

“The Role of Islam in Indonesia’s Developing Democracy”

Professor Din Syamsuddin, Chairman, Muhammadiyah

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On the issue of the relationship with the United States, Prof Din expressed the hope that the U.S. would remain involved in the affairs of East and Southeast Asia. Of considerable concern was the rise of China and the need to have the U.S. provide a counterweight.

Regarding the role of Muhammadiyah in the development of Indonesian democracy, Prof. Din stressed the importance of preparing the “cultural base” for democratic reforms. The Muhammadiyah would cooperate with the NU and other NGOs in this effort, but would not become associated with established political parties. He suggested that freedom of expression, currently flourishing in Indonesia, was a manifestation of democratic development, as well as other indicators such as the multiplicity of commissions which have sprung up over the past several years.

Prof Din was concerned, however, that political parties have failed to consolidate and in fact have become more fragmented. In 2004 there were 24 parties involved in the election; for the 2009 elections that number is apt to increase 34. In his view, this large array

of parties impedes the progress toward substantive democracy.

Muslim organizations in Indonesia may be divided into three groups: the old line organizations like NU and Muhammadiyah; the movements that developed in the 1980s; and the newly established fundamentalist groups (the “Laskar” groups). Although Prof Din opposes the establishment of the Caliphate, he believes that the best approach for dealing with fundamental/radical groups is through discussion and negotiation. In his view, the radical elements have a fundamental misunderstanding of Islam, and that the most effective remedy is an intensified inter-faith dialogue.

Discussion

Q: Why is the Islamic Ahmadiyah sect persecuted when the Constitution guarantees religious freedom?

A: The freedom refers to non-Islamic religions. These religions, such as Christians and Jews, do have freedom to worship as well as Muslims. If Ahmadiyah were separate from Islam it would have rights. But it has portrayed

itself as part of Islam and thus will be opposed by real Muslims.

Q: How do you build democracy without developing critical thought within Islam?

A: I believe democracy is the best system, but it has to be established within the proper context. The Indonesian context is to resolve differences through compromise.

Q: Why is there no freedom in Indonesia not to believe?

A: Pancasila does not accommodate non-believers. There are many non-believers in Indonesia, but reconciliation between the believers and no-believers is very difficult and can not be achieved overnight. Emphasis on the cultural basis of democracy might offer a solution.

Q: Contrast Islam in Indonesia and Islam in Arabia.

A: There is only one Islam, but Indonesian cultural elements have influenced Islam in Indonesia and have promoted its wide acceptance in our country. Some of the Islamic symbols and traditions of Arabian Islam are not entirely accepted in Indonesia.

Q: What does a member of Muhammadiyah do? What are his responsibilities?

A: Being a member of Muhammadiyah is a state of mind. Our members are, for example, more flexible than members of the NU in our devotional practices. And although we are not connected to any political party, I have extended our hand to reestablish the Islamic wing of the PDI-P party.

Q: Can Pancasila be used to resolve differences?

A: Pancasila is the common ground and the instrument to resolve differences and promote harmony.

Q: In a developing democracy, could an atheist be elected to high office in Indonesia?

A: That is a sociological issue. The United States has also not elected an atheist. So we and the United States are following the same practice.

Q: Would you care to comment on the elections – either US or Indonesian?

A: I support the U.S. candidate who went to elementary school in Indonesia.. As for the Indonesian elections, Megawati and the PDI-P, and SBY and the DP as well as Golkar, are the leading forces in the next elections.. I have been honored to be mentioned as a possible candidate, but I intend to remain the chairman of Muhammadiyah until 2010.