Islam and Democracy: The Thought of Abdurrahman Wahid

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ABSTRACT

Islam and democracy has been a subject of intense debate among Muslim scholars. Some argue that Islam is a religion based on divine revelation and therefore it is contradictory to democracy which grounded on human values. Others maintain that democratic values are in line with religious ones, so that the latter should support the former. This paper discusses the subject with specific reference to Abdurrahman Wahid thought. It argues that Wahid believes in the possibility of harmonization of religious values with democratic ones. Moreover, he maintains that religious and democratic values have common goals, because they maintain human equality, freedom and tolerance.

INTRODUCTION

Abdurrahman Wahid was the fourth president of the Republic of Indonesia who was widely known for his liberal thought and actions. Before, he was chairman of the greatest Islamic traditional organization in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama, with approximately 30 million members. He did not resign from this position until he was appointed as the fourth president of the Republic of Indonesia. Gus Dur, as he is popularly called, often launched controversial ideas and perfomed “odd” actions confusing many people, including his followers. Emha Ainun Najib [37] once said, “No figures are the most difficult to understand exceeded Gus Dur. And no one is more confused about Gus Dur than his followers.” The following examples support this proposition. In 1983-1985, Wahid was appointed as the chairman of the Jakarta Board of Art (DKJ) and consequently in 1986 served as the chairman of jurist council of Indonesian Film Festival (FFI). No doubt, such positions were confusing since he was a leader of organization of religious scholars. To this objection Wahid responded that Imam al-Shafi’i, the founder of one of the four school in Islamic law, also became a critic of literature (naqid al-adab) in his time. If he still alived, Shafi’i might be became chairman of Art Board like him [44].

Moreover, when Soeharto’s government supported the establishment of All-Indonesian Muslim Intellectual Association (Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim se-Indonesia, ICMI) in 1990, Wahid rejected to joint this organization considering that this organization will be sectarian. Otherwise, together with his colleagues, he established Forum of Democracy (Forum Demokrasi/Fordem). In 1994, on his return from Israel to see the peace process in the Middle East and to present a speech on peace at the Harry S. Truman Institute for Peace, he suggested that the government of Indonesia should open a diplomatic relation with Israel. Such actions no doubt made him a controversial figure, and even he was sometimes charged with “enemy of Islam from within” or “agents of Zionism.”

Although Wahid’s ideas are very diverse, there are three main aspects of his concern, namely revitalization of traditional Islamic heritage, modernity and search for solutions to the concrete problems faced by Indonesian Muslims [22]. Greg Barton [7], on the other hand, emphasizes that Wahid’s thought is mainly concerned with Islamic boarding school (pesantren), the dynamic of Islam, tolerance and humanity or humanism. Again, Laode Ida and Thontowi Jauhari [25] saw that the major pilar of Wahid’s thought is nationalism, Pancasila and democracy.

Masykuri Abdillah [2] argues that Indonesian Muslim intellectuals generally accept and support the concept of democracy on the basis of political reality in that they accept it in practical sense, but they consider the power of God remains a baseline measure. Wahid, on the contrary, “is the only Muslim intellectual who accepts and advocates democracy recognising popular sovereignty in the context of the life of the nation.” Because his view on democracy is rooted in people sovereignty, William Liddle [31] considers “Abdurrahman is perhaps the most ‘secular’ contemporary Indonesia Islam leader; in the sense that he aspires to a future democratic Indonesia without a religion-based party.”

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This paper examines Wahid’s view of democracy and the values underlying it. Against the previous views, this paper argues that Wahid’s thought of democracy cannot be separated from religious basis as well as Indonesian national ideology, Pancasila. This paper starts with the discussion of religious and ideological sources of Wahid’s thought on democracy followed with its values found in Islamic doctrines.

**METHOD AND MATERIALS**

To discuss the above issues, this paper uses content analysis as method of discussion [11]. Moreover, this paper also utilizes political as well as theological approaches. This is because democracy is a political concept, but religious ideas cannot be separated from this concept. The materials used in this paper are the main writings of Wahid and the writing of others that are related to the issues under discussion.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

a. Theological and Ideological Bases of Democracy:

