

特別寄稿

INTRA- AND INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA: A Participant's Point of View¹

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There is no doubt that Indonesia is a very diverse country, consisting of more than one hundred ethnic groups, living on separate islands and following different religious beliefs and practices. It is not surprising, therefore, if the slogan of the Indonesian state is *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (unity in diversity). The slogan is an indication of the dream of the Indonesia's founding fathers that the diversity of the country should become the source of social and cultural richness rather than conflicts and disintegration.

History tells us, however, that this dream is not easily realized. At the very beginning, immediately prior to the declaration of independence in 1945, national leaders engaged in a serious debate on the basis of the state. One group argued for a secular nationalist ideology, while another aspired to an Islamic nationalist ideology. The two groups finally reached a compromise in which Indonesia was defined as neither secular nor Islamic, but somewhere between the two. It was more or less, a nationalist and multi-religious state. This compromise, expressed in a state ideology called *Pancasila* (Five Principles), has not been maintained without challenges. At times, certain

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Islamic groups tried to change the state ideology into an Islamic ideology, while at some other times, secular oriented groups also tried to impose secular interpretations of Pancasila, and pushed for state policies which marginalise the Islamic groups. However, today Pancasila is still the common platform for the highly plural Indonesia.

Of course, ideology is not the only important political issue in the country. There are other important problems like social and economic gaps between the rich and the poor, between the densely populated Java island and the outer islands, between the Javanese, the largest and dominant ethnic group, and the other ethnic groups, between indigenous and migrant ethnic groups, and last but not least, between a religious majority and religious minorities. These issues are sometimes more important than that of ideology, but they could be expressed in ideological terms. Rebellious movements in the late 1950s like Darul Islam and PRRI, could not simply be understood as ideological struggles. Social and economic gaps certainly contributed to the rise of the rebellions. On the other hand, without neglecting the politico-economic basis of the conflicts in Ambon and Poso during the last days of Soeharto and the early years of the Reformation Era (Klinken 2007 and Wilson 2010), the issue of religion and even nationalism (especially in Ambon where the Christians have been stigmatised as supporters of the rebellious RMS movement) still politically matters. The ideological issue has been even more openly expressed during the Reformation Era by Islamic political parties like PPP, PKS and PBB, as well as by Islamic organizations such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, Majelis Mujahidin and Ansharut Tauhid. The issuing of the regional shari'a regulations in certain provinces of the country is also obviously ideological (Bush 2008; Mujiburrahman 2009).

Thus, the problems faced by the Indonesian government and society to maintain national unity are quite complicated. Various attempts have been taken by the government and civil society to maintain social harmony across the country, and one such endeavor is to encourage intra- and inter-religious dialogue. In this paper, I would like to discuss the development of intra- and

inter-religious dialogue in Indonesia, based on my personal observations and experiences as a participant in dialogues on various occasions and places in Indonesia, especially during the last decade.

An Historical Overview of Dialogue in Indonesia²

Dialogue as a programmed meeting of religious believers to attain mutual understanding and cooperation is apparently not an activity with a long history. In fact, it was initially proposed during the second half of the twentieth century by Christian religious leaders, but received positive responses from leaders of other religions. The dialogue program in Indonesia was started by the 1960s, and such dialogues have been subsequently initiated by the government as well as private organizations. Those dialogues were organised to achieve one or more of the following ends, (1) to end recent conflicts; (2) to support government programs; (3) to find common grounds related to religious differences; and (4) to establish mutual understanding and cooperation between different religious groups.

Abdul Mukti Ali, a McGill University graduate interested in the academic study of comparative religion, is generally recognised as the father of inter-religious dialogue in Indonesia. He organised inter-religious dialogue in his own house and attended international inter-religious dialogue programs in the early 1960s. In 1972, Soeharto appointed Mukti Ali as Minister of Religious Affairs. If we look at the context of Mukti Ali's appointment, we can understand why he was chosen. From 1967 to 1970, there were serious tensions between Muslim and Christian national leaders on the issue of religious freedom, religious propagation, and foreign aid for religious institutions. In Aceh, a newly built Methodist Church was closed by Muslims, and in Makassar, people attacked Church buildings and other Christian facilities. The tensions led the Parliament

² The following description is based on the author's previous work. For a more detailed historical overview and discussion, see Mujiburrahman 2006, especially Chapter 6; and Mujiburrahman 2010.

to an endless debate. The government also organised a meeting for religious leaders in Jakarta, but ultimately they could not reach a substantive agreement. Mukti Ali was apparently considered the most appropriate man to solve the problem of inter-religious tensions in the country.

