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Indonesia's 'big idea': Resolving the bitter global debate on Islam

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As Dr Hassan Wirajuda, the editor-in-chief of *Strategic Review,* recently observed in the pages of this journal, for Indonesia to earn its place as a leading figure in the community of nations, it must do so not as a producer of raw materials, but of ideas - and more specifically, "big ideas" that will help shape the world of tomorrow in a manner beneficial to humanity at large.

Men and women who embody the exemplary values of our ancient culture, including its profoundly spiritual view of religion, constitute what may be Indonesia's most geopolitically significant - and certainly its most unique - strategic asset. This is especially true in light of what the late Indonesian president and Islamic cleric Abdurrahman Wahid called the "crisis of misunderstanding" about Islam that afflicts so many Muslims and non-Muslims throughout the world. "Dry grass burns fast and hot," warns an old Javanese proverb, whose truth is on display whenever and wherever a harsh, narrow and rigid *(ie, spiritually arid)* interpretation of religion gives birth to hatred, supremacism and violence.

One of Indonesia's leading intellectual and spiritual figures, former Muhammadiyah chairman Dr Syafii Maarif, referred to this vexing issue when he said, "The Shariah we know today is the result of *ijtihad*, or centuries-old human reasoning, and thus time-bound. As a result, a huge project such as creating an Islamic system of governance [as desired by many contemporary Muslims] is extremely difficult, if not impossible, without rethinking the very basis of our ideas about Shariah. Small, narrow minds cannot provide a solution to the problems facing Muslim societies today. We need big, broad minds to understand the fundamental message of the Quran as *rahmatan lil 'alamin* - a source of love and compassion for all humanity - and how to bring this message down to earth."

Because of its particular cultural and historic circumstances, Indonesia is uniquely positioned to help lay the foundation for a cultural, theological, legal, political, intellectual and spiritual renaissance of the Islamic world that will enable Muslims to build a bridge between their traditions and the modern world of freedom, democracy and human rights. In the words of Wahid, Indonesia can help "restore honor and respect to Islam, which the extremists have desecrated," and "restore the majesty of Islamic teachings as *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, which represents a vital key to building a peaceful world."

Indonesian spiritual leaders can also help resolve the increasingly polarized and strident debate on Islam that has paralyzed most Western societies since 9/11. This institutional deadlock, which prevents North American and European governments from effectively addressing the complex array of threats posed by extremist ideology, terrorism and a rising tide of Islamophobia in the West, jeopardizes the prospects of a peaceful and harmonious future for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Indonesia is capable of leveraging its remarkable depth of human capital in the fields of culture and religion to attain a high degree of geopolitical influence, and the respect this will naturally inspire among other nations and peoples. However, such influence can never be acquired through mere talk, pretense or manipulation that presents our nation as a model of pluralism and tolerance while ignoring the very real threats to these values in Indonesia itself. Rather, for such an endeavor to succeed, it must be guided by spiritual leaders who live the values they expound, and whose sincerity and lack of self-aggrandizement is evident to all who meet them. It is only such men and women who can achieve the desired transformative effect by visibly demonstrating how religion may function as a source of universal love and compassion for all sentient beings.

The proper role of government in this endeavor may be glimpsed through the wisdom of *lakon wayang kulit* (shadow puppet stories) and their recurrent theme of the king who welcomes a visiting *resi* (enlightened sage) to his palace. Humbly vacating his throne in the presence of one who knows Reality, the king implores the resi to sit upon it, while instructing the ruler and his ministers in the principles of good governance and how to achieve a state of self-transcendent awareness of, and surrender to, Divine will (in Old Javanese, *mokso* or *nirvana*; in Arabic terminology, the state of *islam**). The cultural and spiritual message embedded in this particular aspect of *wayang* is that government officials imbued with wisdom recognize and act in the interests of humanity, rather than self-interest alone.

Serat Joyoboyo, ascribed to the 12th century ruler of Kediri, explains this principle in another famous aphorism: "Although

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a ruler has the body of a human, he or she should have the characteristics of a Divine Being, armed with the sacred trident (honest, grounded in Truth and free of egotistical self-interest); be obedient to holy sages (*resis*), whose unshakable grip upon the sacred trident is embedded in their very souls; and live to serve the people."