Wahid believes that Islam has universal values, as reflected in the belief in unity of God (tawhid), law (fiqh) and ethics (akhlaq), leading to a deep concern for human destination. He argues that “such principles as equality before the law, protection of citizens from the pressure and authoritarianism, for their weakness and disability caused by the rulers” all clearly show that concern [44]. Moreover, Islamic theology has posited human being in high position in the order of universe. They have free will, but it should be subject to God’s power. This freedom indicates that people should respect the meaning and value of life in the highest manner (Wahid, 1981: 40). In Islamic law, Islamic universalism manifested in five protections known as al-usul al-khamsah (five principles) or maqashid al-shari’ah (the ultimate purposes of Islamic law). They are: (1) protection of religious belief; (2) protection of life; (3) protection of intellect; (4) protection of lineage; and (5) protection of wealth (1995: 546). Based on these principles, Muslims had to place the whole system of life in terms of human rights, and to maintain principles of freedom in managing life and to spend maximum opportunities for personal development they choose. These principles, in Siradj’s view, are similar to human rights, and since “there is no democracy without human rights, and in general human rights cannot exist without democracy” [2], then Islam supports human rights which in turn indicate the values of democracy.

Wahid also maintains that Islam is a religion of democracy. There are at least three reasons why Islam can be considered democratic religion. First, Islam is a religion of law, meaning that Islamic law applies to all people regardless of class. Second, Islam has a principle of consultation (shura), which means that Muslims have an opportunity to decide any solution to their problem in free and open agreement. Third, Islam is religion that inspires development (din al-islah) in that it is revealed to develop human life. This is in line with the main purpose of democracy as a joint-effort of peoples to improve their life. Quoting ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq, Wahid maintains that the principles of freedom (al-hurriyyah), justice (al-‘adalah), and consultation (al-shura) together serve as foundations of democracy.

However, these universal values, Wahid believes, are applicable only if they are supported with the nature of cosmopolitanism of Islamic civilization. That is to say that the universal values cannot be applicable to human life, unless they interact with and absorb other existing civilizations. History showed us how Muslims accepted other cultures confidently and absorbed a variety of cultural manifestations in order to found ‘new’ civilization. This implies that Islamic civilization is a civilization that is able at protection of all peoples and can be applied by all Wahid. According to Wahid, this is exactly the meaning of Islam as rahmatan li al-‘alamin, “mercy for all mankind.”

Basen on this cosmopolitan character of Islamic civilization Wahid promoted the notion of indigenization (pribumisasi) or contextualization of Islam. This is because religion and culture have symbiotic relationship, in which one can be distinguished from another, but one cannot be separated from another since they are overlapping. Wahid maintains,

The source of Islamic religion is revelation with its own norms. Due to its normative characters, it tends to be eternal. Culture, on the contrary, is a human creation and therefore it develops in accordance with social changes. However, these differences do not hinder the manifestations of religious life in the cultural forms.

By the idea of the indigenization, Wahid does not mean that it is another form of syncretism. For him, syncretism is an attempt to harmonize belief in supernatural forces with pre-Islamic eschatological belief, whereas indigenization is merely an attempt to take local context into account in issuing Islamic law. This is based on the legal maxim al-‘adat muhakkamah (local tradition can serve as source of law). To illustrate this notion of indigenization, Wahid cites an example as follows.

The contextualization or indigenization of Islam is a part of Islamic history both in its native country, Saudi Arabia, and other countries, including Indonesia. The histories of the two countries form a wide and long river, whose branches are manifold. If a new branch of the river is united together with them, it will give a new color of its water that affects the color of the entire river. At certain times, the flow of water can be polluted of
the industrial wastes. But the water and the river remain the same. The meaning of this illustration is that the involvement of Islam in the history does not change Islam itself, but it just changes the manifestation of the Islamic religious life.

In other words, the universal values of Islam basically will run well insofar as they can relate themselves with and absorb other civilizations, including modern civilization. Wahid’s ability to harmonize Islamic thought with the demands of modernity leads Greg Barton [7] to categorize him as a “neo-modernist” thinker. According to him, none of the requirements to be a neo-modernist is the ability to harmonize traditional and modern thoughts, and Wahid meets it.

In the Indonesian context, whose society is a very pluralistic in terms of ethnicity, language and religion, the application of the universal values of Islam should take this diversity into account, because Islam is not the one and only religion in this country. For Wahid, universal values of Islam can “play their role” as a complementary factor to other components, not as competing factors that will disintegrate national life as a whole”. In this regard, Islam can serve as the spirit of country in line with the universal principles above. He argues,

Religion as the spirit of country is a religion of human nature. That is humanitarian religion which is defined as a “submission” to the One God in the personal context and as commitment toward collective moral values in social context such as justice, fraternity, liberty and equality before the law, as well as values that are respected by human society in general.

In other words, as pluralistic country, Indonesia should not be based on an ideology of particular religion, including Islam, because Islam is just one religion among others.