One of the programs under Mukti Ali's administration was the religious harmony project (*proyek kerukunan*). The project was generally designed to create harmonious relations among religious leaders, and to support the government's development projects (modernization). Some of the programs in the project were dialogues for religious leaders, camping for students of tertiary religious institutions, and social research on inter-religious relations in different places of Indonesia. Mukti Ali suggested that inter-religious dialogue should be based on agreement to disagree. In fact, Mukti Ali's dialogue programs tried to avoid sensitive issues like theological differences. The simple target was to help the leaders of religious groups (or the potential leaders in the case of university students) to know each other, and to support government's efforts to modernize the country.

Mukti Ali was then replaced by Alamsjah Ratu Perwiranegara in 1978. Alamsyah, a military man, was previously a private assistant to President Soeharto. He was actually the man behind the first inter-religious dialogue in Indonesia called *Musyawahar Antaragama* (Inter-religious Consultation) held in November 1967. Alamsjah continued the religious harmony project during his term in office. As an army general, he was apparently able to obtain more funding to run the program. However, he actually did not believe in the effectiveness of dialogue to establish inter-religious harmony. Inter-religious harmony, for him, could only be attained if religious groups were controlled by regulations. Because the regulations were generally in favour of the Muslim majority, the minorities, especially the Christians, were opposed to them. In the eyes of the Christian minorities, Mukti Ali was preferable to Alamsjah.

Nonetheless, it was Alamsjah who proposed the trilogy of harmony, namely

intra-religious harmony, inter-religious harmony, and harmony between religious groups and the government. Thus, Alamsjah's religious harmony project was divided into these three categories. The idea of a trilogy of harmony apparently made the purpose of the project more obvious for the New Order regime. Intra- and inter-religious harmony were considered necessary to establish socio-political stability which was needed to pave the way for the government's development projects. Moreover, the government also needed support from religious leaders for its development projects, and therefore, harmonious relations between the two (the government and religious groups) were important too. For instance, without support from religious leaders, it would be very difficult for the government's birth control program to succeed.

The religious harmony project initiated by Mukti Ali, and further developed by Alamsyah, has remained one of the most important projects of the Ministry of Religious Affairs up to the present. The project has been carried out by the central government in Jakarta, especially the Office for Religious Research and Development, as well as the Ministry of Religious Affairs at the provincial and district levels. Regularly, every year, one or more meetings are organised for leaders of different religions to discuss inter-religious issues. Similar meetings are also organised for intra-religious dialogue, particularly between Muslim leaders of different organisations. Scholars from the Office for Religious and Research Development (sometimes in cooperation with scholars of the State Institute of Islamic Studies) also carry out several research projects related to inter- or intra-religious issues. In short, the Indonesian government spends a significant amount of money for the religious harmony project.

On the other hand, at least by the early 1980s, some religious leaders felt unsatisfied with the government project. First, they found that inter-religious meetings organised by the government were not effective in establishing mutual understanding and cooperation among religious groups. This was because meetings tended to be very formal, and the agenda was usually dictated by the government. Second, dialogue tended to be a tool to support and

to legitimate the government's development projects. In fact, negative impacts of development projects were already being felt, especially in the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and in the destruction of environment. Third, tensions between the Muslim leaders who wanted to turn Indonesia into an Islamic state, and the religious minorities who felt threatened by them, gradually decreased because of the emergence of proponents of a non-ideological view of Islam called the 'reformation movement' (*gerakan pembaharuan*). It was this Muslim group who became the proponents of dialogue.

