

Reconceptualizing Islam in Southeast Asia: Cosmopolitan Public Intellectuals in Perspective

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Abstract

Muslim public intellectuals who are academics in local universities across Southeast Asia are said to be a rare breed. Even more rare are those who display cosmopolitan sensibilities and outlooks. This article examines the case of two Muslim cosmopolitan public intellectuals and their attempts at reconceptualizing Islam. Chandra Muzaffar and Azyumardi Azra and their notions of “Qur’anic justice” and “Islam Nusantara” are placed into focus to illustrate how public intellectuals in Southeast Asia challenged dominant discourses about Islam in the region. Their ideas and intellectual activism provide us with new inroads into the study of cosmopolitanism outside the European context.

Keywords: activism, civil society, cosmopolitanism, dialogue, Islam, justice, public intellectuals, Southeast Asia

Introduction

In the context of Islamic debates in contemporary Southeast Asia, there is a notable lack of public intellectuals, who—according to Pierre Bourdieu’s definition—demonstrate a degree of “freedom with respect to those in power,” and engage in “the critique of received ideas, the demolition of simplistic either-ors,” while showing “respect for the complexity of problems.”¹ The general impression that emerges from a cursory survey of contemporary studies of public intellectuals in the region, as it is elsewhere, is that they are in a state of decline and disappearance due to over-specialization, bureaucratization, marketization, and marginalization by states and societies alike.² Writing some four decades ago, Hussein Alatas went as far as to argue that intellectuals are confronted with a widespread *bebalisma* (stubborn ignorance) that made it almost impossible for any forms of intellectualism to take root and shape the minds of the public in developing societies across Southeast Asia.³ Until the sea change in political climates and the advent of the Internet age in the late 1990s, public intellectuals in Southeast Asia faced similar state impediments and were often subjected to scare tactics and detention.

It is for these reasons that a critical discussion of public intellectualism in Southeast Asia becomes all the more important. This article furthers the frontiers of research on Muslim intellectuals in Southeast Asia by showing how their ideas reflect a much-neglected cosmopolitan outlook in the region. As such, I hope to ground Walter Mignolo’s concept of “cosmopolitan localism” within Southeast Asian realities and provide further evidence that there is no need to necessarily take on board Immanuel Kant’s ideas as the frame of reference or even the starting point for the study of cosmopolitan intellectualism in Southeast Asia. Kant, as Mignolo forcefully indicates, “should be taken as *a local ideal of a cosmopolitan world, the European idea*. Since such imperial cosmopolitanism now is untenable, it is necessary to reduce Kantian legacies to size for there are many other local histories in which cosmopolitan projects emerge.”⁴

I will discuss the ideas of two cosmopolitan public intellectuals—Chandra Muzaffar and Azyumardi Azra. There are several reasons

why I selected these intellectuals, foremost being that they are vigorous in airing problems and challenges in their respective countries and in Southeast Asia, in general, at the present moment. In addition, these figures are linked to a network of intellectuals in the Muslim World and enjoy international reputations. They are members of the sixth generation of Muslim intellectuals in Southeast Asia, who began their intellectual pursuits in the 1980s and were confronted with “the deepening penetration of global Islamic fundamentalism as well as global mass-culture and Western liberal values.”⁵ Finally, I chose these two intellectuals because, although they are academics based in universities, they resisted the prevailing tide of the “marketization of the university”⁶ by publishing in both scholarly and popular avenues and by writing outside their fields of specialization. Their ability to straddle the divide between the two worlds—the scholarly and the popular—sometimes at the risk of denial of promotion, constant censure by their own institutions, and even imprisonment, makes them a fascinating group worthy of critical scrutiny.

I call these intellectuals, who are engaged in the project of popularizing ideas through their writing and political engagement, “cosmopolitan public intellectuals.” The two concepts that will be examined are Qur’anic justice and Islam Nusantara. These concepts are neither mere abstractions nor figments of fantasy. They are what could be described as practical concepts, which challenge prevailing discourses about Islam in Southeast Asia while pushing the boundaries of thinking about what it means to be a Muslim. Before discussing these concepts in detail, it is pertinent to define what I mean by “cosmopolitan public intellectuals” in describing Azra and Muzaffar.

