



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (99/2006)

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## **Traditional Islam: Meeting the Challenge of the Radical Islamists**

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IN a recent talk at the Singapore-based Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, the Malaysian scholar of Islam, Dr Farish Noor, painted an unencouraging picture of the future of Islam in Southeast Asia. He argued that liberal Muslim groups in the region such as Malaysia's Sisters in Islam (SIS) and Indonesia's Liberal Islam Network (JIL) were obsolete and that the Muslim ground has shifted towards the Islamists. These views, expressed by someone deemed as a liberal himself, deserve closer scrutiny.

### **Failure of Liberal Muslim groups**

Liberal Muslim groups grew in prominence against the backdrop of the growing influence of radical Islamists. Liberal Muslim groups postured themselves as alternative voices of Islam, which are moderate, intellectual and acceptable to the West. However, recent trends in Southeast Asia have shown the failure of these groups. Most Indonesians and Malaysian Muslims shun their perspectives due to the liberals' perceived heretical views and beliefs. For instance, the action by Muslim feminist, Amina Wadud to lead a Friday prayer congregation of over 100 men and women in the Episcopal cathedral of St. John the Divine and the support she received from liberal groups in the region drew a public outcry from Muslims all around the world. While the Muslim masses may not necessarily reject some of the views of the liberals such as on the separation of state and religion, these issues are lost as the Muslim masses focus their attention instead on the liberals' supposed heretical beliefs.

Another often-heard criticism of the liberals is that they are in cahoots with Western governments to destroy Islam. The financial support they receive from Western governments and funding agencies further strengthen this perception. In addition, liberal groups confine themselves to organizing seminars and conferences catering to scholars and liberal activists, which have little or no impact on the larger Muslim populace. They have also been unable to build up grassroots networks. This can be contrasted with the highly networked and connected radical Islamist groups with their extensive range of social services. At the same time, the failure of the liberals to react appropriately to contemporary developments affecting the Muslim World has tainted their image further. Farish Noor highlighted the reluctance of liberal groups to condemn Western governments for their policies in the Middle East as an example of the failure of these groups to understand the Muslim ground.

The attention Western government and media give to these groups seems to indicate that liberal Islam is seen as a potential resource for cushioning the Muslim world from its more militant and fundamentalist interpreters. The West has unfortunately placed its stakes with

the wrong groups. The question one should then ask is whether the Muslim world has been lost to the radical Islamists. Perhaps not.

### **Traditional Islam As an Antidote to Radical Ideas**

In many parts of the Muslim World today, groups of moderate scholars and activists are working the ground to educate Muslims against the dangers of radicalism. They are promoting a brand of Islam that many Muslims have forgotten due to the effects of the legalistic interpretation of Islam. This brand of Islam is "traditional Islam". As early as 1987, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a leading traditional Muslim scholar proposed that traditional Islam could be a remedy to the challenge of Muslim extremism. Traditional Islam loosely defined is the understanding of Islam in terms of creed (*aqidah*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and self-purification (*tasawwuf*), that has been adhered to by the overwhelming majority of not only Muslim scholars, but Muslims in general. Traditional Islam entails recognizing that Islam is a living tradition that has been faithfully transmitted to each succeeding generation. Traditional Muslims practise many distinct versions of spirituality called "remembrance of God," or *zikr* which may involve prayer, chanting or silent meditation. At the same time, they emphasize the importance of the *Sunnah* (practices of the Prophet). One of the strongest manifestations of traditional Islam is Sufism. Traditional Muslims do not perceive Islamic tradition as being conservative and cast in stone. While they regard the principles of Islam as permanent and enduring, they see Islamic tradition as fluid and changing such that it can accommodate changes in a society. Traditional Muslims have however been wrongly criticised as heretical by radical Islamists, especially by the Wahhabis. Yet despite these criticisms, traditional Muslims have proven their resilience to withstand such attacks and continue to represent the silent majority of Muslims. Since 9/11, traditional Muslims all round the world have ceased to remain silent and are working the ground to counter the threat of radical Islamists.

Unlike liberal Islamic groups, traditional Muslim groups have strong grassroots support through their network of mosques, neighborhood clinics, schools and charitable services. At the same time, others are involved in organizing conferences and seminars as well as writing books to teach the Muslim masses about Islam and counter extremist thoughts that have been dominating Muslim public discourse. They are also not averse to the West and emphasize the need for mutual respect, interaction, and cooperation between Muslims and the West.

### **The Middle Way Project**

In the United Kingdom, traditional Muslims have come together to initiate The Radical Middle Way project. The project seeks to combat ignorance by spreading and empowering arguments for the 'middle way' and by the consolidation of the mainstream Muslim community. In doing so, traditional Muslim scholars have gone to the grassroots level to organize talks, seminars and other activities to educate British Muslim youth the correct understanding of Islam. Perhaps, their greatest achievement is in their ability to counter the viewpoints of radical Muslim groups in the UK such as the Al-Muhajiroun and in some cases even convincing members of this group to adopt a more moderate stance.

In Singapore, it is also traditional Muslim scholars such as Ustaz Ali Mohamed, chairman of Khadijah mosque and Ustaz Tengku Fouzy, an increasingly popular Muslim Sufi scholar, who are in the forefront of various efforts at countering radical Islamist ideology. Besides being involved in the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), a group set up to reform the Jemaah Islamiyah detainees, they have also been involved in various public forums and

lectures to educate the Muslim populace on a wide array of issues such as the concept of jihad, terrorism and the recent Arab-Israeli conflict. Their message is a simple one -- Islam does not condone violence and one has to use *hikmah* (which refers to the highest possible level of wisdom by a Muslim) in making decisions. Efforts by activists of mosques such as the Abdul Aleem Siddiqui mosque, which is closely linked to traditional Islam, to organize talks and conferences catered to the younger segment of the Muslim populace is commendable. The attendance of large numbers of young Muslims at the recent Second International Conference on Islamic Spirituality organized by the mosque reflect the ability of the traditional Muslim activists to galvanize and subsequently influence younger Muslims to adopt a less legalistic and more pluralistic form of Islam.

In the broader context, the pluralism and moderation of traditional Islam may indeed play a significant role in the ongoing transformation of the Muslim world. In the *ummah*-wide struggle for the soul of the religion, and for the restoration of pluralistic Muslim thought, traditional Islam seems to offer an alternative. To ensure that this struggle is not won by the extremists, it is important that support and attention be given to the efforts of traditional Muslims and that governments seek the advice of traditional Muslims scholars in formulating their policies on Islam.

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