

# Perceptions of Muslim Revival<sup>1</sup>

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While I was preparing for the address that is the basis for this article, the first questions that I raised to myself were: "For whom am I speaking?" and "What am I going to speak about?" I do not want to speak as an academic, as a scholar; it is the scholars who have created the confusion surrounding the theme I am going to discuss. I opted not to address myself to the government, to people in authority, to the people in power. They can be very resistant to changing their opinions and are often not comfortable with others, pointing out that they are in the wrong. So, the only audience left is the participants of this conference. They are not the government and they are not representing the professional body of scholars. That being the case, I prefer to take the approach of my own reflection on the problem, since I believe I started reflecting on these issues when I was fourteen years old, during the Japanese occupation. I was in Indonesia then. The war had shocked and stimulated me to reflect on various matters.

Typical of the youth during that period, I never knew what the war was about. It was our first experience. Suddenly, we saw an invading army coming in to the towns and former rulers disappearing; things connected with them were also vanishing. We began to experience new attitudes, and also political fanaticism. We found ourselves in a society that was entirely and openly corrupt. My initial interest in the study of corruption was due to the experience of total corruption around me during these years.<sup>2</sup> I found it remarkable that these corrupt people were proud of the fact that they were corrupt, and that they looked down on people who were not. These are facts and experiences not found in literature. They are not themes of discussion in books. One extremely important theme for professional discussion that has not been taken up until today is that of the total breakdown of a state.

When there is a total breakdown of a state, however short the period is, this becomes a unique and interesting episode in history. It is this experience that impressed upon me the significance of the function of religious leaders in

keeping peace. In Indonesia, the total breakdown of the state took place before the 17th of August 1945, the day of the proclamation of independence.<sup>3</sup> The moment the Japanese surrendered, there was no government in Indonesia. I was in a town called Sukabumi and when the Japanese surrendered, there was suddenly no authority and government. There was anarchy in the sense that there was an escalation of robberies and other crimes. Dutchmen had been stalked and killed. Apparently, the gate of the concentration camp where many Dutchmen were detained was left open and some of them left, thinking that they were familiar with the area and that there was a return to normalcy, that is, to pre-occupation conditions. Innocently, some of them, having left the camp, were killed.

I myself witnessed an incident concerning such killings. I was having a chat with my friend who was an electrical engineer in charge of a power station. One night, his worker came with his bicycle and entered the room, very enthusiastic and slightly boastful. The reason for his enthusiasm and boastfulness was that he had just killed an elderly Dutchman that evening with a bamboo spear, the corpse of which he disposed of by throwing it into a well. The worker was very proud of his feat. I was shocked at his elation. I then began to notice that in a situation like this, people become barbaric while others become very civilized. Those who are barbarians will reveal themselves, as will those who are very civilized.

I witnessed this phenomenon. During this period of anarchy with no government, I asked myself this question, "What keeps the population stable and restrained from committing crimes and evil acts?" While there were such incidents as mentioned above, the vast majority of people did not commit crimes, even though there were ample opportunities for them to do so. Life was relatively orderly, with the exception of a few killings. I then discovered who it was that played the role of keeping the population stable and morally restrained in the absence of government, the religious teachers in the villages. They were the ones who advised the people. They became the central authority as far as matters of right and wrong were concerned.

During a very short interval before the Japanese occupation, there was an incidence of rioting in Singapore. There was a robbery and people were killed. I knew very well the survivor of that episode. He passed away a few years ago. He had a slash wound on his neck. Although the period of no government lasted for only a few days, such things were still happening in Singapore. Compare that with what I saw in Sukabumi, which went for weeks and months without a government. The Japanese surrendered before the August 17 proclamation of independence. Even after the proclamation, it took some time for the government to establish rule.<sup>4</sup> Not long after, the Dutch

colonial government returned. People were uncertain as to who was in charge of the state. The maintenance of stability and order depended on the leadership of the religious leaders.

I myself was in touch with some of the religious teachers in that area, and I am quite familiar with the *madrasabs* and *pesantrens* and their students. The religious leaders of these institutions were traditional people and were not what some refer to now as "moderate" or "liberal" Muslims. They are genuine Muslims, traditionally attached to Islam, who managed to preserve the peace during the time of the breakdown of law and order. Nowadays, we hear people linking Islam with terrorism. There is an opinion that the Islamic religion itself has the tendency to orient its adherents to the practice of terrorism. In other words, there is a tendency within Islam to *create* terrorism. This is because of how many people have interpreted the word "jihad."<sup>5</sup> Some Muslims cried "jihad" and some suicide bombers roared "Allahu Akbar," which resulted in people associating Islam with violence and killing.