Little known in the West due to the vagaries of colonial history, the East Indies archipelago has long been home to one of the most advanced civilizations on earth, whose ancient wisdom gave rise to the philosophy of *bhinneka tunggal ika* ("Oneness Amid Diversity") and served to unite a linguistically, culturally and religiously diverse population by focusing on commonalities rather than differences. This apprehension of the underlying spiritual unity of creation - including all humanity (referred to in Arabic as *ummah wahidah*) - informs Indonesia's Constitution and state ideology of Pancasila, and explains why the 16th-century Muslim founders of the second Mataram dynasty deliberately established freedom of conscience for all Javanese, a full two centuries before the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and the Bill of Rights separated church and state in America.

As many devout Muslims realize, the Quran urges us to tell those who embrace an earlier revelation: "We believe in that which has been bestowed upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed on you; for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that we [all] surrender ourselves" (Quran 29:46). Or as Wahid often told his fellow Muslims: "It's impossible to understand Islam if you don't understand [the spiritual essence of] other religions."

Indonesia's strategic significance to the Muslim world and the West is rooted in this "big idea" and its manifold ramifications for international peace and security, as well as the continued economic, social and spiritual progress of humanity. For this concept of *tawhid*, or Oneness, which emerges from the depths of human experience through the Divine encounter (in states known, in Arabic, as *fana* and *baqa*), addresses both the spiritual poverty of the modern world and the rise of Islamist extremism and terrorism. Each, in its own way, threatens the economic, technological and philosophical foundations upon which the entire edifice of modern civilization is built.

As I Made Mangku Pastika, the governor of Bali and a retired police general, stated in May 2007: "I've interrogated everyone we've arrested in Indonesia for the commission of terrorist acts in the name of Islam. Finally, I came to the conclusion that they idolize Shariah [without understanding it], and are completely ignorant of *haqiqa* [Reality/Truth] and *ma'rifa* [Gnosis, or direct apprehension of God]. Had they reached the level of *haqiqa* and *ma'rifa*, it would have been impossible for them to commit such [horrific] acts."

The fact that a Balinese Hindu such as Governor Pastika, who cracked the first Bali bombings case and brought the perpetrators to justice while scrupulously observing the rule of law, could precisely diagnose the nature of the problem and solution, speaks volumes regarding the strategic significance of Indonesia's human capital.

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Yet obviously, there is no guarantee that Indonesia's unique potential in the realm of cultural and spiritual diplomacy will ever be realized. The projection of strategic influence requires power, systematically and intelligently applied over time to achieve specific goals. Doing so in this complex field will require an effective public-private partnership. It will also require that a critical mass of Indonesia's elites candidly acknowledge and address a number of factors that not only obstruct the realization of this potential, but threaten to undermine and destroy its very foundations.

It is a sad commentary on Indonesia's state of moral and cultural decay - and a damning indictment of its leadership - that our population at large should retain a greater appreciation of and commitment to the values and traditions of their ancestors, than do many of our governing elites. Opportunistic politicians and political parties continue to empower a small minority of extremists who are bent upon disrupting the social and political harmony of our nation and undermining the very pillars upon which our national unity is built, in pursuit of their illusory ideal of an Islamic state.

As a consequence, a nation once renowned for religious pluralism and tolerance is now better known for savage attacks upon its Christian, Ahmadiyah and Shiite minorities, while government officials stand idly by or even persecute the victims of such attacks. Political parties ally themselves with religious extremists, while striving to neutralize moderate mass organizations such as the Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, to prevent their functioning as voices of moral authority that will hold the government accountable for its egregious acts and omissions. Complicit in this abdication of moral responsibility, all too many religious figures cultivate the appearance of virtue while determinedly pursuing their own egocentric agendas, and thus cooperate with self-serving politicians in the dissipation and debasement of our sublime heritage and the institution of religion itself.