The ideological debate before Indonesia’s independence is a case in point. At the time, Muslims demanded Islam as the basis of the state, since a majority of Indonesia’s population is Muslim. This can be seen in the Jakarta Charter where the first pillar of Pancasila, “Belief in the One God,” should be followed “with the obligation to apply sharia to Muslims.” However, the sentence was deleted to accommodate the demands of the non-Muslims who represent a specific region of Indonesia [42]. The formulation of Pancasila is finally accepted today as the basis of the state which constitutes a common word of all components of the nation. In line with this view, Wahid rejects the notion of “Islamic society” because the recognition of Pancasila implies that Muslims should practice their religious life under Pancasila. Moreover, the notion of “Islamic society” will only bring about differences of the status of citizens that should be avoided on the basis of Pancasila. Wahid argues,

I disagree with those who aspire to build an “Islamic community.” In my view, the Islamic community in Indonesia is a betrayal against constitution, because it will locate the community of non-Muslims as the second-class citizens. However, “Indonesian society” where Muslims become strong society properly is something that I think good [42].

For Wahid, democracy means all improvement for the nation with the participation of all components. According to him, democracy is not a monopoly of Muslims, but the whole citizens should participate in it. And this cannot be done only by a particular religion, but it should start from Pancasila. This is to say that beside theological bases, Wahid also believes that Pancasila is an important source of democracy in Indonesia. It is political compromise that unites the nation. Its essence is the tolerance and mutual respect among the various religious groups, geographical regions, ethnic groups and races. As a political agreement, Pancasila provides an opportunity for Indonesian people to develop a healthy national life in a unitary state. Therefore, for Wahid, “without Pancasila, Indonesian republic never exists” [42].

The compromising trait was reflected, among others, from the values contained in Pancasila itself. Wahid said,

Pancasila is derived from Islam, nationalism and communism. Indeed, it banned the PKI, but the spirit of equality and egalitarianism exists in the Pancasila. The spirit of “social justice” belongs to communism (Marxism), because there is no concept of “social justice” before the birth of communism. The term of “social justice” did not exist before. So, Pancasila is a summary of various ideologies of the world. From the theocratic ideology (Islam) the first pillar flows, and this occurs due to the wisdom of our fathers. It was their wisdom that led the establishment of free and independent nation from communism (the excessive opposition groups) as took place in India.

This indicates that the followers of these ideologies have given up in aspiring their own ideology, and instead they accept Pancasila as the intersection.

For Gus Dur, such a compromise has posited Pancasila as the rule of the game that connects all religions and beliefs in public life, state and nation. This does not only mean that positing one religion, including Islam, as the state official religion should be avoided [42], but also means that Pancasila should not condone any religion. Otherwise, Pancasila will cease being a rule of the game that has been agreed upon together. Therefore, Pancasila should treat all religions in equal manner before the law and in the social interaction.

This view is based on the historical fact that the political agreement on August 18, 1945, involving the entire elites of nation has considered Pancasila the final basis of the state. Therefore, any group who struggles to posit Islam as the basis of the state, basically they violetid or betrayed the agreements made by the founding
Indonesia’s position, in view of Gus Dur, was not as clear as the latter was whether or not Muslims should be the principle of head of state. One of the reasons most often cited by Muslims why non-Muslims are not allowed to occupy the position of head of state is the verse of the Quran, “Let not the believers take those who deny the truth for their allies in preference to the believers”.

Wahid rejects such an interpretation arguing that Islam basically does not differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims, since they have the same rights, including the right to be the head of state. However, in practical context, it is natural that the Muslims chose a Muslim candidate as the head of state in preference to non-Muslims [2]. In the context of Indonesia, Gus Dur did not agree with the opinion that non-Muslims cannot become president of the country simply because Muslims are predominant. He insisted, constitutionally, a non-Muslim can be president, and this must be the principle, despite the fact that such a possibility is very difficult to be realized [26]. The same case applies to America where Protestants serve as majority. It is difficult for a Muslim, for instance, to be a president although constitutionally he is allowed.

Furthermore, Gus Dur insists that the democracy can only be in line with justice. Since Islam is a religion of democracy, it should support justice, whether in the form of the legal, political, cultural, economic and social justice. Legal maxim of Islam states that “the policy the leader takes should lead to the interest of his peoples” (tasharruf al-imam ala al-ra’iyyah manut bi al- masha’lahah). This indicates serves “evidence” whether or not the life of society is democratic.

Based on the principle of justice, Gus Dur rejects the idea of representation in both legislative and executive boards in the country. He asserts, “There have been complaints in the past, [why] Christians are represented, but they are lay Christians. On the other hands, there are a lot of Muslims such as Soeharto, Try Sutrisno, and others, but they are not considered as the representatives of Muslims?” In other words, justice based on representation, for Gus Dur, should be grounded on clear provisions, including who represents whom, not just based on mere claims.