The first approaches apparently came from Protestant circles in Jakarta. In the early 1980s, the Indonesian Church Communion organised a so-called 'Seminar on Religions'. The Seminar was attended by the leaders of different religions. This seminar has been regularly held to the present. In 1991, important religious leaders of various religions established the Institute for Interfaith Dialogue (Interfidei) in Yogyakarta. Around the same period, young activists of Nahdlatul Ulama established the Institute for Islamic and Social Studies (LKiS), also in Yogyakarta. In Jakarta, in the mid-1990s, several religious scholars and activists established MADIA (Majelis Dialog Antaragama/Council of Inter-religious Dialogue). These institutions run various programs for discussion, research, publication and conflict resolution.

Towards the end of the New Order period (in the late 1990s), Indonesia witnessed inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflicts in different parts of the country. In East Java, a riot erupted and numerous churches were burned by rioters. In Ambon, and then Poso, Muslims and Christians attacked each other resulting in thousands of death. In response to the incidents, the government organised inter-religious meetings. Likewise, private religious organizations also initiated meetings to end the conflicts. Private institutions which focussed their programs on dialogue like Interfidei and MADIA, were busy with dialogue too. Interfidei also established 'branches' in various provinces called 'Forlog' or 'Forum Dialog'. One of their important programs was conflict resolution.

After the fall of Soeharto in 1998, inter- and intra-religious tensions did not decrease. The transition from the authoritarian Soeharto regime to the Reformation Era was not smooth. Muslim-Christian conflicts in Ambon and Poso still ran a few years before they finally stopped. After the New Order period, Indonesians have enjoyed relatively high degrees of freedom of speech and association. Islamic ideologically oriented groups previously suppressed by the government have now re-emerged, and people no longer fear expressing their political ideologies and opinions in the public sphere. This eventually causes problems of intra-religious harmony, especially the harmony among Muslim religious groups, to significantly increase.

Some Personal Experiences and Observations of Dialogue

During my fieldwork in Indonesia in 2003 to early 2004, I observed and sometimes participated in intra- and inter-religious dialogue. Since completing my PhD in 2006, I have also been invited to speak in intra- or inter-religious meetings in different places in Indonesia. In this section, I would like to discuss those experiences and my observations which hopefully can help us understand the dynamics and complexity of dialogue in Indonesia.

Intra-Islamic Groups Dialogue

When I was doing my fieldwork in Jakarta in October 2003, I attended a book launching in the luxurious Plaza Bank Mandiri. The program was organised by Paramadina, a private organization led by the prominent Indonesian Muslim intellectual, Nurcholish Madjid. The title of the book is *Fiqih Lintas Agama* (Islamic Law on Inter-religious Relations). The book is actually a collective work, written by a number of Muslim thinkers, both junior and senior,³ and it was distributed to the market in early 2004 (Madjid et al.

³ The authors of the book are Nurcholish Madjid, Kautsar Azhari Noer, Komaruddin Hidayat, Masdar F. Mas'udi, Zainun Kamal, Zuhairi Misrawi, Budhy Munawar-Rachman, and Ahmad Gaus AF, while the editor is Mun'im A. Sirry.

2004). Madjid gave the opening speech, which was then followed by a discussion of one of the sensitive issues analysed in the book, namely inter-religious marriage. The speakers were Dr. Zainun Kamal from the State Institute of Islamic Studies, Jakarta, and Dr. Musdah Mulia, from the Office of Religious Research and Development. In short, the two speakers came to the conclusion that inter-religious marriage is allowed for Muslims (Kamal and Mulia 2003). This view is clearly in opposition to the fatwa of the Indonesian Ulama Council issued in 1980, which prohibits Muslims to have inter-religious marriage. The discussion during the book launch was quite open and lively, and no violence occurred.