Defining Cosmopolitan Public Intellectuals

Perhaps the most authoritative definition of public intellectuals and their representations is provided by Richard Posner who sees a public intellectual as the following person:

[A public intellectual is a person who] expresses himself in a way

that is accessible to the public, and the focus of his expression is on matters of general public concern of (or inflected by) a political or ideological cast. Public intellectuals may or may not be affiliated with universities. They may be full-time or part-time academics; they may be journalists or publishers; they may be writers or artists; they may be politicians or officials; they may work for think tanks; they may hold down “ordinary” jobs. Most often they either comment on current controversies or offer general reflections on the direction or health of society. In their reflective mode they may be utopian in the broad sense of seeking to steer the society in a new direction or denunciatory because their dissatisfaction with the existing state of the society overwhelms any effort to propose reforms. When public intellectuals comment on current affairs, their comments tend to be opinionated, judgmental, sometimes condescending, and often waspish. They are controversialists, with a tendency to take extreme positions. Academic public intellectuals often write in a tone of conscious, sometimes exasperated, intellectual superiority. Public intellectuals are often careless with facts and rash in predictions.⁷

In the light of the above, I define cosmopolitan public intellectuals in the following manner. They are, first of all, well acquainted with pertinent local, regional, and global issues of their time, just as they are interested in practicing Muslims so as to discern at first hand the many trials of daily life. They are, therefore, not in the ivory tower, bereft of any real contact with the common man. They are not mere armchair theorists or scholarly priests whose works no one reads or knows about. Because they see themselves as an integral part of the people about whom they are writing, these intellectuals display a strong awareness of (and adherence to) religious faith. Islam, for them, is not just an inherited identity. It is not something that they are merely born into without any real attachment or meaning. For these intellectuals, Islam is a frame of reference, their basis for thinking and contemplation, and their source of inspiration in advocating universal values, inclusiveness, and social justice in society.

Cosmopolitan public intellectuals are also activists in that they campaign for reforms in Muslim societies. This vocation inevitably has implications for non-Muslims, given the multicultural and interconnected social landscapes of contemporary Southeast Asia. Indeed, the activism of these intellectuals is more often than not amplified and felt even by those who are beyond their reach because of advances in information technology. As Dale Eickelman sharply observes: “[T]he proliferation and increased accessibility of the means of communication in today’s global society, together with the rise of mass education, has increased the power of intellectuals to communicate and of audiences to listen and discuss.”⁸ To expand the scope of their activism, cosmopolitan public intellectuals affiliate themselves with a plethora of mainstream institutions and independent organizations. However, they also maintain critical stances towards the institutions with which they are associated, especially when the politics, policies, and positions of these institutions and organizations run counter to the common good.

More crucially, cosmopolitan public intellectuals transcend parochial paradigms in their own societies. They censure extreme secularism and oppressive liberalism that give little space for religious voices in public debates. They are opposed to the puritanical interpretations of Islam that limit the use of reason and rationality. They are cosmopolitan because they demonstrate a judicious fusion of what is relevant from the intellectual heritage of Islam with what is best from other traditions to devise new solutions to the challenges affecting Muslims.⁹

Chandra Muzaffar on Qur’anic Justice

Justice is one of the pertinent issues that preoccupied cosmopolitan public intellectuals in Southeast Asia. This is barely surprising given that the region has been beleaguered by injustice born largely out of authoritarian rule especially after the rise of nation-states. Media control, the crippling of civil society activism, ethnocracy, crony capitalism, and one-party dominance are among the effects of authoritarianism in the region.¹⁰ Several decades of illiberal democracy and harsh rule produced worsening economic disparities, social distancing between groups in

society, the widening of underclass populations, and the expansion of the proportion of the urban and rural poor. The Bumiputera and Pribumi policies in Muslim-majority countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, respectively, as well as the continued discriminatory policies against the Muslim minorities in Singapore have contributed to distinct social inequalities and the migration of persecuted minorities to countries outside Southeast Asia.¹¹

