



ISLAM & LIBERTY NETWORK

Keynote Address
Islamic Civilisation: Four Challenges
Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf

Istanbul Network 5th International Conference Paper 2017
DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD
27th – 28th November 2017

In collaboration with



Lead Sponsor



Co-Sponsors



Islam and Liberty Network was known as Istanbul Network for Liberty

Keynote Address

Islamic Civilisation: Four Challenges

Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf

*Assalaamu'alaikum warahmatullaahi wabarakaatuh,
Alhamdulillah wa syukurillah wassolatu wassalam ala rasulillah sayyidina maulana Muhammad ibni
abdullah wa'ala alihi wasohbihi wassalam.
Ammaa ba'd.*

Distinguished speakers and participants,

I want to firstly express my thankfulness to our host, the Istanbul Network and Mr. Ali Salman for giving me the honour of this speech. Yesterday, we all repeatedly heard one particular question: is Islam compatible to democracy or is democracy compatible to Islam. Well, we are then facing a question about definition. What is democracy and what is Islam?

On a practical level, our question would be: what is the mindset of Muslim public on democracy and what is the mindset that the mass of Muslims has about Islam. We may all agree that democracy is about freedom, rights, dignity, tolerance and peaceful co-existence (diversity) but do the mass of Muslims have the same perception as us? Do they really think democracy is really about dignity, equality, tolerance and so forth?

And then, what is Islam? Yesterday, I had some smoke outside together with one of our friend, Dr. Kemal Bayram, and we had this conversation about the Malaysian Council of Fatwa whom issued a fatwa which forbid Muslims from smoking and that it has already become a law here. So, what do we do? Interestingly, Dr. Kemal said "Well, then I'm not Muslim" because he wants to smoke. So, what is Islam in the minds of Muslim public? What is the reference that the mass of Muslims used to define Islam?

Speaking about this, we need to understand that there are some references that are considered to be the most authoritative references for Muslims to find the "right Islam" because when a Muslim seriously wants to be a good one, then he needs to find a reference to guide him to become a better Muslim. Now, the most authoritative sources or references for guidance that Muslim would look into is first of course, the Quran and the Hadith and actually, also other authoritative discourse of Islamic thoughts that has been developed for centuries. The most authoritative sources among those discourse is the one from the classical discourse of Islamic thought. We are talking about schools of thought like the Shafi', Maliki, Hanbali, Hanafi and so forth. We are talking about the school of thought like Asha'ari and others.

Now, when we are thinking about whether Islam is compatible to democracy or not, we then have to observe the mindset of Muslims about Islam. The question would be: is the mindset of Muslims about Islam compatible to democracy? When we look into the references in classical discourse of Islam, we will find several problematic elements there. I can point out among many problematic elements - four centers of concerns - related to not just democracy but to the nature of our current civilisation.

The first is the teaching about relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. In the classical discourse of Islamic teaching, the dominant view of this matter is that Muslims and non-Muslims are enemies. The basic norm of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims are enmity. That is what's dominant in the classical discourse of Islamic teaching. For example, in the tafsir Quran by At-Tobari, or At-Tabarani or Ibnu Kathir, it was stated that non-Muslims, meaning infidel, is permissible to be killed merely because of their infidelity. That is there in the discourse. We also, for example, have in the very famous book in Shafi' tradition, l'anath Thalibin, whereby it is stated there that Muslims have the collective obligation to do expansive jihad towards

non-Muslims at least once a year. It is there in the discourse. So, we still have this problematic element in the reference that is still considered to be very authoritative among Muslims all over the world. Therefore, the first problematic element is the teaching about the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The second problematic element is the teaching about the conflict of religion itself. What kind of conflict? The category of conflict that is eligible to be considered as conflict of religion. For example, when the Buddhist in Myanmar attacked Muslims there, it is already a legitimate reason for Muslims everywhere in the world to declare war against the Buddhists. I believe you are all aware that these kinds of arguments have also been the arguments that the terrorists groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda used to attract Muslims to join them. Because the infidels from America attack Muslims in Iraq and in the Middle East, then it is a legitimate reason for Muslims to attack any Western infidels all over the world. That is their argument. And it is justified in the classical course of Islamic teaching.

The third problematic element would be the existence of nation states. You see, nation state is now the base of our current world order. The world order we have now is based on the existence of nation states but this is something new and there is no normative base about nation state in the classical discourse of Islamic teaching. What is dominant there in the discourse of Islamic teaching is the obligation for Muslims to struggle for one grand imamate meaning one universal political system under one Muslim ruler. It is in there in the classical discourse of Islamic teaching.