When I did my fieldwork in Makassar, in January 2004, I was surprised by the fact that the controversy on inter-religious marriage, and discussion (pro and con) of the book *Fiqih Lintas Agama* was quite hot in that city. The Muslim scholars from Wahdah Islamiyyah, an Islamic organization with Salafi-Wahhabi orientation based in Makassar and branches throughout Indonesia, were angry about the book. They managed to arrange a discussion of the book under the theme 'Critical Studies of the book *Fiqih Lintas Agama*'. The theme, however, was finally changed into a more general topic: 'Scientific Dialogue on Pluralism and Tolerance in Islam'. The invited speaker was Qasim Mathar, a liberal Muslim scholar of the State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN), Alauddin, Makassar and a regular columnist for the local newspaper, *Fajar*. The Wahdah Islamiyyah was represented by two scholars, Muhammad Ikhwan Abdul Jalil and Muhammad Said Abdussamad, both of whom apparently graduated from Madinah University. Although the venue of the discussion was a building of the IAIN, Alauddin, the participants were mostly students from Wahdah Islamiyyah. Only a few participants were IAIN students. The male and female students were separated by curtain, and the female students wore *hijab*.

Qasim Mathar was given the opportunity to talk first. His speech was slow and calm but rather provocative. He said, "I have studied different schools and movements in Islam, and I found that those differences were because of the

Qur'an. If the Qur'an were put down in the forest, the leaves of the trees would be more useful than the Qur'an. If the Qur'an were just put in the market, it would be not different from other goods. The Qur'an becomes important only when it is understood and interpreted by human reason." Qasim Mathar apparently wanted to assert that different interpretations of Islamic authoritative sources are inevitable. He then went on to say that, to establish inter-religious tolerance, especially between Muslims and Christians, both groups should eradicate the trauma of history. For Muslims, he said, they should follow the Qur'anic injunctions that religious plurality is God's will. So, what Muslims should do is to compete in doing goodness in this life. With regard to inter-religious marriage, Qasim Mathar said, opinions which prohibit it or allow it, are both valid as Muslim efforts to understand God's will (*ijtihad*). "Let history prove which interpretation is more relevant to our age," he said.

In response to Qasim Mathar's presentation, M. Said Abdussamad said he followed Qasim Mathar's regular columns in the newspaper, and he agreed with many ideas presented in the columns. However, with regard to Qasim's views of religious tolerance, he disagreed. He said, the Qur'an clearly urges Muslims to say to non-Muslims: Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion. It is not enough to say that Muslims should compete in doing goodness. This view would mean that the Muslim is not sure about the truth of his/her religion, and the falsity of other religions. He also said that there is already a consensus among the Muslim scholars in Indonesia on the prohibition of inter-religious marriage. Thus, the new opinion allowing inter-marriage is opposed to the consensus. M. Ikhwan Abdul Jalil then added that Islam was revealed as the last religion abrogating all previously revealed religions before Muhammad. He also said, Muslims should not easily trust the Christians by being tolerant. The conflicts in Ambon and Poso, he said, should be a good lesson for Muslims.

During the dialogue, many participants raised their hands, and the moderator gave some of them an opportunity to speak. Most attacked Qasim Mathar. One of the participants who was given the opportunity to respond was

an IAIN student. He stood up and said loudly through microphone, “I know that most of you disagree with Qasim Mathar’s tolerant and pluralist views. But I myself agree with him. I think we should follow his views if we want to have inter-religious harmony...” He suddenly stopped talking, and apparently fell down because a few of Wahdah Islamiyyah students hit him. The seminar became chaotic. Many participants left the seminar building, including the IAIN student. He said loudly, “I will take revenge!” When he was outside the building with a crowd, a Wahdah Islamiyyah teacher said to him, “Do you want to take revenge? Please hit me!” Without further ado, the IAIN student hit the teacher. Everybody was shocked for a moment. Then, many students of the Wahdah wanted to attack the IAIN student, but their teacher prevented them. “It is finished, it is done,” he said. They finally shook hands to forget and forgive what happened.