For the most part, the distortion of the perception of Islam and prejudice against Islam originate in the Western media. This tendency in the Western media is itself rooted in European history.

Islam is often presented as the cause of extremism. This view originated in the time of the Crusades and continued during the Renaissance. Islam was often referred to as the negative example in a comparison with something European. For example, Islam was often viewed as a "fake" religion in comparison with Christianity. While Marx and Engels regarded all religions as illusions, they nevertheless understood Christianity to be a universal religion, while seeing Islam as merely an Oriental religion and therefore "fake."<sup>6</sup>

Islam was said to be a warrior religion, a bloodthirsty religion. Muslims were described as very cruel conquerors and Islam as a religion was depicted as backward.<sup>7</sup> Leading poets and scholars of that time used a terrible caricature of Islam to frighten people. There were very few exceptions.

Today, there is a more diluted version and sophisticated presentation of Islam as an indirect cause of extremism. On the other hand, there is the view being spread by some confused scholars studying extremist groups that some of these groups are reformist in orientation. When they write about these groups they use the term "reformers."<sup>8</sup> In other words, those with extremist orientations are classified as reformers. They tend to read Muslim history in terms of what they understand of European history. In European history, those who disagreed with the establishment during the Middle Ages were the precursors of what they considered as the rebellion and the revolt of Martin Luther. So, they were viewed as reformers and also referred to themselves as reformers. For instance, the Dutch church, which called itself the Reformed Church, was a follower of Calvin. They abided by very strict principles and in

fact were more restrictive than the church they wanted to reform, that is, the Catholic Church.

The term "reform" in this case refers to those who disagree with the wider establishment. It does not refer to the ideas themselves but rather to the phenomenon of disagreement with the wider group. What reform is there in this reformed church? "Reform" here means only disagreement with the majority. There is also the exclusivist notion of salvation, according to which only a chosen few will be saved and they are predestined. No action can change one's status in this regard. God determines everything and whether one does good or bad, one's actions are not going to have any influence on that determination by God. Most of those from the non-reformed churches and organizations, however, do believe that actions can influence salvation. Faith is necessary, but actions can also influence salvation.

If we use reason as the criterion by which to judge which is more rational and beneficial to mankind, then it cannot be denied that the so-called "reformers" are not really reformers. We would be more accurate in referring to them as deformers. Many of the Muslim movements are actually deform rather than reform movements. Some Western scholars, however, persist in referring to them as reformers. For decades they have been talking about certain trends in the Arabian peninsular as reformist. However, in practice, it cannot be said that they are reformers.

Another problem is the equating of Muslim movements with the Protestant movement. There have been suggestions to the effect that what is necessary in the Muslim world today is a Protestant-like movement, a Protestantized Islam that rebels against the orthodox group, the existing dominant group. Unfortunately, some Muslims have also picked up this idea and coupled it with other new concepts, concepts that are actually part of political power struggles. The intention of these political power struggles is to dominate. For example, nowadays we often hear expressions such as "liberal Islam" and "moderate Islam." In reality, there are no such Islams. Islam itself cannot be characterized as "liberal," "radical," "moderate," or "extremist." There are extremists amongst Muslims, there are terrorists amongst Muslims, there are criminals amongst Muslims, and there are corrupt leaders amongst Muslims, but we should not allow them to carve out for themselves a part of Islam by calling the religion "moderate," "liberal" or "extremist."

When it comes to Christianity in Europe, people do not talk in such a manner. People do not use the term "extremist Christianity"; they don't use the term "moderate Christianity." There are many extremist groups in Europe and in the United States. In America, for instance, there are groups that have influenced the presidency and that have had an impact on the outcome of

elections, yet they are not labeled with such names. The term "Christian terrorist" is not commonly used. Now, is it accurate to say that Christian terrorism has been in existence in the modern world for decades? Where is this Christian terrorism to be found? In Ireland! This can certainly be called a form of Christian terrorism. Violent struggle has been going on there for years, yet nobody applies the term to them. Nobody uses the term "Hindu terrorism" in the context of Sri Lanka. The Tamil Tigers are not called "Hindu terrorists." The same thing is true of terrorism among the Buddhists. People do not speak of "Buddhist terrorism." But when it comes to Islam, that term is used quite frequently. This is because of the peculiar historical position in which the Muslim world finds itself in relation to the West.

