

Nature of Progress

by

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Introduction

Indonesia is the world's fourth most populous country in the world. With an estimated 245 million inhabitants, it must thus be an important factor in any discussion on South East Asia.¹ Likewise, any discussion of Indonesia is likely to have an impact, major or minor, in the region. The suggestion surfaced during the recent 'Being Progressive' Meeting of Indonesia-Singapore Progressive Young Activists², to established a Progressive Muslim Network of South East Asia (or *Jaringan Islam Progresif Asia Tenggara*) is definitely a promising one.

This article is a personal reflection on some of the formal and informal discussions that transpired in that meeting. It is also an experiential observation of the many field trips with various other participants. Last but not least, it includes a suggestion on my part as to why the network, if it comes into existence, needs to further push the agenda to include environmental issues, both green and brown, in future discourses.

It is important to note that this article is written with the spirit and passion of fellowship and brotherhood as expressed in Q. 49:10: "All believers are but brothers" and not be seen as a display of, to borrow Habermas' term, a 'chauvinism of prosperity'.³

¹ Hugo, Graeme (2000) Indonesia, in *Southeast Asia: Diversity and Development* (eds.) Thomas R. Leinbach & Richard Ulack, Prentice Hall, NJ.

² Organized by The Reading Group, Singapore, with the support of Center for Languages and Cultures, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University (UIN) Jakarta, at Puncak Bogor, Indonesia, 14-17 December 2006.

³ J. Habermas "Citizenship and National Identity: Some Reflections on the Future of Europe", *Praxis International*, vol. 12 (1), cited in Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Multiculturalism Conflicts: The Danish Cartoons," *International Movement for a Just World E-Newsletter*, Vol. 6, No 5.

Garden of Eden

Indonesia's 13000 islands stretch across 40 degrees of longitude and contains within them a mind-boggling biodiversity. Although it covers only about only one percent of the world's total land surface, it houses the second largest number of mammal species, the fourth largest number of both, reptile species as well as the primate species, the fifth largest collection of bird species, and the sixth largest number of amphibians. Many of these species can only be found in Indonesia and no where else in the world. Indonesia has the largest number of *psittacine* birds⁴, largest number of palm species and ranks high on many other biodiversity lists, including freshwater fishes and marine life.⁵ Some of these species were discovered only recently, signaling the possibility that the probability of many other undiscovered species is high. It is necessary to stress that the biodiversity facts mentioned above did no justice to the actual reality of the mega-diversity in Indonesia.

Such density of wildlife species existing side by side with and within one of the world's largest and poorest nation would naturally mean constant friction between the need to develop the economy and the need to conserve. Usually the economic imperative wins almost without a fight. Many discussions on environmental conservation have insisted that in the calculations of progress, the existence and health of natural areas must be soberly included. The **Ecological Economics**, as it is known, allows decision-makers to appeal to scientific grounds in ensuring sound policies and management decisions. The absence of such grounds would lead to mere guesswork. The technical aspect of Ecological Economics has led many countries to realize the need of Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) for many governmental projects. However, the technical aspects of Environmental Economics would mean almost nothing without the existence of **Environmental Consciousness**. The former often deals with figures and statistics,

⁴ Relating to, resembling, or characteristic of parrots.

⁵ Harry Surjadi, "Indonesia's Biodiversity Will Be Gone in 30 Years", *Jakarta Post*, 09/05/2006.

and are utilized and interpreted by governments or corporations seeking to gain approval from the government for their capitalistic ventures and projects. More often, it is the Environmental Consciousness of the masses, a healthy democracy and a culture of active citizenship that ensures Environmental Economics to be realized in its best possible form in any given context.

Sadly, as discussions on democracy, citizenship, ethics, civil rights and other constituents of what 'progress' is imagined to be, is gaining grounds (including an observable increase in Progressive Islam discourses), we see scant or almost no mention at all on the need to increase environmental consciousness.

Flooded With Implications

Flooding in 2006 in Banda Aceh has swept away thousands of houses and killed at least 122 people. Flash floods and landslides have displaced more than 400,000 families.⁶ The disaster could have been aggravated by the illegal logging activities. Indonesian Vice-President, Jusuf Kalla, has said that illegal logging was one of the flood's causes and pledged intensive government efforts to replant forests. Many do not realize or simply do not know the role of trees in preventing floods and landslides. The estimated \$25 million worth of damages that were caused by the floods could have been better spent in preventive measures rather than reconstruction efforts. What more when corruption and greed used the very vehicle of reconstruction to further exploit both the weak and nature.⁷

Logs are not the only things being stolen from Indonesians. Without trees to hold on to the valuable top soil, erosion would mean that the income of future generation of farmers is greatly diminished. The soil gets washed down rivers. Mangrove systems that would normally trap these sediments are now missing, due also to illegal logging and

⁶ "Floods displaced 40000", *Weekend Australian*, p. 11, 30/12/2006.