The Makassar case is not the only experience I have regarding the problems of intra-religious dialogue among Muslims. From 2007 up to the present (2011), I have participated in several intra-Muslim dialogues. Tensions frequently arise during the discussion. On one occasion, I was invited to be a moderator of a discussion on the issue of Islamic brotherhood. It was in Banjarbaru, a district 20 kilometers from the capital, Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan. The speakers were Muhammad al-Khattath, the national leader of Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), Anwar Abbas, the national leader of Muhammadiyah, and Said Agiel Siradj, the leader of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). These three speakers were considered representatives of different Islamic organizations in Indonesia: the Muhammadiyah is reformist, the NU is traditionalist and the HTI is transnationalist.

From the very beginning, the organisers realized that tensions could easily emerge. Therefore, they asked me as a moderator to manage the discussion in such a way that everybody could feel comfortable. Having made a few introductory remarks, I gave the first opportunity to al-Khattath. As the leader of the HTI, he explained that his organisation’s primary work is in the field of

politics. The HTI's ambition is to achieve global unity of political Islam under the so-called 'khilafah system'. For him, every Muslim should struggle for global political supremacy, and the enemy is apparently nothing other than the United States and Israel with their global capitalist economic hegemony. When the khilafat is established, Islamic law (*shari'a*) will be implemented. The second chance was given to Said Agiel. He said that NU accepted the Indonesian state, and that for NU Pancasila is final. Pancasila can be accepted because it is in line with Islamic values. The state could accommodate Islamic rules if they are approved by the Parliament. However, to follow the shari'a, Muslims do not always need the state. He then attacked what he called 'formal Islam'. For you who have a beard, I will say that it is not an important mark of being a Muslim. Remember, Abu Jahal, the enemy of Prophet Muhammad, also had a beard. And you, Muslim women who wear the head covering. You must know that head covering is only one tiny rule in the Qur'an. Most of the Qur'anic teachings talk about justice, equality and protection of the weak," Said Agiel said.

The HTI activists and supporters, who heard Said Agiel Siradj's remarks were hot and angry. Before giving a chance to Anwar Abbas to speak, I whispered to him. "Please try to calm down the situation!" He said, "Yes, do not worry!" Then I began. "Ladies and gentlemen, our last speaker is Anwar Abbas. He is an economist. We must listen to him because, it is possible that the different views between al-Khattat and Said Agiel are not that important compared to the economic problems." Anwar Abbas then took his chance. He started with a kind of play. "Please answer 'yes' if you agree with my statement, and 'no' if you don't." He then asked, "Do you agree that all Muslims in Indonesia should be rich?" "Yes...." said all participants together. "So, let's forget our differences, and start thinking about our common interest: the economic interest." Everybody then seems to feel relieved and laughed. The discussion afterwards was still hot, but did not lead to violence.

The third case which I want to present here is the discussion on my book,

Mengindonesiakan Islam (Indonesianizing Islam), published in 2008. The book is actually a collection of papers previously presented in seminars or published in academic journals. As a collection of papers, it was difficult for me to find a suitable title. The publisher, Pustaka Pelajar Yogyakarta, finally gave it this title, and I just agreed with it. When the book reached the public, it triggered a bit controversy, in particular its title. Because of this controversy, the book was discussed in public with my presence at least three times: twice in my hometown, Banjarmasin, in Pekanbaru and then in Bandung. The book was also discussed in the Office of Religious Research and Development of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Jakarta, but without my presence.

During the discussions, I found that some of the participants already suspected me of being an agent of the West because I graduated from McGill University in Canada, and Utrecht University in the Netherlands. Moreover, the introduction to the book was written by a Dutch scholar and my former PhD supervisor, Karel A. Steenbrink. They said to me that, to Indonesianize Islam means to humiliate Islam. Islam is universal, and therefore, everything should be Islamised, not the opposite. In response to their criticisms, I said that to Indonesianize Islam is not to make everything in Islam Indonesian. The rituals, for instance, should be maintained as they are. What can be Indonesianised is simply its cultural and political dimensions. It is not a humiliation. It is actually an effective way to integrate Islam into Indonesian politics and culture. “I cannot love womanhood. I have to love a concrete woman. Likewise, I cannot love Islam unless it is manifested through our culture,” I said. I believe that many of them did not accept my ideas, but many others did. The point is that the ideological issue is still an unresolved problem in Indonesia, especially among the Muslim groups.