Then, the fourth problematic thing would be the status of state laws as the alternative of Shariah. How would Shariah see the state laws? State laws that are produced by modern political processes, by democracy. Is it an obligation for Muslims to follow the state laws or should they reject the state laws and follow the Shariah instead? Is following state laws such as the traffic regulation an obligation for Muslim, a "Shariah obligation" for Muslim, or is it just a worldly affair not related to religion? All these are centers of our concern regarding Islamic teachings because it is still recorded in the most authoritative references of Islamic teaching.

If you want the Muslim world to go towards democracy then we need them to ultimately accept some relevant views such as Muslims should view others - non-Muslims, the infidels - as equal members (citizens) of this global society and Muslims should treat them without enmity and without discrimination or segregation. If Muslims are not willing to have this view, then democracy is not for them because democracy demands equality among fellow citizens. If we want the Muslim world to accept democracy, then we should demand Muslims communities to accept the view that people must not use religion as justification for political conflict anywhere in the world because if they do so, then any conflict in any part of the world would be seen logically as a universal conflict of religion. We have to demand for Muslims to accept the existence of nation state as a political system binding all the citizens - Muslims and non-Muslims - equally and not pursuing the Khalifate because once they do that, they will end up doing what ISIS and Al-Qaeda do, pursuing Khalifate and then triggering conflicts all over the world. We have to demand Muslims to accept state laws as the result of legitimate modern processes to bind their lives all together with their fellow citizens - Muslims or non-Muslims - and not using Shariah as justification to defy the state, the laws or to raise for rebellion against the government.

While we have the reality that many, maybe most Muslims, still see these authoritative references, this classical discourse of Islamic teachings, to be the most authoritative reference for religious guidance, then we will always face the challenge of Muslims being radicalised in the name of authoritative Islamic teaching. Earlier this year (2017) in May, our organization, the Nadhatul Ulama, held a gathering of Ulamas from all over the world. We had more than 300 Ulamas from at least 20 different countries gathered. As a result of that conference, we declared what we call as a Declaration on Humanitarian Islam. The view is that we have to think about how Islam can contribute more positively to our current human civilization. What we have been witnessing at least for these last 30 to 40 years is that this world is facing continuous problems from the direction of Islam, like problems of terrorism that still show no sign of decreasing.

Therefore, to back the effort so that Islam can be seen a positive contribution to our current civilisation, we then have to deal with our internal problem first. The problem of Islam. This reference is a problematic element fuse in Islamic teachings but it is still there and considered to be authoritative by many Muslims. This must be resolved. Thus, what we call for in the Muslim world is to re-contextualize Islamic teaching because we are now facing a very different reality than what it was there when the discourse of Islamic teachings was created.

The classical discourse of Islamic teaching emerged in the era when Muslim world was relatively integrated into one consolidated political and territorial system with the Ottoman Empire ruling most of the era. In that time, conflicts between Islam and other religions would be seen as conflict between different states such as Ottoman against European states whereby the war was a fight amongst soldiers. Nowadays, we have the reality whereby Muslims live together with non-Muslims everywhere in the world in the same neighbourhood. If allow conflicts of religion to occur, what will happen would be a social catastrophe that most certainly would lead to genocide - genocide of Muslims living as minority within non-Muslims majority and genocide of non-Muslims living in Muslims majority society. So, the conflicts of religion in the context of our current reality is just not acceptable.

The thing is, we need a significantly powerful alternative view on Islamic teaching - altering the old established view of Islamic teaching, at least regarding the centers of concern I mentioned. Of course, we have many others to discuss on the elements of Islamic teaching but these four centers of concerns are the most critical thing we have to deal with. We need to be honest to deal with this problem. The way I see it, what ISIS did was that they want to force the reality of today's living to be following what is in the source of Islamic teaching. Everything they did, they have the justification from the authoritative references of Islamic teachings. That should tell us that we need to re-contextualize those elements of Islamic teaching so that Islam would be compatible and harmoniously functioning in our current civilization, not just to democracy but to the entire civilization that are living today.