The West and the Muslim world have had conflicting relations throughout history. Many of these relationships were peaceful; there was trade and other forms of cooperation between them. However, the Crusades and more recently European imperialism functioned to awaken the spirit of resistance among Muslims. During the peak of the expansion of Europe in the 19th century, there was only one international resistance against European expansion, that is, resistance from Muslims. In Africa, India, Southeast Asia, and everywhere there was dominance of Muslims, there was resistance. Many have observed that before the Russian revolution, the only international foe of imperialism was the pan-Islamic movement. Only after the recession of the pan-Islamic movement, around the end of the First World War, did people start talking of "communist imperialism" and the "threat of communism." But now, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there is the need to go back to portraying Islam as the world's foe. Islam has been dissected: we have extremist, terrorist and moderate Islam. Where is the original Islam? And what is meant by "moderate"?

In this regard, I remember some incidents when I was in Holland as a student. I used to come to certain gatherings during the weekends at The Hague. I was staying in Haarlem, near Amsterdam, while doing my doctorate at the University of Amsterdam. I would often have dinner with students at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. The building of the institute was actually a former palace. I used to meet Dutch professors and students, as well as students from India, Indonesia, Iran and the Arab world. The issue of eating pork was sometimes discussed. I said that, as a Muslim, I did not eat pork. One of the Dutch students, sneering and with an air of superiority, feeling that he could eat everything, asked "Why not?" as though it was silly to avoid pork. So, I replied, "Well, I don't eat pork because I don't want to eat pork. What about you? Would you eat horses?" He was silent. I said, "It's allowed to eat horses. You can have horse beefsteaks. Would you eat dogs?" He said, "No." "Would you eat cats?" "No." "Would you eat rats?" "No." I continued, "There

are many people in the world who eat rats. But you avoid certain foods. Yet if I avoid some foods you consider me irrational? What about yourself? You are not able to eat many things that are available. You have your choice." Then I explained to him, "The only difference between you and me," I said, "is that your choice is left to your own imagination. You can decide what you want to eat and what you don't want to eat. It's left to you. My choice is based on the guidance of my religion and many people are guided in the same manner. You are on your own, alone. With me, I'm guided along with many other people. It's not a question of rationality," I said, "It's a question of preference." No Muslim would say that if somebody eats pork he is an evil man. It is just like the vegetarians. The vegetarians do not say just because we are not vegetarians we are evil people. They just say that it is not their way to eat flesh. It is not connected with evil. It is just a matter of preference.

Concerning the use of words and terms, there is a linguistic bias in the study of phenomena such as resurgence and terrorism. To avoid such biases, it is necessary first to listen to the Muslims. Because, if you listen to a Muslim and you are not yourself a Muslim, you can decide which of the two positions you are going to take. The same goes for Muslims. When the Muslim listens to a non-Muslim, he or she must decide which of the two positions he or she is going to take. One has to have an open, rational, investigation into the truth of what the Muslim told him, assessing the facts properly, or take the position of a fool, with no interest and a closed mind, content to pick up one or two concepts here and there and use them. This is what is going on now in the international media. Politicians around the world have started to do the same. This includes politicians in the OIC (The Organization of the Islamic Conference). They themselves use terms such as "radical Islam," "moderate Islam," and so on. They have also started to become apologetic, and anxious due to the perception that their religious community is the origin of terrorism and other negative trends.

I have been involved with battling extremist thinking since my student days. I can even remember the first year of my confrontation with extremist Muslims, young men with sparsely grown beards coming from, I believe, Egypt. They were supporters of the Ikhwan al-Mulimin (Muslim Brothers), conferencing in London in 1950. I happened to be on a holiday in London then and I attended a talk they were giving. I raised a question during this talk. They did not like the question. My question was whether it was necessary to use or to follow every *hadith* found in the collection of Bukhari. After the talk, as I was leaving, two people approached me. With a curious tone they asked me why I asked that question. They stared at me and I sensed then that to argue with them was of no use, as I was alone and did not think they would listen to my arguments. So, I just gave an excuse stating that I just came to find

out. And they let me go. They allowed me to leave without any further questioning. Ever since then, I have rejected this kind of attitude. In Singapore itself during the 1970s, these influences were coming from abroad, particularly from Egypt and Pakistan. But these influences did not include the propagation of violence and terrorism.

