

THE NEXUS BETWEEN RELIGION, RADICALISM AND TERRORISM: HOW REAL? *)

Abdul Mu'ti**)

Religion, radicalism and terrorism are three different matters. Originally, the three have its' own contexts. Religion –specifically- Islam is a set of revelation from God. As implied from its lexical meaning, Islam means peace. The whole teaching of Islam contain prescription for the attainment of individual, collective and universal peace. The teaching of Islam is a mercy from God from the entire creatures in the world. Islam teaches its followers to spread *salam* (peace) for all. It is also the teaching of Islam that every Muslim (the adherent of Islam) begins every activity by reciting the name of Allah, the Most Gracious and Merciful God. No single behaviour of Muslim brought about harmful condition for others. On the other hands, terrorism is a modern phenomenon. It is born at the heart of modernity. The word “terrorism” itself

*) Paper, presented in 23rd Asia-Pacific Roundtable (APR), Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), Malaysia, Sheraton Imperial Kuala Lumpur Hotel, June 2nd 2009.

**) Abdul Mu'ti, lecturer at Faculty of Islamic Education State Institute for Islamic Studies (IAIN) Walisongo, Semarang, Central Java. He is also secretary of Council for Primary and Secondary Education, Central Board Muhammadiyah, Indonesia. Since 2006, Mu'ti also holds a position as vice secretary of Religious Counter-Terrorism Team, formed by Minister of Religious Affairs the Republic of Indonesia.

represents insecurity, fear, hatred and violence. At this point, there seems no relation between religion and terrorism.

In reality, however, there are likely relations between religion, radicalism and terrorism. Terrorists very frequently claim religious mission as their “holy” motivation. Two most common teaching referred to legitimate terrorism and violence are *jihad* and *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (enjoin the good and forbid evildoers). In the Quran, the word *jihad* is mentioned more than 30 times. It is an important teaching of Islam and one of indicators for the quality and degree of faith. Similarly, is *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (to enjoin the truth and forbid evildoers). The phrase *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* appears nine times in the Quran. In some verses, there are instructions for believers to stand for *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*. A very strong command of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* is found in *Sunna* (Prophet Muhammad traditions) within which believers have individual and collective obligations to perform such a teaching. In this sense, there are possible relationships between religion, radicalism and terrorism.

No disagreement among Muslims on the importance of both *jihad* and *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*. But, Muslims do have differences on interpretations and implementation of the two concepts. Although there might be different

categories, in this paper, Muslims are divided into two groups: the radicals and the moderates. There are three main characteristics of the radicals. The first one is the puritan. There is only one single truth, that is the truth from God. The world is divided into two: the truth (*al-haqq*) and the wrong (*al-bathil*). Anything come from God is the truth, anything come from other than God is wrong. Having this point of view, the radicals are intolerance to all kind of teaching and practices other than that of God. The second characteristic of the radicals is scripturalists. They understand the Quran and Sunna literally. Only literal interpretation is acceptable. They strongly reject a rational or contextual understanding of Islam. Finally, the radicals argue that Islam and Muslims are under threat. *Munkarat* (evildoers) are everywhere. It is the time for Muslims to wage a war against enemies of Islam. For them, the West is evil that cause all damages for Islam.

The second group of Muslims are the moderates. This group has three main characteristics as well. In theology, this group believe that Islam is not the only religion of God. They view religions other than Islam such as Christian and Jewish are equally true. This does mean however that the moderates believe in syncretism. They believe in Islam but they also believe that there are shared-truth among religions. Due to this, the moderates are mostly tolerance to other

religions or faiths. The second characteristic of the moderates is their contextual understanding of Islam. According to this group, the Quran and Sunna are inseparable to social, political and religious contexts of revelations. A rationalistic approach of understanding Islam is permissible. Having this understanding, the moderates have a contextual or progressive understanding of Islam and very positive toward modernity. Violence is strictly permitted in a very measurable manner. Finally, the moderates view that Islam not under threat. Islam, as other religions, involve in an open competition. There are challenges that Islam has to deal with. But, these challenges are not exclusively caused by the West. To some extents, they might be deep rooted from Muslims themselves.

In brief, terrorism has no direct relations with Islam as a religion. Terrorism is driven by Muslims understanding of Islam and their perception of the West and modernity in the global contexts. It is this understanding and perception that determine the extent of terrorism.

Terrorism is not exclusively related to Muslims and the Muslim world. While terrorism is more visually pronounced among the Muslims, it is also evident among followers of other faiths, including Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism,

and Buddhism. Religious “radicalism” or “fundamentalism” is by no means limited to Muslims. Across history, terrorism in form of killings, kidnappings, suicide bombings and other kind of violence are performed by adherents of religions other than Islam such as Hindu, Buddha, Christian, Jewish and so on.

In addition, other than the Muslim world, acts of terrorism from the 20th century onward have happened also in Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Angola, Chile, Argentina, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Puerto Rico, and many others. It is true that the deadliest terrorist strikes to date, the September 11 attacks (2001), was said to be done by suicide terrorist associated with al-Qaeda, and other striking terrorist strikes were said to be also carried out by Muslims, but this should not hide the fact that this phenomenon is not only related to the Muslim world.