A noted cosmopolitan public intellectual who spoke the truth about injustice is Chandra Muzaffar. Before examining Muzaffar's intellectual elaborations, it is important to note that his personal background shaped his long and firm commitment towards justice and cosmopolitan ideals. Muzaffar was born a non-Muslim in 1947. He belongs to Malaysia's minority Indian community and grew up in a relatively privileged household within a multi-ethnic society. He recounts vividly that his "family was Indian and Hindu but there was a Chinese amah in our household from the time I was born. A Malay driver was also part of the family. The community I grew up in was also multi-ethnic."¹² His conversion to Islam was preceded by his commentaries on religious issues in Malaysia and by his interactions with his doctoral supervisor, Syed Hussein Alatas, a famous Malaysian public intellectual. Upon completing his PhD in Malay Studies in 1977, he garnered a reputation as a critic of both the state and society by writing many books as well as opinion pieces in local and international newspapers and periodicals. Many of these writings highlight the inequalities caused by the residue of feudalism in Southeast Asia which formed the subject of his doctoral thesis.¹³

Because of his unwavering critique of the existing political and social order, Muzaffar's appointments as a professor at the Scientific University of Malaysia (USM) and the University of Malaya (UM) were relatively brief. In October 1987, he was arrested under the Internal Security Act for his involvement with a Malaysian human rights organization, called Aliran. Released two months later, Muzaffar left the university and founded the International Movement for a Just World (JUST), a movement that was met with a favorable reception among Muslims regionally and internationally. Muzaffar's ideas on justice reached full

maturity thereafter. "Justice for the weaker segment of society," Muzaffar writes, "has been central to my struggle."¹⁴ His approach to justice is cosmopolitan, universal, forward-thinking, and sophisticated to an extent that is probably unrivalled by any of his Malaysian peers.

Muzaffar sees justice as the most important determinant in the making and unmaking of Muslim societies. In addition to drawing upon his life experiences, the importance he places on justice is an upshot of his reading of historical and theological works, most notably, the Qur'an. He describes justice as "the real goal of religion. It was the mission of every Prophet. It is the message of every Scripture."¹⁵ The Qur'an is filled with references to the importance of being just. Muzaffar calls it "Qur'anic justice" which, if properly conceptualized and implemented, could engender a cosmopolitan society. By practicing Qur'anic justice, Southeast Asian societies can offer a viable alternative to the Western-led global system that "is so palpably unjust that any human being with an atom of commitment to social justice would want to change it for the good of human beings everywhere."¹⁶ But what are the characteristics of Qur'anic justice?

A central pillar of Qur'anic justice is fairness to all of mankind. Muzaffar stressed that the Qur'an lays a strong emphasis on the fact that the reach of justice should not be confined to Muslims. On the contrary, justice is a right that should be enjoyed by all people. Qur'anic justice therefore transcends religion, class, culture, community, nationality, and gender.¹⁷ A universalist conception of justice, according to Muzaffar, is sorely lacking among Muslims today. Muzaffar castigates his co-religionists who call out for justice to be served when Muslims are oppressed, yet fall silent when it comes to the plight of other communities. Such an exclusivist outlook works against the Muslims themselves because it serves to limit the possibilities of forming a united front against oppressive global forces.

