanding and respect. This delicate balance between religion and the state has been constantly under pressure. In the new millennium with the increasing level of terror linked violence, it has raised concerns on Indonesia's religious tolerance.

Growing Incidence of Extremist Violence in Indonesia

In the 21st century there has been a growing incidence of violence from radicalised and religious extremist groups. Further, Indonesia being a vast archipelago with porous borders makes it an attractive destination for international terrorist to illicitly enter and open networks for carrying out their operations on Indonesian soil. According to the global terrorism database maintained by the University of Maryland, from 2001-2017, there have been 448 incidents of terrorist related violence in Indonesia. The Al-Qaida and Jemaah Islamiya (JI) bombing in the tourist district of Kuta in the Bali Island on October 12, 2002, that killed 202 while injuring close to 300 is one such major terrorist attacks in recent Indonesian history. Acts of violence have also been carried out by Muslim radical groups that include Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), Majahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, as well as by Christian extremist group such as in Karubaga on July 17, 2015.¹⁰

More recently on May 13, 2018, a family of suicide bombers linked to JAD attacked three churches across Surabaya, killing at least 12 people and injuring 41 others. Later the same day, another explosion was reported at a low-cost apartment in the neighbouring city of Sidoarjo. Further, on May 14, a bomb exploded at the Surabaya Police headquarters. In total, 25 people, including 13 suicide bombers, were killed and dozens injured in the series of bombings in Surabaya. This was the worst terrorist attack in Indonesia in a decade.¹¹

Conclusion

This makes the first ever Interfaith Dialogue between India and Indonesia significant as it is being done with the purpose of building a culture of peace by promoting religious harmony. Further, as both nations share commonality in terms of their religious diversity along with the increasing threat to their social fabric, central towards their nation building. It becomes necessary to expand their security collaboration beyond traditional arrangements and undertake initiatives that promote religious understanding in order to counter radicalisation and extremist violence being carried out in the name of religion. Thus, the upcoming interfaith dialogue seems to be a mature step forward in the new India-Indonesia comprehensive strategic partnership.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes

¹ Muhammadiyah, which was the first modern organisation of Reform Islam was established in Yogyakarta in 1912 under the influence of the Islamic reformism of Mohammad Abduh (1849-1905) in the Middle East. As a reformist movement, Muhammadiyah sought to purify Islam against heresy and khurafat or myths often practised by Indonesian Muslims. See: Rizal Sukma, *Islam in Indonesian Foreign Policy*, (Routledge Curzon: London, 2003), p. 15.

² "India, Indonesia to organise interfaith dialogue to promote pluralism", *Rajya Sabha TV*, May 30, 2018, <https://rstv.nic.in/india-indonesia-organise-interfaith-dialogue-promote-pluralism.html>, accessed on August 21, 2018.

³ "Indonesians join thousands of soldiers, police at Interfaith Rallies", *Regional Interfaith Network*, December 2, 2016, <http://regionalinterfaith.org.au/?p=1497#more-1497>, accessed on August 20, 2018.

⁴ Sukarno along with group of students formed Partai Nasional Indonesia (PNI) in 1928. The PNI represented the first major political party in which the membership was ethnically Indonesian; the goal was simply political independence with the ideology of secular nationalism. Sukarno's PNI attracted substantial support from secular Muslims as well as non-Muslims. For Sukarno, the notion of an Islamic state was no more than a recent formulation by Muslim scholars and intellectuals without strong foundation from Islamic teachings. Sukarno concluded that Islam in Indonesia should not become the affair of the State. See: Rizal Sukma, *Islam in Indonesian Foreign Policy*, (Routledge Curzon: London, 2003), p. 16-18.

⁵ Muhammad Yamin was a member of the Investigating Body for the Preparation of Indonesian Independence or BPUPKI established in 1945. During the committee hearing on May 29, 1945, Muhammad Yamin laid out the five principals for the foundation of the new state. His perspective as a secular nationalist was shaped by his life journey influenced by socialising with people from different cultures, the diverse indigenous Indonesian people and his exposure to European teachings. See: <http://widyagama.ac.id/iwan-nugroho/2010/05/pancasila-1menggali-pemikiran-muhammad-yamin/>

⁶ Norman G. Owen (edi), *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia*, (University of Hawai 'i Press: Honolulu, 2005), p. 306-307.

⁷ Mohammad Natsir was an Islamic scholar and politician and was the fifth Prime Minister of Indonesia from September 5, 1950 to April 26, 1951. In Natsir's view, the idea of unity between religion and the State was imperative and maintained that the affairs of the State are an integral part of Islam. Thus, the Islamic group of Natsir was of the view that Islam should form the basis of the Indonesian state. See: Rizal Sukma, *Islam in Indonesian Foreign Policy*, (Routledge Curzon: London, 2003), p. 18-19.

⁸ Rizal Sukma, *Islam in Indonesian Foreign Policy*, (Routledge Curzon: London, 2003), p.4 and 18-19.

⁹ General Suharto took over the presidency from Sukarno in 1967. Suharto was suspicious of Islam based on his own experience in the 1950s and the challenge that Islam might pose to the state. This led his New Order government and its supporters, especially the military, to prevent Islam from becoming an independent force and sought to neutralise the influence of Islam as a political force. It was believed that by denying Islam any formal role in politics and policy process, a challenge to the *Pancasila* state and the New Order's ideology of development could be managed. See: Rizal Sukma, *Islam in Indonesian Foreign Policy*, (Routledge Curzon: London, 2003), p. 41- 47.

¹⁰“Global Terrorism Database”, *University of Maryland*, July 2018 (updated),

https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?page=16&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=&start_yearonly=2001&end_yearonly=2017&dtp2=all&country=93&expanded=no&charttype=line&chart=overtime&ob=GTDID&od=desc#results-table, accessed on August 21, 2018.

¹¹ Karina M. Tehusjarana and Moses Ompusunggu, “What is JAD? Terror group behind Mako Brimob riot, Surabaya bombings”, *The Jakarta Post*, May 14, 2018,

<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/05/14/what-is-jad-terror-group-behind-mako-brimob-riot-surabaya-bombings.html>, accessed on May 15, 2018.