Terrorism, therefore, might be a universal phenomenon. It develops not only within specific religious groups but also non-religious groups as well. If so, what factors relate to terrorism? There are facts that terrorism has a unique relation with radicalism. But, not all radicalism always relate terrorism. With respect to Muslim world, for example, analysts tend to conclude that terrorism and radicalism are attributable to so-called Salafism. In Muslim world, there

are at least three kind of Salafism: the literal, the political and the reformist. The first two are very radical and in agreement with terrorism. Some of terrorists come from and grew up within these groups. Reformist Salafism, however, is an open toward modernity, inclusive and anti-terrorism. As Muslim, the Reformist Salafism is very keen to practice Islam but they do not reject other religions. They could accept any political system, culture and other values as far as their not contradictory with Islam. They could accept a secular political system if it is agreed by the people and result in prosperity for all.

Radicalism might lead to terrorism if people live insecurity. Cultural, political and economic insecurities are three common conditions that trigger terrorism. Cultural insecurities is caused by fear of loosing identities. These identities could be religious, cultural, language and the like. People might become radical, if they do not have religious freedom. Uniformity under the name of building a united national identity has likely led to radicalism. Cultural, religious or language alienation is a good fertilizer of radicalism. Other than this, cultural insecurities might also caused by the view that a religion or a culture in under threat. Among radicals and fundamentalists, secularism is the most popular “enemy” attributable to the damage of traditional and religious

values. The development of Muslim radicalism in Europe, for example, is brought about by the lack of respect from both government and secular societies. France government policy on *jilbab*, the Fitna film in Netherland, Cartoon Case in Denmark or, the Satanic Verses of Salman Rushdie are examples of cases that stimulate radicalism. Muslim radicalism in this sense is developed as a means of defending religious or cultural identities. On the other hands, the rise of Muslim population might also caused Christian fundamentalism. Christian and European fear of Muslim dominant over European and Christian values. Islamophobia, racism and xenophobia develop among European and Christian are example of modern radicalism. Due to this, radicalism in almost every religion and culture shares the similar characteristics and also similar physical performances.

Political insecurities relate to power. Radicalism develops when people or nation in fear of loosing their political authority. The case of Palestine, Sudan, Southern Philippine, Southern Thailand, Kashmir and other part of the world could possibly caused by the absence of political authorities. Terrorism is carried out as a means of political war or bargaining to gain an independent or political autonomy. In line with this, radicalism also develop as a form of solidarity of the oppressed. For example, the invasion of US allies troops to

Iraq, trigger not only a global demonstration among Muslim across the globe but also among non-Muslim people who against USA. Anti-America increases in many part of the world, especially among Muslims. This is similar to the case of Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. Although Israeli government argues that their attack is directed to Hamas, at the head of majority Muslim, such an attack is an evident of the brutality of Jewish against Islam as mentioned in the Quran. USA and West government policies that hardly condemn Israel are indicators of their back up to the Zionism, a religious movement against by majority Muslims.

Economic insecurity might also relate to radicalism and terrorism. A widening economic gap between the developed and developing countries is a fertile ground of terrorism. There is perception prolongation of poverty in developing countries is caused by so-called neo-colonialism. Hegemony of rich countries to dictate and somehow exploit natural resources of the developing countries create economic radicalism.

Finally, radicalism might also develop as an “answer” for failure of modern system. The failure of capitalism has resulted in the development of sharia economy such as sharia bank, insurance, etc. The failure of democracy for the

creation of better security and prosperity of a nation has raised political fundamentalism that aim at developing an “Islamic political system” under the Caliphate system as proposed by Hizbut Tahrir or, the Madina state system as promulgated by Ikhwan al Muslimin. The increase of crime has been blamed as the failure of secular legal system. This condition emerge the demand of sharia criminal law in some Muslim countries. These modern system failures and the dream of rebuilding an imagined, a complete and holistic Islamic way of life are sources of Islamic militancy and radicalism.

It is important to note that radicalism and militancy do not always linear to terrorism. The two might develop as a way to conserve cultural, religious and traditional identities of people or nation. Despite critics and condemnation, radicalism tend to develop in a very unique and “modern” form. Ideologically, most radicals against modern system. But, this does not mean they totally reject the system. In order to gain a political power, radicals set up their own political parties and participate in a democratic election system. Fundamentalist political parties such as Hamas in Palestine, Prosperous Justice Party in Indonesia and FIS in Alger have been successfully received significant voters. The radicals might have a conservative religious understanding, but they are not anti modern technology. They have a good technology expertise

and utilise modern technology communication to spread their ideology. They have good education and strong network to develop and recruit new members especially among youth. In many countries, including Indonesia, the majority of radicals are young-middle class Muslims who obtained university education and working in professional sectors. They are not mainly Middle-east universities graduate but, a large group of them are West universities alumni.

In the future, therefore, radicalism and terrorism remain a challenge. If countries unable to create a more secure and safer world, radicalism tends to increase and brought about unpredictable terrorism. In this sense, it is important to rethink the use of military power to fight against terrorism. The use of military forces might be effective to reduce terrorism from its external factors and for temporary time. It might be valuable if fighting against terrorism more emphasize on soft power through cultural ways: developing pluralism and multiculturalism, inculcating the culture of democracy and creating a more just economy. This cultural way could also be strengthened by empowering and facilitating the moderates through education, economic advocate, leadership exchanges and regional or international networking.