By being more inclusive in the approach to and implementation of justice, Muzaffar envisions Muslims and non-Muslims uniting "to vanquish what is after all a global power structure and create in its stead an egalitarian universal civilisation that is just and compassionate because it respects each and every human person."¹⁸ Farish Noor

correctly observes that one of the underlying themes of Muzaffar's lifetime pursuit is "to translate Islam's values and goals into a living reality that is relevant in the here-and-now and to extend its universalism to its utmost inclusive domain, thus bridging the gap between Muslims and non-Muslims."¹⁹

Fighting the same battle against the inequality caused by materialistic systems and ideologies is another important cornerstone of Qur'anic justice. Muzaffar directs his attention to the hegemony of global capitalism that corrupted human morality and gave rise to poverty in many parts of the world. Global capitalism tainted all faiths; and because of this, Muzaffar calls for inter-religious solidarity that involves collaborating with any group, Muslim or non-Muslim, in the battle against global capitalism. The coming together of all religious communities to combat capitalism is not an impracticable task. Muzaffar cites many instances in Southeast Asian and South Asian Islam where Muslims and non-Muslims worked together to resist colonialism and construct new pathways for their newly-founded nations.²⁰ In Malaysia, for example, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Inter-faith Spiritual Fellowship and the Malaysian Interfaith Network brought together many religious groups to address "societal challenges such as corruption, greed, global hegemony, global justice, the family and the environmental crisis rather than theological concerns as such."²¹ Muzaffar is somewhat silent regarding the reality that these Malaysian NGOs are often regulated by the state. Their impact in society is all too often curtailed by the government's policies discouraging Malays from participating in inter-religious activities.

Muzaffar obliquely addresses the issue of obstacles imposed by states in Southeast Asia by stressing the importance of good governance. Good governance necessitates, first of all, the grooming of enlightened leaders to replace tyrannical ones. Enlightened leaders are men and women who internalize the values found in the Qur'an, who are guided by the idea of unity (*tawhid*) in Islam, and who are dedicated to benefiting all of humanity rather than satisfying their own personal desires. To Muzaffar, good governance involves paying attention to the demands and concerns of the masses as well as allowing public debates to flourish.

In connection with this, he calls upon Islamic civil society activists to struggle against political injustice and to develop leaders who are committed to good governance, especially in Malaysia. He faults these activists for sliding into conservatism and for being averse to opposing authoritarianism, urging them to go beyond their concern with rites and rituals to engage in the larger issues of injustice and inequality caused by despots. Qur'anic justice, from Muzaffar's vantage point, is closely connected to the flowering of civil society. It is only when the masses, including Muslims and non-Muslims, are involved in the structuring of politics and governing processes of a country that true Qur'anic justice is achieved. This was put into practice, in Muzaffar's opinion, during the time of the first four caliphs of Islam.²²

Finally, Muzaffar argues that Qur'anic justice prescribes the upholding of human rights. The notion of human rights has often been defined within the framework of Western takes on individualism, liberalism, and secularism. Muzaffar contends that such Western conceptions of human rights are partial, selective, sectarian, and incongruent with Asian traditions. In this, he is on the same page with Makau Mutua, who rails against the Eurocentric rendering of human rights and encourages the facilitation of a new human rights movement that is "multicultural, inclusive and deeply political."²³ Muzaffar opines that human rights must be understood within the Qur'anic view that all men are responsible for one another as part of their obligation to Allah. He sees human rights, as defined in Islam, as sharing a common denominator with other world faiths. In fact, Muslims are encouraged to draw upon other ideas of human rights to illuminate their own conceptions of these rights. The Islamic conception of human rights is, to Muzaffar, cosmopolitan and open to accepting other traditions to ensure that the rights of individuals and the wider community are protected. To quote him extensively here:

It is because of these and other flaws in the very character of the Western approach to human rights that there is an urgent need to try to evolve a vision of human dignity which is more just, more holistic, and more universal. In Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism,

