ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN[1]

Lily Zakiyah Munir[2]
lilyzm@hotmail.com

"My religion is an open-minded faith, neither an intolerant political ideology nor a concept of world order, as Islamic fundamentalists—and some in the West—so fiercely contend. The Qur'an unmistakably commands: [There is] no compulsion in religion (QS al-Baqarah/2:256).
Bassam Tibi (1998:ix)

Religious and Islamic Fundamentalism

Islam is obviously an open-minded and inclusive faith, and is not an intolerant political ideology nor is a religion which forces people to embrace. The Qur'an is very clear that "there is no force in religion" (QS al-Baqarah/2:256). However, the fundamentalists have exposed a face of the religion which is terrorizing global human security. Islamic fundamentalism has displayed a terrifying face of Islam because of its characters , mainly in exerting an aggressive agenda for the politicization of the religion to achieve certain objectives. Religious symbols have been used to pursue political agenda. It is, therefore, important to distinguish Islam as a belief and cultural system and Islam as a tool to build political legitimacy by political authorities, oppositions and other fundamentalist movements.

Firstly referred to in the USA in early 1920 in connection with the battles of leading evangelical Protestants against liberal and progressive spirit of the age, fundamentalism is now observed to exist in all Semitic religions, more obviously in Islam. The term 'fundamentalists' has recently been used reluctantly and apologetically to describe new radical Islamic movements or to offer substitute terms for it such as 'revivalist', 'religious nationalists', 'Islamic radicals', 'Islamic populists' or 'Islamists' (Davis, 1984; Juergensmeyer, 1993; Nasr, 1977; Rahnema, 1994 in Moghissi, 1999:65; Roy, 1999). Another term, 'Islamic extremism' is used by scholars such as Al-Jabiri (2001) and Al-Asymawi (in Zada 2002). Hefner (2001) uses the term 'anti-liberal Islam' to refer to DDII (Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia) and KISDI (Komite Indonesia

[1] Paper presented at the Association of Asian Studies (AAS) Forum conducted at the Hilton Hotel, New York, March 27-30, 2003
[2] Director, Center for Pesantren and Democracy Studies (CePDeS), Jombang, Indonesia

untuk Solidaritas Dunia Islam) who opposed the liberal views of Islam especially those introduced by scholars socializing Fazlur Rahman's neo-modernism and Mu'tazilah's rationalism.

For all the controversy, it is clear that fundamentalism can lead to superficiality and reductionism in one's understanding of the religion. Deeper spiritual dimensions of the religion cannot be captured and reflected because fundamentalism tend to refer to religious texts rigidly and literally (Amin al-Alim, 1993:10). Al-Alim further contends that fundamentalist thinking is no more relevant in the currently changing world because human problems are so complex and diverse. Religious texts need to be reinterpreted by prioritizing the *ijtihad,* deconstructing rigid texts, and putting at the forefront *maqasid al-syariah* (goals of the religion).

Unlike al-Alim, Tibi (1998) argues that fundamentalism is an ideological phenomenon emerging as a response to problems incurred by globalization, fragmentation, and clash of civilization. However, along the course, the fundamentalists' agitation has evoked turmoil not only among Muslim societies but to the whole world. Therefore, it just makes sense that the term fundamentalism, originally meaning back to fundamental values of the religion, has acquired a pejorative meaning and become biased. Fundamentalist groups are often associated with irrationality, immoderation, narrow-mindedness, and violence. These traits are further implanted by fundamentalist leaders as 'manual' for their followers, which, ultimately, has shaped them as they are now, i.e. against the main stream and exerting efforts to make the world a sacred place amidst the growing skepticism (Marty and Appleby 1991, in Armstrong 2000).

In spite of its various manifestations, fundamentalism as a movement appears to share some common platforms. *First,* they tend to be literal in interpreting holy religious texts. They refuse contextual reading of the texts as, to them, it can reduce the sacredness of the religion. *Second*, they refuse pluralism and relativism. For fundamentalists, pluralism is a distorted understanding of the religion. An Indonesian radical writer, Adian Husaini, argues that pluralism is a form of religious harassment and resembles the concept developed by the Jewish Freemasonry movement (Husaini, 2002: 32-33). *Third,* fundamentalists monopolize the truth of religious interpretation. They are authoritarian[1] as they claim that they are the sole holder of 'truth' and that their reading of religious texts are final and unchallengeable[2]. *Fourth,* fundamentalist movements are

correlated with fanaticism, exclusiveness, intolerance, radicalism, and militarism. The fundamentalist always takes action against every threat to the religion.