The contemporary Muslim world is currently beset by two problems. One is the problem of terrorism, and the other is that of the closed mind. We should be dealing with both problems seriously. As far as terrorism is concerned, it is more of a security problem. At the same time, it is necessary to have people mobilized against it. All religious leaders must participate in this mobilization. The imams of the mosques, the madrasah teachers — all have to be involved in telling people not to fall for terrorist interpretations of jihad.

The Islamic interpretation of jihad is very clear in the Qur'an. Jihad is legitimate only when you are attacked or when you are driven out of your home, and you have to defend yourself. Every community, every sane community in the world, would agree that you can go to war if it is a defensive war. Jihad is nothing more than that. Apart from that, the word has so many other meanings. It is not confined to physical fighting.<sup>9</sup> The problem is to do something about decreasing the influence of terrorists and those with closed minds, without interference from outside. Using confusing terminology will create resistance from some Muslims and dissension within the Muslim community. Such a use of terminology is ultimately counter-productive. It results in a negative outlook towards the Muslim world and thwarts efforts at mobilizing forces within the Muslim world, forces against terrorism. By all rights, the West should be more conciliatory towards those Muslims who are battling terrorism.

An instance of the confusing use of terminology that is inaccurate as well as counter-productive is the term "clash of civilizations." Luckily, no dominant Muslim groups believe in the "clash of civilizations." It is only Huntington and some of his followers who believe in such a concept. Those involved in the conflict do not credit this term. How do you have a clash when those who are supposed to be involved do not believe in the clash? They believe it is political. Look at, for example, Muslim terrorist attacks against Muslim governments. The theorists of civilizational conflict are conceptualizing and articulating themselves in a state of intellectual license. Anything goes, whether it is logical or not, whether it conforms to reality or not. To me, this is one aspect of terrorism — it is intellectual terrorism. Anything goes, blow it up! Surprise people here and there, put some intellectual explosives here and there, and then dominate them in the interests of global hegemonic objectives.

I hope that this discussion of terrorism will lead to a parallel interest in intellectual terrorism.

## Endnotes

1. This is a revised version of the Keynote Address, Conference on Globalization and Religious Resurgence, Singapore, 28–29 September 2005.
2. My first work on corruption was *The Sociology of Corruption* (Singapore: Donald Moore, 1968). Subsequent works include *Sosiologi Korupsi* (Jakarta: LP3ES (2nd ed., 1982) [in Indonesian]; *The Problem of Corruption* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1986); *Corruption: Its Nature, Causes and Functions* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1990) and *Corruption and the Destiny of Asia* (Petaling Jaya: Prentice Hall (M) and Simon & Schuster (Asia), 1999).
3. On August 17, 1945, three days after the Japanese surrender, Soekarno and Mohammad Hatta proclaimed Indonesia's independence.
4. For more details on this period see George M. Kahin, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1952); C. Smit, *De Indonesische Quaestie* (Leiden: Brill, 1952) and Alastair M. Taylor, *Indonesian Independence and the United Nations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960).
5. For a more informed understanding of the concept and practice of jihad, see Moulavi Cheragh Ali, *A Critical Exposition of the Popular "Jihad" showing that All the Wars of Mohammad were Defensive; and that Aggressive War, or Compulsory Conversion is not allowed in the Koran* (Karachi: Karimsons, 1977); and Karim D. Crow, *Jihād: 'Peaceful-Striving' & 'Combative-Struggle'*, Monograph Series, No. 7, Centre for Civilizational Dialogue, University of Malaya, 2005.
6. See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953), 96.
7. These views have not disappeared today. For example, the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi had said in Berlin that "we should be conscious of the superiority of our civilization." (*Washington Post*, September 28, 2001, 'Muslims Call Italian's Take on Islam 'Racist'). Alex Standish, editor of *Janes' Intelligence Digest*, said on BBC's *Hardtalk* (on 17 September 2001) that Islam is a military religion.
8. See, for example, Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
9. For more on jihād, see Ali, *A Critical Exposition*; and Crow, *Jihād*.