Taoism, Christianity and Buddhism there are elements of such vision of the human being, of human rights and of human dignity. The idea that the human being is vicegerent or trustee of God whose primary role is to fulfill God's trust is lucidly articulated in various religions. As God's trustee, the human being lives life according to clearly established spiritual and moral values and principles. The rights one possesses, like the responsibilities one undertakes, must be guided by these values and principles. What this means is that human rights and human freedoms are part of a larger spiritual and moral worldview. This also means that individual freedom is not the be-all and end-all of human existence. Neither is the individual and community the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong, of good and evil. The individual and community must both submit to spiritual and moral values that transcend both individual and community. It is the supremacy of these values and, in the end, of the Divine which distinguishes our God-guided concept of human dignity from the present individual-centred notion of human rights.²⁴

As a public intellectual, Muzaffar's main contribution to challenging dominant discourses about Islam lies in his lengthy elaboration on what it means to be just. Muslims, to him, should be the main torchbearers of Qur'anic justice and they must work hand in hand with anyone who does not contradict the message of the Qur'an and of the unity of mankind. Muzaffar's rendering of Qur'anic justice brings him close to another Muslim thinker, Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966). In his book, *Social Justice in Islam*, Sayyid Qutb posits that justice is the bedrock of the Islamic civilization and that justice based upon the Qur'an could rid societies of the evils of modern life.²⁵ But unlike Sayyid Qutb, Muzaffar is neither radical nor revolutionary, nor is he anti-modern or an Islamic utopian. He is cognizant of the danger that in the realization of Qur'anic justice, Muslims may fall into the trap of developing a "superficial attachment to identity." This comes in the form of calls for the "Islamicisation" of all spheres of society and an obsession with shallow Islamic mottos, such as "Islam is the Solution," and ersatz labels, such as the "Islamic car."²⁶

Such proclivities will erode the cosmopolitan vision inherent to Islam and result in chaos. However, Muzaffar is confident that Muslims in Southeast Asia will rise against such superficialities, “heralding a truly cosmopolitan Islam.”²⁷

Azyumardi Azra’s Islam Nusantara

While Muzaffar devotes his attention to the concept of Qur’anic Justice, an aspiration that Muslims should work towards on the road to making Southeast Asia attuned to cosmopolitanism, another prominent Indonesian public intellectual, Azyumardi Azra, focuses on “actually existing cosmopolitanism.”²⁸ He popularized the idea of “Islam Nusantara” and elaborated on how it is closely linked to Muslim cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia. A brief biography of Azra is in order here. Unlike Muzaffar who was educated in secular institutions and became increasingly interested in issues concerning Muslim life and faith, Azra was tutored early on in his life in the traditional Islamic sciences. He was born in 1955 into a religious family that adhered to the modernist interpretations of Islam propagated by the Muhammadiyah movement. Educated in Islamic schools and tertiary institutions until the completion of his first degree at *Institut Agama Islam Negeri* (IAIN, or State Institute of Islam Studies) in Jakarta, he went on to pursue his postgraduate degrees at Columbia University, New York, specializing in history and graduating in 1992.²⁹

Azra certainly fits squarely into Richard Posner’s definition of public intellectuals as those who obtain “an audience by engaging with some matter that has the public’s attention.”³⁰ Since his days as a journalist with a local newspaper, *Panji Masyarakat*, Azra started writing books and articles that sought to break down the dichotomies between religious and secular sciences as well as between lofty intellectualism and popular activism in a manner that is accessible to a large segment of the Southeast Asian Muslim community.³¹ His intellectual and journalistic output is simply staggering, with more than twenty books and hundreds of articles written in English and the Indonesian languages. Even though trained, in his words, as a *peneliti sejarah* (historical investigator),³² Azra wrote and

commented on topics of contemporary significance surrounding issues such as education, theology, politics, sociology of religions, violence, intellectuals, and the intelligentsia as well as Islamic jurisprudence. One controlling concept that binds all of these writings together is the concept of “Islam Nusantara” (or Southeast Asian Islam). It is a concept that has stirred the imagination of the Southeast Asian public inasmuch as it has generated polemics among conservatives who felt that Azra was being divisive for having drawn boundaries between various versions of Islam. Some critics alleged that he was unfair in his judgments of Islam outside Southeast Asia, particularly beyond the borders of modern-day Indonesia.³³