It is scant consolation to point out that worse conditions prevail in many other nations. Yet there is hope and reassurance in the fact that the Indonesian people, by and large, recognize these failings and continue to adhere to the principles of mutual respect and harmony in their private lives, due to a profoundly spiritual understanding of religion. This attitude is the deliberate result and precious legacy of systematic inculcation over a period of many generations, as is evident from the lyrics of the often-recited and widely beloved mystical poem, *Suluk Tanpo Waton* (Without Rules), which combines Arabic-language *salawat* (musical chants beseeching God to bless the Prophet

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Muhammad) with a characteristically Javanese cultural and aesthetic sensibility:

I seek forgiveness from God,
the Lord of all creatures
I seek forgiveness from God, for
all my transgressions
Lord, grant me increase of knowledge that
is solely for the good (of all creation)
and guide me to perform pious deeds
(for the benefit of all creatures).
O Messenger of God, may peace be with you!
O (you,) who (help) to elevate the stature, and state, of one's soul
(to feel the presence of God)
O (you,) whose love embraces all sentient beings
O beloved (of God,) the Most Generous One, the Giver (of life itself).

I raise my voice in song
to praise the Lord
The Giver of immeasurable joy and blessings
both day and night.

Oh my companions, male and female
Don't just study Shariah (Islamic law)
or merely be clever at reading and writing stories (about religion).
In the end, this will lead to nothing but misery.
Many who memorize the Quran and hadith
love to condemn others as infidels
while ignoring their own infidelity (to God)
their hearts and minds still mired in filth
easily seduced by anger and passion
amid the glittering temptations of this world
jealous and envious of their neighbors' possessions
for their hearts are full of darkness, and contemptible.

Come, brothers and sisters, let's not forget
our duty to study (Islam) and travel (the path to God)
strengthening and relying upon (our)
faith in His Divine Oneness.

A life distinguished by nobility, leads to a noble death.
A life distinguished by nobility, leads to a noble death.

The term "pious" refers to one
who has a good heart
for he or she is firmly established in the essence of (spiritual) knowledge
having followed the path of Sufi brotherhood, until direct cognition of God
and Ultimate Reality (were achieved).

The primordial Quran (is a) noble revelation.
Unwritten, (yet) it can be read.
That is the advice of an enlightened guru.
So let us embed (the uncreated, eternal Quran) in our breasts
and fix it in our hearts and minds with
a hook (that can never be extracted)
infusing every cell and organ of our bod-

ies (with the primordial Quran).

Let us learn from the noble Messenger (of God),
so that he may serve as a compass
on the path leading to (true) faith
in God, the Most Pure and Holy.

Hold fast (to these teachings) day and night
through physical and spiritual exercise and worship.
Don't neglect to follow the path to inner perfection
and practice the remembrance of God
(so that we may enjoy) a tran-
quil life and feel at peace,
for inner tranquility is the sign of (true) faith
patiently accepting life, whether (rich or) poor
for all is destined by the Lord.

As for friends, family and neighbors
who live in harmony
do not quarrel (or interfere with their lives)
for that is the example offered by the no-
ble Messenger (of God)
our role model, the Prophet Muhammad.

Come, let us put (these teachings) into practice
and God will elevate our (spiritual) stature.
Although our worldly (status, and/or adher-
ence to the formal rules of Islam) may be poor
yet our spiritual state shall be noble.
And when we come to the end
our souls shall not be lost
(but rather,) unite with God in paradise
our corpses, and the white cloths that en-
velop them, pure and fragrant.

O Messenger of God, may peace be with you!
O (you,) who (help) to elevate the stat-
ure, and state, of one's soul
(to feel the presence of God)
O (you,) whose love embraces all sentient beings
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ous One, the Giver (of life itself).

Opportunistic politicians and political parties continue to empower a small minority of extremists who are bent upon disrupting the social and political harmony of our nation and undermining the very pillars upon which our national unity is built, in pursuit of their illusory ideal of an Islamic state.

Although shaped by a distinctively Javanese aesthetic, the metaphysical perspective expressed in this poem is that of traditional Islam as observed by a majority of Muslims worldwide, who practice a form of religious piety directly or indirectly derived from Sufism. Muslim theologians grounded in the spiritual traditions of Islam often distinguish between a "muslim" (ie, one who is truly surrendered to the Divine, in a state of complete self-transcendence) and a "Muslim" (one who professes the formal religion of Islam, but who may or may not have realized, and lived, its essence).