In addition to the dialogues organised by Muslims privately, the government also has a regular program for intra-Muslim dialogue, part of the intra-religious harmony project. I have been invited to speak at several dialogue sessions, especially those held in South Kalimantan and organised by the Ministry of

Religious Affairs. The speakers usually include a representative of the reformist and traditionalist Muslims plus an academician. I have been considered as representing the last category. The program is called '*Pembinaan Ukhuwwah Islamiyah*' (Rearing the Islamic Brotherhood). The participants are usually the head of the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) which is found in every subdistrict. Thus, they are actually civil servants or bureaucrats, not necessarily leaders of Islamic organizations.

The discussion during this kind of dialogue is sometimes lively too. The issues which attract more attention include the unresolved difference among Islamic groups in Indonesia in deciding the beginning and end of Ramadan every year. Many Muslims felt unhappy with the fact that the government's decision on the day of Idul Fitri is sometimes different from that of the other Islamic organisations. In 2011, for instance, Muhammadiyah celebrated Idul Fitri one day earlier than the government. Other issues like terrorism and radicalism on the one hand, and liberalism on the other, sometimes trigger hot discussion too. The most sensitive issue, however, is the issue of politics within the Ministry of Religious Affairs (because the participants work under this Ministry). It is a public secret that when the Minister of Religious Affairs has a reformist background, like during the New Order, most of the high echelon officials are usually of the same background. On the other hand, during the Reformation Era, the Minister has usually had a traditionalist background, so the high echelon officials also have the same background. The question asked is, how can the civil servants in the Ministry maintain Islamic brotherhood if one's career is not based on merits, but on identity politics (organizational background)? Although usually there is no clear solution to this problem, it is important that the participants dare to talk about it openly, something which was certainly difficult to do during the New Order period.

Inter-religious Dialogue

In 2006, a joint decree of the Minister of Home Affairs and the Minister of

Foreign Affairs was issued. The decree regulates the procedure to obtain permission to build a place of worship, a controversial issue since the early years of the New Order. Besides this important regulation, the decree also demands the provincial and district level governments establish a Forum *Kerukunan Umat Beragama* (Religious Harmony Forum/FKUB). FKUB members consist of the representatives of the six religions officially recognised by the state, namely Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism and Islam. The government facilitates but does not interfere in the process of selection of members or the leader of the FKUB. It is somehow democratic, but at the same time, voting is not allowed in making any decision. All decisions should be based on mutual consultation and agreement (*musyawarah mufakat*).

In its report on religious life in Indonesia in 2009 (Cholil et al. 2010), the Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies at Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, notes that an FKUB has been established in almost every province and even every district. In certain places, a similar organization already existed with a different name, in which case people just turn the organization into an FKUB. In other places, it was difficult to found the FKUB for reasons such as disagreement about who would represent of a certain religion, while in fact, there are various schools within the same religion. In one province, the establishment of the FKUB was postponed simply because of the political rivalry between the Vice-Governor and the Governor, who are to compete in the forthcoming gubernatorial election.

Apart from those difficulties, the FKUB is a positive initiative from the government to enhance religious harmony in the country. The budget of the FKUB programs is included in the provincial and district government budget. This means that it is primarily taken from the budget of the local government rather than that of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. In some provinces and districts, the government allocates a significant amount of money for the FKUB programs. Therefore, whether the FKUB is an effective organization to

establish religious harmony or not will depend on how the members of the FKUB develop their programs. Based on my own observations, there are effective FKUB programs like organising discussions on inter-religious issues, publication, meeting with religious leaders in the grassroots, and research. However, like other government funded institutions, the FKUB members sometimes also spent a lot of money for so-called 'comparative study' (*studi banding*). It is apparently an official way to get free travel, and therefore it is generally not useful.