But what is Islam Nusantara? Azra refers to more than just a version of Islam that is unique and distinctive to Southeast Asia. Islam Nusantara points to a variant of Islam that has been “indigenized” and “vernacularized” to fit with the *urf* (customs) of the people in Southeast Asia. The concept of Islam Nusantara shares some affinities with Tariq Ramadan’s idea of “European Islam,” that is, a lived version of Islam that accommodates the European environment without contravening the core pillars of the Muslim faith.³⁴ Even though Muslims in Southeast Asia may share the same sacred sources as other Muslims around the world and subscribe to the same basic precepts and beliefs, they interpret and manifest many non-fundamental aspects of Islam in their own cosmopolitan ways.

From dress codes to the interpretation of certain rulings and the treatment of women, Islam Nusantara departs from praxes found in the Arab World. This departure, according to Azra, resulted from the creative exegesis of Muslim scholars since the thirteenth century. Their close interactions with Southeast Asians informed them that there were aspects of Islam that needed to be reinterpreted to harmonize the faith with local cultures. With the assistance of traders, mystics, and wayfarers, these networks of scholars contributed to the rapid spread of Islam in the region by adapting the religion to indigenous traditions.³⁵

Azra gives the example of the festivities and praxes connected with the month of fasting in Java and other parts of the Malay World. Some Javanese Muslims stretch these to three months, beginning with

the month of Sya'ban and ending at the end of the month of Syawal. This is radically different from how these preparations and festivities are understood in other parts of the Muslim world, where they are comprehended as being specific to one month in the Islamic calendar. During Sya'ban, a month prior to Ramadan, Javanese Muslims would heighten their devotional activities by organizing feasts, conducting religious classes, and reaffirming relations with their friends and relatives, both Muslims and non-Muslims, in preparation for the fasting month. Following the end of fasting in Ramadan, Javanese Muslims would lengthen the festivity for one whole month, which again differentiated them from Muslims in other parts of the world who would normally celebrate the *Eid* (Holiday) only during the first few days of Syawal. Javanese Muslims would visit their relatives and return to their hometowns during that month as part of their endeavor to maintain the spirit of Muslim brotherhood.³⁶ Muslims in Southeast Asia perceive fasting and other practices as more than just devotional acts. These acts are imbricated within the nexus of kinship, social institutions, local traditions, and social norms conditioned by Islam Nusantara.

Azra sees Islam Nusantara as “easygoing” (*lunak*) and “gentle” (*jinak*). The reason why Islam Nusantara has such characteristics has to do with the minimal acceptance of Arab cultures by the Malays.³⁷ On this score, Azra is on the same page with Nurcholish Madjid who argued that, “Indonesia is the least Arabized of the major Islamic countries, in addition to being geographically farthest from the Holy Lands.”³⁸ Azra, however, departs from the views of another respected scholar of Southeast Asian Islam, Syed Naquib Al-Attas. The conversion of Southeast Asians to Islam, in Al-Attas' evaluation, brought about profound transformations in Malay life, culture, and thinking. Among such transformations was the adoption of many aspects of Arab-Persian civilization.³⁹ Azra does not deny this line of argument and reinforces it by providing evidence of the use of Arabic loanwords in the Malay language.⁴⁰ The adoption of Arabic words, however, did not change the mild character of Islam Nusantara when compared to Islam in the Arab World. This mildness made Islam Nusantara more peaceful, cosmopolitan, and inclusive. Azra supported his argument by stating that, with exception of isolated internecine

conflicts, nominal (*abangan*) and devout (*santri*) Muslims got along well. The relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims continues to be stable despite the many centuries of Islamization. The celebration of and tolerance towards diverse ways of interpreting Islam is so marked in Southeast Asia that it is unsurpassed in any country in the Arab World.⁴¹

