

THE JAKARTA POST -- SATURDAY, MAY 24, 2003 -- PAGE 7

Misunderstanding of polygamy lingers in Islam

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Over the last few years we have witnessed a relatively new phenomenon, i.e. the increasing popularity of polygamy, especially for men with upward social mobility. During the repressive Soeharto regime, polygamy seemed to be repressed as well, either by government regulation (Peraturan Pemerintah No. 10) on the prohibition of polygamy among government officials, or else by stigmatization due to prevailing social control. Polygamy appeared to have a pejorative meaning, often associated with low education, low social status, or the feudalistic culture of keeping concubines.

Now, along with the reform era toward freedom and democracy, polygamy has apparently acquired a new image, which has made it less resisted or opposed by society in general. Many Muslims, including those with high education, high social status or even high governmental leadership positions, do not seem to be bothered about displaying polygamous behavior.

People do not seem to be bothered either seeing their leaders having two, three, or even four wives. These polygamous men proudly justify their behavior by referring to it as a "right" granted by Islam to men. A former minister of religious affairs, in an informal meeting, jokingly, even equated Islam in terms of polygamy with the Mormons, a Christian sect whose majority live in Salt Lake City and whose prophet, Joseph Smith, was said to have had more than 30 wives.

This way of thinking, viewing polygamy as a man's "right" is obviously wrong. The notion of polygamy has clearly been misunderstood, deliberately or ignorantly, and therefore it is important that we go back to the relevant verses in the Koran and read them with the Koran's original spirit of liberating the oppressed, including women.

The core issue of polygamy in current Muslim societies is that it has been taken as a general attitude to Islam, ignoring the social justice reasoning behind the revelation of the verse. Polygamy, which was common in pre-Islamic society, apparently has a new meaning in Islam. Islam intended to change it from a male right into a female privilege in limited circumstances, beneficial to women and children, and not in circumstances detrimental to women. If it were acceptable to women, polygamy could be a way to protect them and give them sexual access to men at a time when women outnumbered men.

However, the Koran itself does not refer to the sexual nature or needs of women or men when dealing with polygamy. It refers only to the need to ensure social justice for orphaned girls, at a time when unprotected women were open to all kinds of abuse. This is clear from the Koran's statement, "If you fear that you will not be able to deal justly

with orphans, marry of your choice, two or three or four; but if you fear that you will not be able to deal justly with them, then only one" (al-Nisa/4:3).

This rule on polygamy was introduced conditionally: The verse especially refers to the justice to be done to orphans. The verse was revealed immediately after the Battle of Uhud, when the Muslim community was left with many orphans and widows and captives of war. Their treatment was to be governed by principles of humanity and justice.

Hence, justice is a prerequisite for a polygamous man. However, while the Koran refers to justice, it also says that the condition of being just and fair is difficult to realize due to human limitations. It is explicit about this, which makes it even clearer in its attitude for not advocating polygamy: "You are never able to be fair and just as between women; even if it is your ardent desire," (al-Nisa/4:129). It is quite categorical that it is not within the power of human beings to treat more than one wife with equal fairness.

There is a big gap between desire and fulfillment, and as far as polygamy is concerned, the Koran is clear. In spite of good intentions, men cannot deal justly between their wives.

This may be because, as the Koran says, "God has not given any man two hearts" (al-Ahzab/33:4). This implies that a man cannot love two women equally. These verses, then, can be read together as presenting a case against generalized polygamy, which Muslims derive from reading half a line of al-Nisa/4:34.

Given the context of its revelation among polygamous pre-Islamic Arab societies, the Koran accepts the fact that women are victims of injustice in society. However, abolishing polygamy completely and giving women equal status with men in every respect was not a practical proposition in that type of society.

Thus the Koran adopted the middle-way solution, in what is termed a "pragmatic-ideological" course. It even goes further by speaking of "the near impossibility" for a man to be fair and just to multiple wives. This spirit of the Koran in empowering and liberating the oppressed group, the women, should be captured when one speaks about polygamy.

Our neighboring country, Malaysia, is launching a monogamy campaign. Prime Minister Mahatir Mohammad has appealed to all states to apply the Muslim Family Law as soon as possible, to avoid heterogeneity in the application of sharia, including polygamy.

The assertive Muslim feminists group, Sisters in Islam, has also embarked on this campaign through car stickers bearing three messages: a) 1 husband = 1 wife, b) Monogamy My Choice, and c) "If you fear you cannot do them justice, then marry only one."

When will Indonesia follow?