On a number of occasions, I attended some meetings organised by the FKUB, or other meetings organised by the Ministry of Religious Affairs which were attended by the FKUB members. In most cases, I was invited to be a speaker. In those meetings, the discussion on inter-religious issue was quite open. Muslims still talked about the threat of Christian missions, while Christians lamented their difficulty in obtaining permission to build new churches. Government regulations on religious issues were also discussed. At the end of the meeting, sometimes participants made a joint statement regarding their commitment to maintain religious harmony. The joint statement was then quoted by the press.

In some cases, however, I spoke to meetings where the Muslims were very dominant, and in which other religious minorities apparently did not dare to speak. I was also unhappy with Muslim leaders who spoke in the inter-religious meeting using Islamic terms unknown to the believers of other religions. In these cases, the dialogue certainly did not work. It is interesting that the lively and open discussion usually occurred in the meetings for young participants like high school or university students. I spoke to meetings of young students twice, one for a national meeting, and another at the provincial level, both held in Banjarbaru. I was impressed by the fact that they were very serious in their eagerness to establish inter-religious harmony in the country. According to the organizers, by the end of the program, the young generation of different religious backgrounds embraced each other, indicating their close and warm

relationship.

Another interesting experience is that, in the meetings funded and organised by the government, the participants were generally not attracted to jokes on religion. For instance, I said that many Chinese are rich because the way they pray is different from that of the Muslims. The Chinese use burned incense and move it up and down, like somebody who is poking at fruits of a tree by a stick, while the Muslims just hold his/her hands with palms upward, like somebody who is waiting for something to fall down. I also told another joke. A Muslim father is very sad because one of his three sons converted to Christianity. He prays to God, asking Him to return his son to Islam. One lonely midnight, the Muslim father finally hears a voice: "Why are you sad? You have three sons, only one converted to Christianity. I have only one son, and he is Christian." To my surprise, no body laughed for the jokes, and perhaps, they consider them blasphemy.

I found jokes like these in the circles of cross-religious activists. For these people, that kind of joke is acceptable. These activists often organised inter-religious meetings, and sometimes I was invited to participate or speak in the meeting. In my hometown, Banjarmasin, inter-religious meetings are usually organised by an NGO called LK3 (*Lembaga Kajian Keislaman dan Kemasyarakatan*/the Institute of Social and Islamic Studies) and Forlog. In Makassar, similar activities are organised by an NGO called LAPAR (*Lembaga Advokasi dan Pendidikan Anak Rakyat*, Institute for the Advocacy and Education of the People) and Forlog. In Jakarta, among the NGOs involved in inter-religious dialogue is the Wahid Institute, founded by the former president, Abdurrahman Wahid.

In 2007 and 2008, I was invited by the Wahid Institute to present a paper in workshops on Islam and pluralism, the first in Jakarta and the second in East Java. The participants were the ministers and religious teachers of the Indonesian Christian Church (Gereja Kristen Indonesia, GKI). The GKI

ministers and members have mostly been Chinese, but its ecumenical orientation makes this church also open to non-Chinese. In both meetings, I talked about the historical development of inter-religious tensions in Indonesia. The discussion was quite intense but friendly, and I found the Christians very open. The program seems to have been funded by both sides, the Wahid Institute and the GKI. After the workshop, the Christian participants were invited to spend some nights in Islamic boarding schools to have a personal experience of living in a Muslim religious environment. I cannot judge how effective this program is in fostering mutual understanding and cooperation between Muslims and Christians, but it is obviously a positive initiative.

In September 2010, I got an email from a minister of the GPM (Gereja Protestan Maluku/Mollucan Protestant Church) inviting me to present a paper in a GPM meeting in Ambon. I did not personally know this minister, but he said that he had met me the previous month in an international seminar organised by the State Islamic University, Sunan Kalijaga. I finally agreed to come to the meeting, hoping to have more experiences in a place where Muslims and Christians used to kill each other. I then realised that I was the only Muslim who was to speak in the meeting. I tried to talk openly about problems of inter-religious issues in Indonesia. The discussion was lively and inspiring.