Azra casts Islam Nusantara as distinctive in yet another aspect: its dialogical character. Indeed, dialogue between fellow Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims has been an inherent feature of Islam in the region. This explains why many aspects of Islam Nusantara are more often than not syncretic and hybrid in nature, fusing past different cultures and beliefs to form a crossbred Islamic faith. Azra identifies a few forms of dialogue that have defined what Islam Nusantara is. The first is the dialogue inherent to aesthetics. This is found in the architectural splendor of mosques and other iconic sites, “a theme that is explored in his books.”⁴² The second form of dialogue is an intra-Muslim dialogue that involves groups with competing ideas. Azra divides them into the following typology: modernist Muslims, transformative Muslims, inclusivist Muslims, fundamentalist Muslims, and neo-traditionalist Muslims. Each of these groups interprets Islam in its own way. Leaving aside those groups that are extremist and militant, the majority of Muslims in Southeast Asia is often open to discussions pertaining to issues affecting Muslims in general, even if they disagree on the methods to resolve such challenges.⁴³

The third form of dialogue is between different civilizations in Southeast Asia. Azra regards Southeast Asia as a domain where different religions co-existed peacefully for many centuries. The change in this harmonious relationship coincides with the coming of colonialism. “This peaceful relationship often gets tainted by polemics and open protests, particularly after the establishment of Muslim organizations in the beginning of the 20th century.”⁴⁴ Although the inter-civilizational relations improved greatly, while being kept in check under the iron fist of Suharto’s New Order regime, the end of Suharto’s autocratic rule unleashed extremist forces within the religious communities in Indonesia. Azra sees the urgency of reviving dialogue on all levels of society in order to restore the previous friendly relations between the

different religious communities:

I believe that dialogue that is carried out with much civility, with ethics, will yield many benefits. If nothing else, dialogue can be an ice breaker, breaking the ice between two mutually suspicious parties, or those that have developed prejudices, bias, misperceptions, misunderstanding, and even anxieties and animosity. More than that, dialogue opens up opportunities for a transformation in behaviour and perceptions, aside from imbibing better mutual understanding that transcends the differences that exist between two sides.⁴⁵

Like Muzaffar, Azra is not a romantic idealist. He does not imagine that Islam Nusantara is a panacea that can free the region from all problems. Azra acknowledges that there are powerful forces threatening the cosmopolitan nature of Southeast Asian Islam and society. Azra singles out the politicization of Islam as the greatest threat to Muslim cosmopolitanism. The conflation of faith and politics is not new to Islam in the region. Muslim sultanates in Southeast Asia during the precolonial period bound together politics and Islam in the management of their territories. Azra is concerned, though, with what he calls “Islam politik” (or political Islam). This is a brand of Islam that is used as “a framework or basis for political ideology, which would eventually materialize into political parties.”⁴⁶ The key setback of political Islam is that it tends to slide into a hardline approach to interpreting Islam. The inevitable outcome of this tendency is the rise of collectivist politics, suspicions between Muslims and non-Muslims, the loss of mutual tolerance, and, worst of all, sectarian violence. Azra sees incidents of the violence in Aceh, East Timor, Ambon, and West Kalimantan as evidence of the politicization of Islam. These tragic events happened due to the influence of radicals and hardliners in militant groups such as Front Pembela Islam (FPI) and Laskar Jihad. These groups may not be popular but they could grow in numbers and sow the seeds of hatred between communities.⁴⁷

How then can Islam Nusantara be strengthened? Azra agrees with Muzaffar on the importance of civil society. He draws upon Robert

Hefner's concept of "civil Islam" which is the opposite of the type of Islam that is imposed by states and regimes. Civil Islam is a version of Islam that abides by the rule of law and is, at the same time, shaped and conditioned by the work of civil society movements and organizations.⁴⁸ Such a model, which, at present, is being steered by the Nahdatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, would consolidate and deepen democracy in Indonesia: "With a strong emphasis on the role of civil society in the democratic process, they are expected not only to consolidate their own organizations in order to be able to function more effectively, but also to disseminate the ideals of democracy; building civic culture and civility among the public in general."⁴⁹