As mentioned earlier, Gus Dur regards Islam as a religion of democracy because it is based on law. It means that law applies to everyone regardless of class; the highest officials and common people are subject to the same law. Since the law applied in this country is not religious law, national law should be the rule of the game.
c. The Principle of Freedom:

According to Gus Dur, from the theological perspective, Islam acknowledges a great freedom for humans. In Sunni doctrine, for example, people were given a high position in life order in the universe. He is allowed to will anything, although the will itself must be subject to the reality of God’s power. The independence, to Gus Dur, requires people to uphold the meaning and the value of life ends.

Human freedom is not limited to the free will and effort, but more important is the freedom of speech. According to Gus Dur, many verses of the Qur’an use the term ʿAfalā ʿaʾqīlān, ʿAfalā tatafkharīn and so on. This indicates that each man must think. The necessity of thinking also means the recognition of freedom of thought, because the results of the individual thoughts are not the same. In other words, the command to think also comes with the consequences, i.e. the difference of opinion, even controversy, and that’s the “essence of democracy”.

According to Gus Dur, the difference of opinion in this religion must be the principle of every Muslim to keep respects the opinion of others. Whatever the form of opinion one has, as such, it does not diminish the greatness of Islam. Freedom of speech is emphasized by Gus which can be seen, among other things, from his attitude in defending Salman Rushdie, the author of The Satanic Verses.

His great attention for the freedom of speech is also based on his interest in liberalism. According to him, liberalism is a philosophy of life that emphasizes the fundamental rights of humankind. It believes in and necessitates its rule of law, equal treatment before the law for all citizens, regardless of ethnic origin, culture and religion. In fact, for Gus Dur, liberalism protects those who dissent from the opinion of the majority of the nation. In other words, liberalism has values that support high civilization. Therefore, Gus Dur found liberalism is the only ideology that can lead to a more democratic direction [15]. As stated earlier, Islam recognizes humanitarian values in high manner, and the core values of Islam, according to Gus Dur, are the values of ‘liberalism’. He himself has no objection if one calls him a ‘liberalist’ since liberalism itself is in line with Islamic values. In Gus Dur point of view, freedom of speech was also absolutely guaranteed by the laws and Constitution of 1945. Since controversy is one of the essences of democracy, said Gus Dur, “If you ban controversy, you can be considered dictator, anti-Pancasila” [26].

d. The Principle of Pluralism:

What is meant by pluralism here is a society where the population is not homogeneous, but is divided by tribal, ethnic, racial and religious aspects, in which sometimes some of these factors converge and lead to conflict. According Abdillah, most Indonesian Muslim scholars emphasize pluralism in terms of religious aspect [2].

According to Gus Dur, the religious diversity was actually a difference in perceiving concepts and the attributes of their own divinity. This difference in turn causes the different procedures and rituals, but they basically lead to the same God. Gus Dur said, “We serve [the] substance of the same God. God is essentially the same. What differ are the divine attributes, the concept of divinity. In essence, God is the same”.

By the essence of God is the same Gus Dur does not mean eliminating the theological differences that exist within each religion, because each religion is unique. In line with this understanding, Gus Dur interprets QS (2:120), “O Muhammad, verily the Jews and Christians will not be willing to you until you follow,” not as commonly understood by many people, in the sense that they will be always hostile to Muslims. According to him, it is “not willing” in the above verse is “unable to accept the basic concepts”. For Gus Dur, those Jews and Christians absolutely cannot accept the basic concepts of Islam, otherwise they are no longer Jews and Christians.

From the above description, it shows that the tolerance among co-religionists become an inevitable in building Indonesia. However, according to Gus Dur, the tolerance does not merely mean “peaceful coexistence” as it is echoed by many people. The most important of the tolerance, said Gus Dur, was a sense of togetherness and understanding.

Gus Dur believes that the greatness and the strength of a nation because it has the spirit of pluralism. To realize this pluralistic spirit, Gus Dur requires the democratic treatment from all parties, including the government. Gus Dur argued that pluralism would not be maintained in the absence of democracy. This means, the government should not be favored one religion over other religions in the management of the state. For this reason, among others, Gus Dur assessed the presence of all-Muslim Intellectual Association that can lead to sectarianism.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion, it is clear that Wahid is promoter and defender of democratic values, such as principle of equality, freedom, tolerance. He argued that such values are congruent with Islamic values, so that Muslims should uphold these values. Moreover, these values are also fundamental as can be seen Indonesian constitution and ideology.
REFERENCES