Other commonalities of fundamentalists are summarized by Moghissi (1999:70) as falling into three inter-related domains: anti modernity, anti democracy, and anti feminism (Moghissi 1999:70). Fundamentalists are anti-modernity, reject the Enlightenment by opposing the separation of religion and politics, denying the importance of individual rights and are not concerned with the notion of universal human progress. In doctrine, they are 'utopian and past oriented' (Eisenstadt, 1996, in Moghissi 1999:71). However, while against the idea of modernity, they are not against modern living conditions. They use sophisticated technologies, computers, internet, etc.

Fundamentalists are anti democracy because of their exclusionary stance. Their attention is focused on the Muslim *ummah*. Non-Muslims who are followers of major monotheistic religions with claim to a holy heavenly book are considered as *dhimmi*. They may live in the Islamic society but as second-class citizens. Followers of other religions, or the atheist, however, have no rights whatsoever. As for their anti feminism, fundamentalists share a common sense of threat from changes in gender relations, triggered by the spread of capitalism and feminism. Fundamentalists believe in religious doctrines which put restrictions on women. On the basis of sharia and *'kodrat'* (nature), women have to be controlled and live in the domestic sphere. Hasan al-Bana, a less radical ideologue from Egypt, declares that 'women's place is the home, and their primary roles are mother, wife, and housekeeper'; he prohibits the social mixing between men and women. For Abul A'la al Mawdudi, one of the basic human rights is respect for women's chastity; to preserve chastity, women must be kept housebound and in purdah (Mayer, 1995: 100).

The most conspicuous signifier of fundamentalists is their commitment to reviving Islamic doctrines on women's status. For this purpose, they explore medieval Islamic texts prescribing moral codes or invent their own rules of conduct whenever necessary. For example, a dress code practiced in the past centuries in certain communities is propagated as 'Islamic' and people are forced to adopt it as a symbol of their "Islamic' identity. Experiences of formalization of sharia in several Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Taliban, and other gulf countries show that women are

systemically marginalized, forced to veil themselves, may not go out without a guardian or work in public places. Women become detainees in their husbands' homes.

Dimension of Fundamentalism in the Formalization of Sharia in Indonesia

One of the backslides of the reform movement, aside from the return of the New Order and military power onto the political stage under Megawati's administration[3], has been the growing demands for formalization of sharia. The desire for formal sharia may be viewed as a proposal indicating the birth of fundamentalism in its political form (Roy, 1994). This phenomenon is always developing extensively, not only at national level through the amendment of the 1945 Constitution, but also at regional level through local regulations. The momentum of weakening national leadership and the general tendency of national disintegration in the past five years has been well utilized by the fundamentalist groups to strive for their religious political agenda.

The agenda for formal sharia appeared into public scene after a number of Islamic interest groups such as *Front Pembela Islam* (Islamic Defenders' Front/FPI*),* Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), KISDI, Front Komunikasi Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah, Persaudaraan Pekerja Muslim Indonesia (PPMI), and Majlis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI) exerted an agenda on the issue. These interest groups, working at the cultural level through their mass-based organizations, were balanced by their political counterparts, Partai Bulan Bintang (PBB) and Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP) at the structural level.

However, the survey by PPIM (Center for the Studies of Islam and Societies) conducted in 2001 and 2002 (Tempo No. 43/XXXI) indicated that supports for political Islamic orientation as manifestation of a legal formal approach of sharia were not adequate. The survey shows that majority of Muslims in Indonesia expressed their positive attitude toward Islamic government, i.e. one based on the Qur'an and Sunnah under leadership of religious authorities. A bigger proportion was positive that the state is to obligate the implementation of sharia. But these attitudes were actually obscure as it was not clear what was meant by sharia, the Qur'an and Hadith in the political context. It is realistic to say that majority of Muslims respect the Qur'an, Hadith and sharia; but the meanings of these three words may vary from individual Muslim to another or from a Muslim group to another. Followers of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), for example, understand

sharia the same way as taught by their religious teachers. Sharia means, to them, rituals they practice every day, not the *kaffah* (complete) sharia which includes hands chopping or stoning to death.