Without re-contextualization, having democracy as a formal procedure for political processes in Muslim countries would produce even more problems because there we will find political actors who want to use these problematic elements of Islamic teaching as a weapon for their political purposes to gain support and to gain legitimacy. It will be very dangerous to the whole society because when Muslims are called to these kinds of cause, they will be willing to sacrifice anything because they see it as defying obligation of God if they do so. We see this all over the Muslim countries - from social unrest to civil wars. That also means that when we talk about transitions of democracy in Muslim world, we should also consider Muslims living in non-Muslims world because we are living in a less bordered reality now. This is a borderless world we are living in now. Whatever happens in Muslim world will affect the life of those in non-Muslim world. Whatever Muslims do in their society where they are the majority will affect the lives of Muslims living as minority in other parts of the world.

Thinking about this, I will say that we need to be aware and acknowledge that we are facing a civilizational problem here and it is not just for Muslims to do something about it because it concerns the whole world. It concerns the whole human civilization where 1.6 billion Muslims live among 7.6 billion citizens on this planet. Thus, whatever direction this thing go will then determine the fate of the entire planet.

Is it possible to do such re-contextualization like we proposed? We believe that it is possible. Why? Because we actually did it in Indonesia. In Indonesia, our Muslim leaders produced an alternative discourse about the state regarding the relationship among group of different religions. We produced an alternative discourse on all those four centers of concerns. Moreover, we manage to make this alternative view of Islam dominant among our Muslim society in Indonesia. However, it does not mean that we have no more problem. We still face challenges and theses challenges keeps coming over and over and we have to deal with it frequently. But up until now, we manage to survive, meaning we were able to keep these other views of religious teaching dominant among our Muslim society.

Now, this is not just about creating a new alternative discourse as an intellectual effort because the problem that we have is also related to authority. We have many different ideas in the market but which ideas would be adopted by the mass of Muslims? That is a matter of authority. Which ideas are considered authoritative or are more authoritative than others? This is also a problem of authority and authority is a function of politics. This is not just about winning the debate of new ideas versus the old ideas but it is also about political struggles. The way we manage to keep our alternative views dominant, we do it through a political struggle. So now what we need is to control it globally to face this challenge together.

Thank you.

Wassalaamu'alaikum warahmatullaahi wabarakaatuh.



Yahya Cholil Staquf

Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf serves as General Secretary of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Supreme Council.

As the world's largest Muslim organization—with over 50 million members and 14,000 madrasahs—the Nahdlatul Ulama adheres to the traditions of ahlussunnah wal jama'ah (Sunni Islam), and teaches that the primary message of Islam is universal love and compassion. Descended from a long line of prominent Javanese ulama (religious scholars), KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf was educated from earliest childhood in the formal and esoteric (spiritual) sciences of Islam—first by his father, grandfather and uncle, of the renowned Bisri family of Rembang, Central Java, and subsequently by Kyai Haji Ali Maksum (1915 – 1989) at his madrasah in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. KH. Ali Maksum was himself a direct disciple of Shaykh Umar Hamdan al-Makki (1858 – 1948) and Shaykh Hasan Masshat al-Makki (1900 – 1979) of Mecca.

KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf was a member of Indonesia's National Electoral Commission during that nation's successful transition from authoritarian rule to democracy, and served as presidential spokesman to Indonesia's first democratically-elected head of state—Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, who himself headed the Nahdlatul Ulama for 15 years prior to his election.

KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf serves as co-chair of the Council's "Countering Violent Extremism" working group as part of the newly created U.S. – Indonesia Council on Religion and Pluralism. In addition to his management of Raudlatuth Tholibin Madrasah in Rembang, Central Java, Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf is responsible for coordinating the execution of policy between the Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council and its Executive Board, and also for the expansion of NU operations to North America, Europe and the Middle East. In this capacity, he is coordinating NU efforts to help transcend the increasingly polarized and strident debate on Islam that has paralyzed most Western societies, and prevented the adoption of policies that would effectively address the multi-faceted threats posed by Islamist extremism, terrorism and a rising tide of Islamophobia in the West.

In pursuit of these objectives, Shaykh Yahya co-founded the U.S.-based organization Bayt ar-Rahmah li ad-Da'wa al-Islamiyah Rahmatan li al-'Alamin (The Home of Divine Grace for Revealing and Nurturing Islam as a Blessing for All Creation) in December of 2014, to serve as a hub for the expansion of Nahdlatul Ulama operations in North America, Europe and the Middle East, and to consolidate the global ahlussunnah wal jamaah (Sunni Muslim community), "in order to bring about a world in which Islam, and Muslims, are truly beneficent and contribute to the well-being of all humanity." Shaykh Yahya is a member of Bayt ar-Rahmah's board of directors and its Director of Religious Affairs (modir).

Contact: staquf@yahoo.com