⁷ "Walhi Uncover Illegal Logging Within Aceh Reconstruction", *Tempo Interactive Jakarta*, 29/12/2006.

expanding human coastal population. As a result, the silt goes directly to the sea, clouding the pristine waters of Indonesia, smothering the valuable corals that would have otherwise helped the fishing and tourist industries.

There is a need to stress that the act of protecting nature is really not about putting the flora and fauna above mankind. Instead, as the previous example shows, the rape of nature creates situations where the poor normally gets the brunt of ecological disasters. The fate of the fragile ecosystems is almost always synonymous with the fragile fate of the poor. To leave the struggle of protecting Indonesia's environment to The Indonesian Forum for Environment (Walhi) alone, or even to the other environmental-protection groups ('green groups') that exist in the archipelago, is unwise and impractical. The protection of the environment cannot be done only by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) alone.

Religion's Role

Religion cannot be made ignorant or detached from environmental problems facing us today. To do so will only deny the immense cultural resources and potentials in religion that are necessary in the pedagogy of raising deep spiritual relationship with the Earth and protect it. In addition, religion can empower the masses by providing working vocabularies to understand certain environmental concepts.

One important concept is the trusteeship (*amanah*) of God upon mankind (termed in the Qur'an as *khalifa*, or God's trustee and vicegerent). This trusteeship ensures that nature ought not to be owned by greedy individuals but should instead be used to support life, as it did in the past, as it is the present, and as it shall be in the future.⁸

Second, there is the religious concept of justice, or *'adalah*. Islam has taught that the

⁸ Q. 2:30-34.

khairah ummah (best of nations or people), especially the *ulul amri* (those entrusted with leadership),⁹ has to be accountable for all our actions. The role of *akrah*, or accountability, must include the accountability to manage natural resources and its sustainable use. Religion's professed role in being the advocate of the poor would be severely compromised without including the teaching of compassion for God's other creations. Hence, it is important to revitalize the meaning of conservation in Islam within the Indonesian context since almost one out of every four Southeast Asians is an Indonesian and of that, nine out of ten Indonesians are Muslims.

Rights of Our Children

During a visit to Jakarta in 2005, Dr Khaled Abou El Fadl, stressed the fact that human rights are above God's rights.¹⁰ Progressive Islam must now ask how long these rights that every human should enjoy can last. Intergenerational equity of all humans, especially in the area of ecological sustainability, must now be implicitly included in all curricula of progressiveness. The scope for social justice must be extended and therefore, the oppression of the present generation towards the generation of the future must be stopped or at least minimized. The discussion on ethics must include the issue of intergenerational equity.

At the rate that humanity is going, we are diminishing the food sources of our future generation. Over-fishing and destruction of coral and mangrove systems will deplete fish stocks. Inland, water pollution and littering poison our rivers and fresh water fishes. Deforestation strips top soil for farming and herding and limits the planet's ability to clean the very air our children will breathe. Failure to include emission of carbon dioxide in our calculations of industrialization and progress is changing the very climate we live in and may already have started irreversible changes in the weather that might soon

⁹ Q. 4:59.

¹⁰ In a conversation between Prof. Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl (Professor of Islamic Studies, University of California Los Angeles) and Novriantoni and Ramy El-Dardiry, activists of Indonesia's Liberal Islam Network (JIL) at Hilton Hotel in Jakarta on Saturday, 24/07/2005.

render some parts of the world inhospitable. Java's recent surge of hot sludge spewing from a hole is an example as to how fast nature can change the hospitability of a location.

Conclusion

Environmental problems anywhere, including Indonesia, are always characterized by social, political, economic, historical and cultural elements. Environmental problems in a particular location are never solely about our practical relationship and interaction between the people, the government and interest groups that exist in that location. It must also include our spiritual relationship with nature, our ability to empathize with the lesser creations and with our ability to see the bigger picture, which includes the future generations.

In my previous writing, *Environmental Pedagogy: Absence of the Green*,¹¹ I argued that the 'Islamic' ideas of conservation, as well as the 'green reformism' imagination in the Malay/Muslim community, stem from middle-class anxiety that middle-aged Muslims needing to romanticize the glorious past. I had also discussed several factors that account for the lack of environmental consciousness within the community. Here, I will like to offer one more reason for this lack: The failure of the Progressive Muslims to seriously participate in environmental discussions and their failure to make an intellectual presence. As we now observed, the failure of Progressive Muslims to include and articulate the environmental agenda has given ample space for 'Islamists' to define the realm of spirituality that Nature naturally inspires.

Failure to discuss the need to care for the environment is therefore the failure to see progress in all its forms. For the region's Muslims to progress in their respective communities within Southeast Asia, we need to study local constituents of what it means

¹¹ Paper presented at Series on Social Discourses Seminar organized by The Reading Group, Singapore on 12 August 2005. Paper available upon request: info@thereadinggroup.sg.

to be progressive (that is, progressiveness is contextual, not merely theoretical). This contextual definition of progressiveness cannot be selective. It cannot, most important of all, be sterile of the very ecology that houses and feeds them.

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