Similarly, Muslim scholars throughout the world often distinguish between "islam" (the actual state of ego annihilation and moment-by-moment awareness of, and surrender to, Divine Will) and the formal religion known as Islam. According to this definition, muslims who practice islam may or may not actually profess the formal religion of Islam, for not all are followers of the Prophet Muhammad (cf Quran 2:132, 2:133, 3:52 and 5:111). Significantly, the Quran itself

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uses the terms "muslim" and "islam" primarily in this spiritual sense, rather than to refer specifically to the followers of Muhammad, or the formal religion of Islam - connotations that became dominant after the death of Muhammad, with the institutionalization of religion in the context of expanding Arab military and political power.

From the perspective of Sufism, this distinction between "muslim" and "nominal Muslim" (and between "islam" and "nominal Islam") is neither academic nor of minor import for an individual or society at large. Rather, it is the distinction between true and artificial (or "institutionalized") faith. As the Spanish-born Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), commonly hailed as Shaykh al-Akbar, or the Greatest Master, wrote: "My heart has become capable of every form; it is a pasture for gazelles and a cloister for Christian monks, and a temple for idols, and the pilgrim's *Ka'bah*, and the tables of the Torah and the book of the Quran. I follow the religion of Love, whichever way his camels take. My religion and my faith is the true religion."

The renowned poet and jurist Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207-1273) expressed a similar idea when he wrote: "The difference among men results from the outward name; when you reach the inner meaning you reach peace. Oh marrow of existence! It is because of the perspective in question that there is a difference between a Muslim, a Zoroastrian and a Jew … Every prophet and every saint hath a way, but it leads to God; all the ways are really one." Or as the Persian Sufi poet Shabistari (1288 – 1340) explained, "The journey of the pilgrims is two steps and no more: one is the passing out of selfhood, and one towards mystical Union with the Friend … By counting beads, repeating prayers and reading the Quran, the infidel does not become a muslim. The man to whom true infidelity is revealed becomes disgusted with pretended faith."

These brief quotes - characteristic of Islam's prominent and illustrious spiritual tradition - are cited to illustrate the extent to which Indonesian Islam is, in fact, representative of Islam as understood and practiced by a majority of Muslims worldwide. Steeped in spiritual and aesthetic refinement, traditional Islam breathes forth the fragrant scent of love and compassion, which arises spontaneously from the state of inner peace. This profoundly experiential view of Islam as *rahmatan lil 'alamin* is capable of preserving and deepening Muslims' faith, while disarming those (non-Muslim and Muslim alike) who prefer to characterize Islam as a religion of hatred, supremacism and violence.

Prior to his death in December 2009, our friend Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, who fully recognized these facts, set in motion a pair of interrelated endeavors to help realize Indonesia's strategic potential as an engine of spiritual progress for humanity. The first of these, the International Institute of Quranic Studies (IIQS), seeks to help restore Islam to the pristine beauty and truth of its original message, as revealed by the Quran and the life of the Prophet Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him peace. Operating with its initial center of gravity in In-

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donesia and Egypt, the IIQS aims to unite academicians and spiritual ulama in meticulously researching - and systematically disseminating - the pre-dogmatic original message of Islam as a true blessing for all creation, in which reason and faith in Holy Scriptures (*'aql* and *naql*) peacefully coexist in a state of Divine Illumination (*'irfan* and/or *ishraq*).

The IIQS mission is to develop schools of Quranic interpretation that combine the best of classical exegetical methodologies with those of modern scholarship, and to ground this scholarship in a profoundly spiritual understanding and experience of Islam that is capable of deepening and broadening, rather than destroying, Muslims' faith. In doing so, it seeks to establish a lasting foundation for a renaissance of Islamic pluralism, tolerance and critical thinking, and foster the necessary conditions for the development of just societies and the protection of universal human rights throughout the Muslim world, so that Islam may truly function as *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, or a source of love and compassion for all God's creatures.

The second endeavor consists of a systematic effort to help educate and mobilize Western governments, civil society and public opinion at large, to address the complex array of threats posed by Islamist ideology, terrorism and a rising tide of Islamophobia in the West. This strategic endeavor, jointly undertaken by the Nadhlatul Ulama and LibForAll Foundation, seeks to develop a broad center-left to center-right coalition in North America and Europe that will unite the "humanitarian left" and "national security-oriented right" in forging the societal consensus required to marginalize and discredit both Islamist extremism and its mirror phenomenon in the West,

For what we are facing today is even more dangerous than physical acts of terrorism: that is, the onslaught of extremist ideology, which is provoking a visceral backlash in the West, in an ever-escalating cycle of hatred and violence.

namely Islamophobia. This entails preventing the instrumentalization of Islam for political purposes, whether by Muslim extremists or by Western politicians, political parties and/or their ideological allies, and helping to ensure the ascendency of a pluralistic, tolerant and spiritual understanding of Islam throughout the world, including the Sunni and Shiite heartlands of the Middle East.

