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Politics, Plurality and Inter-Group Relations in Indonesia

Strengthening Tolerance in Indonesia

By Jeremy Menchik

Synopsis

In a democratic society where people are free to spread ideas, acts of intolerance are inevitable. There are, however, established strategies to strengthen tolerance.

Commentary

SINCE DEMOCRATISATION began in 1998, Indonesia has been home to radical social movements like the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI). Indonesians have heard recurrent polemics against faith and other minorities from religious leaders and government officials. In a democratic society, intolerance is an unfortunate manifestation of political liberty.

The massive turnout for the 5 November 2016 anti-Ahok demonstration offered a vivid reminder that millions of Indonesians are sensitive to a non-Muslim becoming the political leader of a predominantly Muslim country. While these acts do not negate the success of democratisation, they are a reminder that tolerance must be carefully nurtured and intolerance managed by policymakers.

The State and the Place of Religion

As a result of incessant polemics, many Indonesians today feel unnecessarily threatened by faith minorities such as Christians, Shiites and Ahmadis. Every expression of intolerance should be met with an expression of tolerance. Individuals are less likely to believe polemics when they see that their neighbours, classmates and fellow citizens hold different religious views.

It is exposure to difference that explains why Muslim Indonesians from religiously diverse ethnic backgrounds—Torajan, Nias, Balinese—tend to be more tolerant of Christians than Muslims from religiously homogenous backgrounds like Sasak, Sumbawa, and Sundanese.

The government currently recognises only six religions: Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, Catholicism, Hinduism and Protestantism. Yet Indonesia is home to other religions as well. The programme of the Indonesian Conference on Religion and Peace (ICRP) on local religions is a great example of an effort to educate the public about other traditions, including *Sunda Wiwitan*, Sikhism, and Baha'i.

This public recognition is an important strategy of expanding state tolerance beyond the current truncated system of pluralism. Special attention should also be devoted to educating the police, since they are often the ones that have to defend minorities against intolerant groups. No actor is more powerful than the state in shaping social attitudes.

The current system of pluralism fosters oppression of unrecognised minorities like Sunda Wiwitan. It could be otherwise. Article 1 of the 1965 presidential decree on blasphemy and the defamation of religion states that other religions cannot be banned and makes clear that the Ministry of Religion could recognise other traditions. Rather than forcing all students to be educated in one of the recognised religions, the state should allow students to take a class on comparative religions or ethics or to opt out of religious education.

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah are the backbone of civil society in Indonesia and a bulwark against radical groups. The more that leaders like Abdul Mu'ti, Haedar Nasir, Said Aqil Siradj, and Ahmad Ishomuddin denounce intolerance, the more likely their supporters will be able to defend democracy and pluralism. Denouncing intolerance is not "playing politics," it is a vital manifestation of NU and Muhammadiyah's commitment to tolerance.

Four Don'ts in Studying Intolerance

Thanks to Indonesia's vibrant public sphere, scholars play a major role in combating intolerance. Yet, there are many ways that the study of intolerance could be improved.

Firstly, they need to be precise. Because tolerance is a general value it is easy to lump attitudes toward minorities together. That is a mistake. Over the 20th century, attitudes toward Christians vastly improved, while attitudes toward Shiites and Ahmadis deteriorated. That difference should not be ignored. Similarly, since intolerance can be studied through attitudes, discourse, physical violence, or government policies it is easy to lump them together. That, too, is a mistake. Since democratisation in 1998 and the accompanying violence, physical acts of intolerance toward Christians have declined, but it is not clear that attitudes have improved.

Secondly, they should not misrepresent levels of tolerance in secular democracies. Secular democracies like the United States also face problems of intolerance; no

one paying attention to the white nationalist movements supporting Donald Trump could think otherwise. Indonesia, too, will not resolve its issues of intolerance if the state becomes completely secular. The idea that the West has resolved issues of religious intolerance - while the developing world, or Muslim world, has not - is a dangerous myth.

Thirdly, they should not misrepresent levels of tolerance in the Suharto era. The New Order regime used minority communities instrumentally to shore up political power. Its acolytes massacred hundreds of thousands of suspected communists and demonised their family members. While the New Order was also witness to the emergence of champions of tolerance like Abdurrahman Wahid, it is unclear to what degree Wahid's views reflected those of NU members or Indonesian Muslims; survey data since 1998 suggests that Wahid's views reflected those of only a small minority. The common perception that Indonesia faces a "crisis of intolerance" since democratisation is built on a partial depiction of the New Order.

Indonesia Not Exceptional

Finally, Indonesia is not exceptional. Indonesia's plural legal system is similar to those of India, Switzerland, Canada, Belgium and Spain in providing a mixture of individual and collective forms of recognition. Indonesia's mass Islamic organisations are similar to those of Senegal, Egypt, and Turkey as well as to mass Christian organisations in Northern Europe and Latin America. Pretending that Indonesian Islam is exceptional precludes clear analysis and effective policy recommendations about best practices in the struggle against intolerance.

Indonesia faces many of the same challenges that other democracies face: radical social movements, economic inequality, poverty, inadequate access to good education, and a history of civil conflict. Studying how other states have successfully (and unsuccessfully) addressed the challenge of intolerance can help Indonesia become an ever-more tolerant nation and an example for others to follow.

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