A look at the 1999 general election gives a different picture from the survey. Voters of three political parties pursuing formal sharia—PPP, PBB, and PK—total only 15 percent, much below the percentage number of the PPIM survey on proponents of formal sharia, which is 71%. Another striking finding of the survey, which may need further verification, is the respondents' attitude on social and religious norms related to women. Thirty six percent of the 2500 respondents agree that government should obligate women to wear *jilbab* (head covering); 51% agree that women should not travel without guardians, and 37% of them support polygamy. If these numbers are to be relied on, it is a big issue for Muslim women's activists. Their relentless efforts to introduce women's rights and gender equality and equity seem to be challenged by the resurgence of patriarchy along with the democratization process.

Formalization of Sharia and Its Repercussion on Women

Pioneered by Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (NAD) which imposed it formally on Islamic New Year's Day 1 Muharram 1423, formal sharia soon became a widespread issue. Within a relatively short time, over ten districts and provinces are now ready to follow: Cianjur, Garut, Tasikmalaya, Indramayu, Banten, South Sulawesi, Riau, Ternate, Gorontalo, Pamekasan, and West Sumatra. Along with the spirit of political and economic decentralization towards regional autonomy, these regions demand for institutionalization of sharia. For women, this growing phenomenon is to be carefully observed. What is actually sharia? How are women positioned within the system? For the Indonesian context, how will sharia deal with conflicts of interest with the existing positive legal system?

When the decentralization package, known as the regional autonomy policy, was issued as an effort to embark on the democratization process, there was a slight hope among Indonesian women. After three decades of the repressive Suharto regime who manipulated women for political purposes, women were optimistic that the reform era would open up the door for women's equal status and for casting away patriarchy.

Women were also hopeful that the new regimes would bring the nation out of its multi-dimensional crises primarily affecting them and children.

But these hopes diluted and turned into apathy when the reform era did not show any indication for its leaders to take side on people's problems, especially women's. More recently, women were made worried observing the implementation of regional autonomy. In West Sumatra, for example, the Bill on Social Ills was issued, containing an article that banned women from going out at night without a guardian. On the basis of eliminating prostitution, women were kept home at night with a hope that by so doing prostitution in West Sumatra would be gone. While sane logic could not accept the fact that prostitution would not take place without men's participation, the misogynist attitude of male-biased policy makers has taken victim, i.e., setback in women's struggle for freedom and equal status. This policy was obviously strange because women in West Sumatra, with their matrilineal family system, had been actively engaged in public issues and now they were going to be domesticated in the name of sharia in the regional autonomy system. Victimization of women in the district of Karimun, Riau, took place when women who were dressed in an un-Islamic way were caught at broad daylight because they were suspected as sex workers. In banning prostitution, un-'Islamic' women were caught and detained because they were assumed to have been the roots cause of various social ills. When the police office was full and there was no fund to support the detention, they were released. Men, on the other hand, remained safe and nothing was done to them.

The Case of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (NAD)

Visit Aceh and you will immediately sense the "Islamic' nuances of the province. A big billboard displaying a smiling woman in *jilbab* will welcome you right after you leave the airport. Strolling along the city roads, you will see changing faces of the streets and buildings. Now, names of streets, shops, buildings, government offices, drugstores, and banks are all written in the Arabic alphabet, in addition to the Latin one. Quotations from the Qur'an, "And be moderate in thy pace" (QS Luqman/31:19) and "…nor walk in insolence" (QS Luqman/31:18), are even displayed on the street signs as a reminder to pedestrians to cross the street carefully, and to motorists in order not to speed up. It is a perfect example of the literal use of the Qur'an's texts.

Since December 2000, the province has formally imposed sharia, based on Law number 44/1999 on the special status of Aceh. This law granted Aceh authorities to regulate itself in terms of traditions, education, and religion. The law was followed by local regulations (Perda) among others on sharia Islam. However, implementation of the regulations is not easy. Most Acehnese are Muslims, but the societies remain plural. Moreover, Aceh remains under Indonesia's positive legal system. The Perda on sharia is not specific enough to be a legal reference. As a result, people followed their own interpretations of what sharia is, what outfit is deemed Islamic for women, etc. At this point, along with the euphoria of sharia two years ago, cases of women's hair cutting, because they did not wear *jilbab,* and tight jeans cutting occurred. More recently, Mrs. Linda Poernomo Puteh, wife of the governor, performed an action of distributing free *jilbab* to women who did not wear it. Women with open hair were stopped in the center of the city while hundreds of eyes were staring at them, and were forced to cover their hair. For the sake of sharia actions, which may cause offence, shame or humiliation on the side of the women victims, were taken.