The stakes are high, and the challenge enormous. For what we are facing today is even more dangerous than physical acts of terrorism: that is, the onslaught of extremist ideology, which is provoking a visceral backlash in the West, in an ever-escalating cycle of hatred and violence. Decades of petrodollar-financed Wahhabi/Salafi proselytization have coarsened Muslims' understanding of their faith and stoked the extreme intolerance that again and again erupts in horrific bloodshed and destruction that dominate the world's headlines.

Many ignorant people, who have never studied the Quran in depth, are quick to adopt a narrow and literal interpretation of the text. One can see for oneself who is committing terrorist acts and gauge just how extensive their understanding of religion is. Such analysis will conclusively demonstrate that the problem stems from a profound lack of knowledge about their own religion. The extremist does not see Islam as a whole, and he certainly has not yet plumbed the ultimate spiritual depths, and unity, of Islam. Such people are easy targets for exploitation by those who promote extremist ideology. The ignorant and foolish are their primary targets. For people who live a rich life of the mind, and are spiritually literate, cannot be indoctrinated with hate-filled, supremacist ideology because they will simply spit it out in disgust if it's fed to them. They want nothing to do with such ideology, because they know that it conflicts with human nature as endowed by God and the primary message of Islam itself.

People who study the Quran need to know and understand the context of its revelations. If we wish to apply its teachings in our present age, we must be familiar with the context of what we are reading. We cannot directly apply everything we see in the Quran to our present context. Contemporary Muslims often commit this error, with grotesque results. They claim to act on the basis of the Quran, but in ways that completely violate its spirit.

As a result of extremist actions, animosity towards Islam and Muslims is rapidly escalating in the West. This includes well-organized efforts to legally declare that Islam is not a religion, but a subversive political ideology whose adherents are not entitled to the constitutional protections and freedom afforded to other faiths. On the other side of the political spectrum are those who minimize the threat of Islamist extremism, seek to limit freedom of expression and ostracize or punish anyone who dares to discuss the very real problems that exist within Muslim communities in the West and throughout the Islamic world.

Thus, an essential step - if the US and other Western nations are to establish a rational, sound and mutually beneficial policy towards Islam and Muslims - is to depoliticize the issue of Islam within their respective societies and create a bipartisan/international consensus.

Thus, an essential step - if the US and other Western nations are to establish a rational, sound and mutually beneficial policy towards Islam and Muslims - is to depoliticize the issue of Islam within their respective societies and create a bipartisan/international consensus. Its goal, as Wahid wrote in an opinion piece in *The Wall Street Journal* in 2005, is to "illuminate the hearts and minds of humanity and offer a compelling alternate vision of Islam that banishes the fanatical ideology of hatred to the darkness from which it emerged."

Indonesia is uniquely positioned to help bring this about. For in a world torn by conflict between competing ideologies, it continues to produce men and women whose nonsectarian vision remains every bit as pluralistic, tolerant and spiritual as that of our founding fathers. In the words of Indonesia's Kyai Haji Yusuf Chudlori: "I do not long for a return to Muslim domination of the world, or the establishment of an Islamic state. No. The 'triumph of islam' that I dream of is one in which Muslim intellectuals and ulama spread the true values of islam: the values of mutual love, compassion and respect. That is the form of Islamic power, the *triumph* of islam, of which I dream."

This is a message capable of uniting humanity. A message that people of every faith and nation can readily accept and embrace. A message guaranteed to ensure Indonesia's long-term geopolitical and strategic significance in the realm of "big ideas" that contribute to the well-being of humanity … but only if we choose to act upon it.

⋆ *Please note that we deliberately use alternate spellings of the word Islam/islam, in order to distinguish between the formal religion of Islam and the state of consciousness known as islam.*