As a cosmopolitan public intellectual himself, Azra places much importance on the active engagement of intellectuals with civil society. He argues that intellectuals play a crucial role in influencing public perception and producing understanding towards religion in society. Their honesty, humility, engagement with the public, and expertise could help in making Islam Nusantara more relevant to the changing times.⁵⁰ They are the vanguard on the march to preserve the inclusive and cosmopolitan legacy of Islam Nusantara. They are also tasked with the responsibility of exposing the root causes of extremism and radicalism. Among these root causes that Azra identifies are "liberalization of the political system, fragmentation and conflicts among the political elite and parties, failure of law enforcement, economic deprivation, and socio-cultural dislocation and alienation."⁵¹ Overcoming these causes of radicalism would lead Islam Nusantara towards the middle way (*ummah wasat*), a path that brings Muslims to the ideas and practices of democracy, human rights, justice, gender equality, pluralism and, most crucially, cosmopolitanism.⁵²

Conclusion

In the face of the many obstacles that stood in their way, cosmopolitan public intellectuals sought to shape the texture of Southeast Asian Islam through their writings. They achieved this by writing in ways that are accessible and intelligible to the Muslim public, while touching on

issues that affected Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The impact of these intellectuals is relatively felt at the grassroots level due to the fact that these intellectuals create, as John Esposito and John Voll aptly assert, “activist programs of reform and social transformation that could be clearly identified as Islamic but, at the same time, went far beyond the traditionalism of the remaining conservative ulama establishment.”⁵³ By touching on issues such as justice, human rights, equality, politics, marginalization, religious assertiveness, and inter-religious tolerance – topics that are seldom broached by the ulama class – cosmopolitan public intellectuals in Southeast Asia gained a captive audience of their own. Their reach has further expanded due to the advent of the digital media.

Another reason why these cosmopolitan public intellectuals command attention from the public is that they hail from humble backgrounds and reveal their personal experiences and struggles in many of their writings. Posner’s observations on black intellectuals are instructive here as a basis for comparison. According to Posner, “[I]f life experiences may be important. One reason so many well-known public intellectuals are black, such as Anthony Appiah, Stephen Carter, Michael Eric Dyson, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Lani Guinier, Thomas Sowell, Shelby Steele, Cornel West, Patricia Williams, and William Julius Wilson, is that blacks are believed to have life experiences that give them insights denied the ordinary white male academic.”⁵⁴ Certainly, Muzaffar and Azra interwove their personal life journeys into their scholarly writings. These cosmopolitan public intellectuals are conscious of their position as minorities, in terms of ethnicity, paradigms, and intellectual position-taking. Such a consciousness of marginality adds passion and urgency to their work just as it serves to spur them to challenge dominant discourses on Islam in Southeast Asia.

Notes

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the New Myths of Our Time*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 92.

² Yudi Latif, *Indonesian Muslim Intelligentsia and Power* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008) and Frank Furedi, *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone?* (London: Continuum, 2004).

- ³ Hussein Alatas, *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* (London: Frank Cass, 1977), 26-31.
- ⁴ Walter Mignolo, "Cosmopolitan Localism: A Decolonial Shifting of the Kantian Legacies," *Localities* 1 (2011): 44.
- ⁵ Latif, *Indonesian Muslim Intelligentsia and Power*, 480.
- ⁶ Ronald Barnett, "Academics as Intellectuals," in *The Changing Role of the Public Intellectual*, ed. Dolan Cummings (London: Routledge, 2005), 112.
- ⁷ Richard Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study in Decline* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2001), 35.
- ⁸ Dale F. Eickelman, "Clash of Cultures? Intellectuals, Their Publics and Islam," in *Intellectuals in the Modern Islamic World: Transmission, Transformation, Communication*, ed. Stéphane A. Dudoignon, Komatsu Hisao, and Kosugi Yasushi (London: Routledge, 2006), 291.
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