

The Future of Multiculturalism in Southeast Asia

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*I*n recent decades, multiculturalism has been a widely debated concept. In its most rudimentary understanding, the concept refers to a modern condition where diversity prevails. Three factors account for this unprecedented implosion of diversity in the modern world. First, the postcolonial condition that pits traditional loyalty with new national identities within a modern nation-state, thus giving birth to new multiple identities. Second, the rise of globalisation as a political economic force that brought trade and production under a single global market, thus generating global exchanges and new labour migration. Third, the exponential development of technologies that facilitate ease in travel and communication, and along with it, new influences across cultures.

Given that diversity is a mainstay in modern society, what remains to be answered is: How do we respond to this fact? Even the most conservative of opinion will not deny the fact of plurality. What matters is our attitude towards diversity. It may range from rejection of those who differ from us, and fortifying our own exclusivist identity; to embracing differences and promoting mutual exchanges that can enrich one another. This is the debate that is now consuming nations across the globe, be it in America and Europe, or in our own backyard of Southeast Asia region. A two-day regional conference on 'Islam and Multiculturalism in Southeast Asia' (5-6 Dec, 2011) organised by The Wahid Institute and Leftwrite Center Singapore suggests that the issue of multiculturalism is fast becoming an urgent agenda for researchers and activists in the region. Participated by researchers and activists from Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, the conference underlined the need to locate challenges that can derail the process of building a multicultural society that protects the right of individuals and groups alike within the framework of equal citizenship.

Dual Challenges

Emerging from the conference, two challenges became apparent. First is the debilitating effects of rigid state policies that straitjacketed diverse groups of people into a set of neat and monolithic identity. Often, the process of ‘delegitimation’ occurs through a brushstroke of the law. An entire community and their cultural-historical identity were automatically deemed “illegal” and expunged from existence within the state’s construct via laws that do not recognise their legitimacy to exist. Without legal recognition, their rights are often trampled upon and access to justice limited. An example of this is the Indonesian government’s exclusion, until recently, of indigenous belief-system or *aliran kepercayaan* within the 6 legally recognised religions of the country. In Malaysia, non-Sunni sects such as the Syiah are often target of state sanction by the religious bureaucracy under the control of the government. In Singapore, often diverse and contending voices within a racial or religious group is not heard because of the hierarchical nature of state bureaucratic instruments that only listens via “official” channels such as state-sanctioned institutions.

The second challenge that threatens the fabric of multiculturalism lies in the paralysing effect of religious fundamentalism. The mushrooming of fundamentalist groups in the region means that modern consciousness crucial to the functioning of a democracy, such as the idea of equal citizenship, is not able to take root. Religious fundamentalists often seek to impose a singular religious order based on exclusivist and hegemonic tendencies. Their goals are often not subjected to democratic analyses and critique for they assume superiority in the imposition of “God’s Will”. A truly multicultural society will eventually have to be subjugated through the fundamentalist’s imposition of a single religious order that is intolerant of those not in line with their vision. As pointed out by Mr. Ahmad Fuad Rahmat from the Malaysian NGO, Islamic Renaissance Front, interreligious tensions in Malaysia, for example, can be attributed to the increasing decibel of fundamentalist voices nurtured within the state system and development process in the last three decades.

What Can Be Done?

Nonetheless, multiculturalism as an orientation that embraces diversity is not a spent force. As noted by Mr. Ahmad Suaedy from The Wahid Institute, like-minded scholars and activists in civil society groups across the region must consolidate their resources and come together to push for a multicultural agenda together. This can be done through several ways.

First, there must be an effort to develop and expand the discourse of citizenship along with democratic ideals. The idea of equal and multicultural citizenship as a foundation of modern nation-state must enter the imagination of every member of society – from top government officials and policymakers, to the ordinary citizens on the streets. This can be done through inserting the subject of multiculturalism in school curriculum and expanding the public sphere to allow positive multicultural engagements to occur. At the same time, democratic values must be reinforced. By this, we do not mean procedural democracy such as the electoral system. Rather, the nurturance of a democratic personality that is amiable to difference and diversity, and to see the Other not by their primordial identity such as race and religion but by their common humanity and as fellow citizens, must occur. This is very much the spirit of *ukhuwwah basyariah* or fellowship among humans that was once emphasised by the late Abdurrahman Wahid.

Second, extremist tendencies must be kept in check through countering their ideological intent and exposing their agenda. To do this, remarked Dr. Azhar Ibrahim Alwee from the National University of Singapore, we must win over the largely moderate but often apathetic religious elites. Thus, the idea of multiculturalism must be garnered from within the religious tradition, as exemplified by the Post-Traditionalist movement fronted by Dr. Rumadi from within the Nahdhlatul Ulama. Despite the fundamentalists' propaganda, multiculturalism is a well-entrenched concept within Islamic history and tradition and not necessarily a western or alien concept imposed from without.

Third, progressive groups within the region must forge a loose alliance that can facilitate sharing of information and resources. Issues such as violations of religious freedom and human rights abuses across the region should be discussed together and form case studies to educate and raise consciousness within respective communities. It is

also important that such alliances should be interfaith in nature. Muslims and non-Muslims should form a broad network that can help strengthen and champion the multicultural agenda in the region.

Last but not least, the effort to strengthen multiculturalism must be fronted by civil society groups and be made into a citizen's agenda. Civil society groups must be on guard against any attempt to subvert the multicultural agenda and challenge any move towards hegemony by any single group including the state. This can only occur if a broad segment of the population is aware of the challenges toward achieving a truly multicultural society and are conscious of the democratic ideals that recognise the right of individuals and especially the minorities to co-exist on an equal plane within the construct of a modern nation-state. Only then can multiculturalism be fully realised and diversity celebrated in the near future. []