Early this year an anthropological study was conducted in Aceh to document people's understanding, opinions, and feelings about sharia. Ordinary people, teachers, housewives, activists and intellectuals were interviewed in depth. Interestingly, most informants felt misled by the formalization of sharia. They understand sharia as all embracing to include justice, peace and welfare for all. When sharia was first enacted two years ago, they were hopeful that it would do justice to them, imposing qishas (equal punishment) to perpetrators of violence or chopping the hands of corruptors who have stolen people's money. But they were disappointed when, two years later, sharia was concerned more with jilbab, controlling women and formal rituals. Many of the informants boldly expressed their disappointment and even apathy, "Social ills such as KKN (corruption, collusion, and nepotism), prostitution or violence against women remain unchanged." Nothing has been done about people's welfare, combating corruption or promoting justice, as if they were not within the scope of sharia. Now, with the full autonomy status of Aceh, with a bulky budget allocation for local development, and with supports from foreign countries to restore peace in Aceh, sharia is at its crucial moment. Can sharia combat the latent social ills of KKN? Can sharia bring

justice—in terms of economic, social, and political—to men and women in Aceh? Can sharia act as a 'watchdog' for gender justice to which all Muslims are committed?

However, notwithstanding people's concerns and apathy, Aceh received its latest gift: presidential decree number 11/2003 issued on March 3, 2003, inaugurating the Sharia Courts (Mahkamah Syariah) in Aceh. These courts will be the first of their type in Indonesia, and will have the authority to examine, decide, and settle civil law cases, material cases and crimes such as murder or torture punishable by *qishas.* The stoning to death punishment (*rajam)* is not yet incorporated into the system.

Syarifah Rahmatillah, a woman NGO activist, may be one of the thousands of voices from Aceh who contemplatively expressed people's concerns. "We all know that Aceh people had been deeply hurt because of armed conflicts involving Indonesia's military and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). Sharia may have been viewed as an instant solution by the central government for Acehnese. There are very few who are aware that the root of the problems is how to end all forms of violence in Aceh. It is not the issue of dependence or independence from Indonesia, or the issue of sharia or non-sharia. The issue is how to end the violence. Aceh people are tired."

Conclusion

The weakening national leadership and the decentralization process toward regional autonomy in Indonesia has been well benefited by Islamic fundamentalist groups to pursue their agenda for formalization of sharia. Pioneered by Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, now more than ten regions have been prepared to enforce sharia. Because of its characteristics which may hamper the realization of Islamic values of democracy, tolerance, pluralism, egalitarianism and gender equity fundamentalism is to be carefully and critically observed.

Cases from Indonesia's regions have shown that formalization of sharia, which is indicative of fundamentalism, has triggered various forms of discrimination against women. All regions in Indonesia and other countries enforcing sharia appear to share the same characteristics: controlling women's dress code and women's chastity. These discriminatory actions are obviously against the ultimate goal of sharia itself (*maqasid al syariah)* which is welfare of all people. Experiences show that what people need is the

achievement of *maqasid al syariah,* which is welfare and justice; not the formalization of sharia.

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[1] On authoritarian and authoritative, see Khaled Abou El-Fadl (2001)who distinguishes between authority (which he calls the authoritative) and the authoritarian within Islam. Authority is concerned with the question of who has the authority to interpret or construct the meaning of God's word, the Qur'an, and Prophet Muhammad's hadith. When the opinion is presented as the final and the only reading of a text, it has the nuances of final authority and thus becomes authoritarian.

[2] Tradition of accusing opponents or those with different views as 'infidels' (*kafir)* is a serious threat to the principle of freedom of thinking propagated by Islam itself. History notes that a number of liberal thinkers and scholars in the Islamic world have been exiled or even punished to death because of their consistent views.

[3] The 'total reform' agenda demanded by students along with the toppling down of the New Order regime includes among others: 1) eliminate the New Order down to its roots, 2) end the double function of the military, 3) disperse the Golkar party, 4) return people's sovereignty, and 5) modify the political law package. Of these items on the agenda, which one has been seriously implemented by the current government?