

## **The Liberal Islam Debates and the Politics of Religious Pluralism in Indonesia and Malaysia**

The debates concerning Islam culture have been a trending topic not only in politics but also when analyzing social-economic aspects within the nations, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, where it is possible to find an Islam prevalence. The opportunity to engage in an interesting discussion about this subject led by Doctor Carlo Bonura enriched it even more. Dr. Bonura is a professor in SOAS the University of London and is an expert in the field of comparative political thought in Southeast Asian Politic.



As an introduction, Dr. Bonura provided the students with a presentation about some the debates concerning contemporary issues regarding law and Islam in Southeast Asia in order to give a general overview about it. It was very interesting to come to the knowledge that Pakistan, India, Indonesia and Bangladesh have more Muslims within its territory than all the other countries we typically associate with Islam because of the media and political conflicts. Malaysia and Indonesia are both diverse countries. An interesting fact pointed out by Dr. Bonura is that Malaysia is a country geographically divided by water and because of it, the religious dynamics in both parts of the country is different, however, any political controversy affects the country elsewhere too. This scenario is very different from the Indonesian one, where there is also a significant Christian population coexisting with the Muslim one.

For a long time, especially in the beginning of the 20th century, Islam has been considered a moderate form of the religion in Southeast Asia. The term "moderate Islam" has become widely used after the terrorist attack of 2001 but, as stated by our speaker, this term has no religious relevance and in fact is only a geopolitical category which makes sense for governments in Europe and North America. In reality, people do not think of themselves as "moderate Muslims". The meaning of this term is mainly grounded in an international level, perhaps as a way of classifying danger. Discussing the use of this term in Malaysia, Dr. Bonura led us to a conclusion that this is an effort of the Malaysian Government to try to develop a state ideology of moderation, and it indicates how the state tries to intervene actively

in Islamic law.

The argument about "moderate Islam" raises a question on why isn't liberal Islam supported, which has been raising an emerging debate in Malaysia and Indonesia since the early 2000s. In Indonesia, it was raised within the fall of Suharto dictatorship, which in the aftermath was the scenario of a broadening of all types of political discourses, especially the ones prevailing religious discourses and with new forms of liberalism, and also new forms of Islamism as well.

In Malaysia, liberalism is inserted in a different scenario, it is politicized, which leads to a negative image in the country; it is also possible to observe state institutions against liberalism, which is not possible to find in Indonesia. To discuss this matter in Malaysia, Dr. Bonura highlighted how important it is to understand how liberalism is understood by some religious authorities as a threat to religious and political order, by reaffirming that the term "moderation" does not help to understand the complex dynamics that shape political and religious practices.

"Religious authority" is the main topic of today's speech and in order to understand how complex this issue is in Malaysia and Indonesia, we have to take into consideration a series of long-term colonial interventions that took place in the 19th and early 20th century both in Indonesia and Malaysia. A clear evidence of it is the fact that both countries have a dual legal system, systems in which criminal cases are usually tried by secular courts meanwhile family law ones, by religious courts. Nowadays, the majority of Muslim countries have dual legal systems as the product of the colonial experience.

In Indonesia and Malaysia there is a variety of state institutions: in Indonesia there are ministries who are devoted to religion and education is controlled by the State meanwhile in Malaysia the state is more actively involved in saying what Muslims can or cannot do on a daily basis, because of a proliferation of state administration to administrate Islam.

One of the last but not least important topics Dr. Bonura mentioned was "Liberalism and the principles of Liberal Islam". Ululi Abshar Abdalla, which is one of the main figures of liberal Islam, wrote an article about "rejuvenating Islamic understanding" where he argued that there are four core principles for liberal Islam. The first one is "a non – literal, substantive, and contextual interpretation of Islam"; the second one "differentiates between fundamental elements and those elements that are creations of

the local culture” ( for example the hijab which he considers a product of pre - Islamic tradition ); the third one “recognizes no difference between the “Ummah” ( the Muslim community ) and humanity itself meaning that there’s no difference between people, and finally, the fourth one “ insists upon the separation between religious power and political power, between church and state”.

In order to understand the differences on how debates about religious authority emerged in Malaysia and Indonesia, we can argue the fact that in Malaysia liberalism didn’t really have a chance and that the conservative critique was effective in limiting its influence whereas in Indonesia things were far more open. Malaysia is a more autocratic state and the Malaysian authorities are far more worried about the emergence of new ideologies, new sources of religious beliefs, and therefore there is an environment in which liberalism, which is seen as a threat, is not supported by any of the Malaysian authorities. In Indonesia, instead, we find a more open system and because religious authority itself is decentralized these debates can emerge more thoroughly.

To conclude, Dr. Bonura left us with a quote by Ugi Suharto, a conservative critique. He states that to preserve the Muslims community in Indonesia you have to react against an ideology which is all about challenging the Islamic knowledge and the religious authority more generally: “ When there is no legal protection, then elements that can harm Islam from the inside can easily be disseminated throughout society without being hindered by the Indonesian government itself ”.

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