After the meeting, one of the GPM ministers approached me, and asked me to come to his church. "What do you want me to do?" I said. He said, "We want you to talk about Islam and its views of other religions, especially Christianity." I agreed, and so that evening I was picked up and taken to the church, a church which is about a hundred years old. When I arrived, many people were already waiting for me. I start talking about various schools in Islam and their different attitudes towards non-Muslims. I also expressed my appreciation to them for their open mindedness. "It is hard to find a Muslim group inviting a Christian to speak in a mosque," I said. The dialogue was long and lively, lasting about two hours. I received a lot of information about Ambon conflict

and the politics behind it, and I got the impression that Ambonese are very regretful for what happened during the conflict and want to maintain the existing peace.

While the above experiences were with Protestants, it is also important to mention my experiences engaging in dialogue with Catholics. In 2009, I was invited by a Catholic representative in the Ministry of Religious Affairs, South Kalimantan Province, to speak to Catholic religious teachers coming from South, Central and East Kalimantan. I spoke about the importance of mutual respect and understanding, and the challenges of globalization to all religious believers. A senior Catholic religious teacher then responded, saying: “Honestly speaking, when I heard your name, I suspected that you are a fanatic and anti-Christian. Having heard your presentation, I found that my judgement is wrong.” It seems that the dialogue helped eradicate suspicion. On another occasion, namely during the last Ramadan, the Forlog and FKUB of South Kalimantan Province organised an afternoon discussion which closed with a meal to break the fast. The discussion was on the role of religion in fighting corruption. The venue of the discussion was the Catholic Santa Maria Hall, Banjarmasin. The two speakers before me were extremely critical about the many cases of corruption in Indonesia. They seemed to be very pessimistic. When I got the chance to speak, I said that we should have to have hope. We should be optimistic. “A long time ago, a meeting of religious leaders in a Catholic place like this was almost unimaginable. But now it happens. So, we have our strength, and we have a common interest to fight against corruption,” I said. Many participants were apparently happy with my words.

Conclusion

It is clear in our discussion above that Indonesians take the diversity of the country, especially the diversity of religion, as a serious matter. The government’s continuous religious harmony project and the recent establishment of the Religious Harmony Forum in all provinces and districts

obviously indicate that the government is very aware of the importance of dialogue and cooperation among religious groups. Of course, bad experiences of inter-religious conflicts push the government to be more attentive to intra- and inter-religious issues. Besides the government, certain elements in civil society have also made significant contributions to the establishment of religious harmony, especially through the dialogue programs. Their efforts to develop a more open dialogue with a wider purpose, not simply to end current conflicts, but more importantly to establish mutual understanding and cooperation, have enriched the content and impact of the dialogue. In some cases, the activists involved in dialogue came together to help people affected by the tsunami and earthquake in Indonesia. This in a way challenged the more formal dialogue initiated by the government.

The present political democracy is a challenge as well as a good opportunity for the proponents of dialogue in Indonesia. Following the fall of Soeharto, people have enjoyed freedom of speech and association. The print and electronic media are relatively free to report news and opinions, and therefore, dialogue can now be enjoyed everyday. Now, even religious preachers should open up opportunities for his or her audience to speak. Moreover, Indonesians, like many other people in the world, are living in an open globalised world facilitated by sophisticated communication technology. People can easily access information in a very fast and inexpensive way. However, sometimes one may feel annoyed with the conflicts of ideas and opinions. Moreover, it is quite clear now in Indonesia that freedom eventually can lead to anarchistic actions (*kebebasan yang kebablasan*). The violent attacks on Ahmadiyah by radical Muslims in Bogor in 2005, and on activists of the National Alliance for Freedom of Religion and Belief in Jakarta in 2008, are examples of how freedom of expression crossed its limits, abusing the freedom of others.⁴ Thus, the serious challenge to the proponent of the dialogue is how to make dialogue an effective

⁴ I do not discuss the Ahmadiyah case in detail, despite its importance, simply because I did not have the opportunity to attend a dialogue on the Ahmadiyah issue. For studies of this case, see Avonius (2008), Suaedy (2010) and Sasaki (2010).

way to manage differences. Difference is a reality. One cannot deny it, but should live with it. Therefore, one should try his/her best to manage the difference in a just and peaceful way.

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