

## TREND OF LIBERALISM IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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### Abstrak

*Tulisan ini ingin mengeksplorasi fenomena Islam liberal di dunia Islam dengan difokuskan pada kajian aspek historis, konteks kelahiran, tema penting yang dibahas, dan perkembangannya di Indonesia. Beberapa literatur dari karya Leonard Binder dan Charles Kurzman diambil sebagai referensi. Kedua sarjana tersebut, meskipun berasal dari Barat, memiliki perbedaan pandangan tentang otentisitas perkembangan liberalisme Islam atau Islam liberal. Binder berpandangan bahwa perkembangan liberalisme Islam dipengaruhi oleh tradisi berfikir Barat. Sementara Kurzman memiliki pandangan sebaliknya. Islam liberal menurut penulis buku, *Liberal Islam, A Sourcebook*, itu merupakan tradisi yang muncul dalam Islam sendiri. Terlepas dari kontroversi tersebut, salah satu fenomena yang menarik dari perkembangan Islam liberal adalah, Islam liberal juga berkembang di Indonesia.*

### INTRODUCTION

This writing tries to explore the phenomena of liberal Islam in Islamic world with focused on studies about its historical aspect, birth context, important themes discussed, and its development in Indonesia. Several literatures from works of Binder and Kurzman are taken as reference. Other pros and cons references, are also used to elicit more comprehensif understanding. The works of Binder (1998) and Kurzman (2003), although it was born from western scholars who were interested to discuss about liberal Islam, however, proposed several fundamental differences. Binder's works try to track on correlation between Islam liberalization and politics liberalization in Middle East, along with the fading of secularism's influence as the base of its nation ideology. In his works, Binder concluded that liberalization in Middle East will never happen without Islam liberalism (Binder, 1998). To support the thesis, Binder has put several ideas of Islam philosopher whose opinions are actually influenced by the thought of western liberalism and the correlation of its study to Islamic elements.

In Contrary with Binder's study, Kurzman's works tended to give contribution toward intellectual project by proposing texts of most liberal Islam philosopher into English in formed of anthology. Despite that, Kurzman also wants to give contribution into Islamic literatures by focusing his study on its Islamic context. To him, analysis of liberal Islam mostly were compared with western liberalism with an implication it was assessed using western barometer. To Kurzman, the similarities between liberal Islam and western liberalism will not implicate a conception in which liberal Muslims are perceived as not dynamic and only imitate western philosophy. Many of their writings are actually cited from interpretation of the holy Qur'an, life of Muhammad, early generation of Islam, and traditional form of Islamic discussions (Kurzman, 2003).

### **LIBERAL ISLAM The Problem in Term**

Kurzman admitted that the concept of liberal Islam did sound as contradiction in terminology (Kurzman, 2003). Kurzman proposes several western view of Islam through its most exotic elements. for instance, Islam is comparable with fanaticism (as stated on works of Voltaire). The power of Islamic politic is comparable with despotism (Montesquieu on his phrase said oriental despotism). Francis Bacon defined the power of politic Islam as monarchy which has no noble values as Turkish monarchy was a pure and absolute tyranny. This practice is also said to be comparable with terror and rape as well as Islamic tradition which is comparable with savage and primitivism.

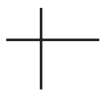
Themes surrounding minor view of Islam which is equally compared with theocracy and the frightened terrorism is continuously occur until present. Thus, No wonder it was then emerged several academic works of western orientalism in terrifying tittles, such as: Radical Islam, Millitant Islam, and Sacred Rage (Kurzman, 2003). Moreover, empirically, radicalism of Islam has appeared in some countries as happened in Iran (Iran revolution, 1979) and in West Africa. The phenomena of radicalism and terorism by using religious symbols has currently appeared in Indonesia as well. To this context, is the importance to provide another perspectives of Islam which can not be seen as monolithic, since historically there are various religion understanding within internal Islam which creates various mazhab and believes. Referring to the phenomena, term of liberal Islam however can be said as a reality in Islamic world.

Contradiction impressed in term of liberal Islam can also be noticed in the following question: Can Islam be positioned with liberal equally? Islam on *lughawiy* means obey, abide to Allah and bind to *syariah* brought by Rasulullah saw. Based on this perspective, it can be clearly concluded if Islam does not mean freedom. To answer this terminological problems, Kurzman quoted Asaf 'Ali Asghar Fyzee (1899-1981) who stated, "We don't have to mind the nomenclature, but if a name must be given, lets we call it as liberal Islam". Even Fyzee named liberal Islam as Protestan Islam (Kurzman, 2003). By using the term, Fyzee tried to deliver message of the importance for Islam to show its other faces which are non-orthodox, Islam who is compatible to changes of era, have futuristic and forward orientation and not orientating backward to its past (Husaini dan Hidayat, 2002). However it have to be admitted that liberal Islam to some community often refer to negative connotations associated in terms of western domination, hypocrite, and against Islam it self.

Within context mentioned above, Kurzman stated that concept of liberal Islam has to be viewed as a tool and not as an absolute category. Here, Kurzman has defined "liberalism" in a less strict definition, which is the community who act opposite to Islam revivalist. While Islam is understood by its believers having important roles in contemporary world, as the opponent of secularist (Kurzman, 2003).

#### **THE CONTEXT OF EMERGENCE OF LIBERAL ISLAM**

Based on Kurzman, liberalism in Islamic thought had actually appeared among movements of Islam revivalist since the XVIII century, it was the productive era for Islamic debates (Kurzman, 2003). Prominent figure of liberal Islam reference, is Shah Waliyullah (1703-1762) (Ahmed, 1962). Argumentation of placing Shah Waliyullah as the ancestor of liberal Islam intellectual community can be observed based on his thought which appeared to be more humanistic than Muhammad bin 'Abdul Wahhab's (1703-1787) and other pioneer of Islam reawakening figures. As an example, Waliyullah was very tollerant to local culture, which then these are perceived by revivalist to be contradictive to conception of orthodox Islam. Waliyullah has also pointed out the importance of *ijtihad* and rejecting *taqlid*. Kurzman view has also showed to Islamic world that actually the study of liberal Islam is rooted authentically within Islam. So, not as accused by some people who said that liberal Islam is based on westernism and secularism, or at least resulted from the creativity of Muslim philosophers in responding to western tradition.



History of the emergence of liberal Islam by Kurzman was also placed into dialectical context between three traditions of sosio-religion interpretation in Islamic world, which one and another completing present Islamic study through its each own perspective. Three forms of those traditions are: customary Islam, revivalist Islam, and liberal Islam (Kurzman, 2003).

Customary Islam as the first tradition is noted as combination of custom and Islamic habit. Kurzman proposes the tradition of worshipping to holy figures occurred in Marocco and Indonesia as the example. Particularly in Indonesia, this tradition is also related with ritual religious performances and power of religion rites which express local traditions (Geertz, 1982). As examples: *bedug* sounds in South Africa and other musical traditions in Islamic worlds; the belief of Kurdis to spirits; the celebration of Islamic new year, and other big day in Iran and other Islamic world; social-*kasta* like hierarchy in Islamic region in South Asia; and the belief of people to mystical/magical power owned by things. To some people, those local traditions are not only seen as contrary to Islam but also to other aspects in its own custom and area. Therefore, those traditions prone to be justified in local scope and not global scope.

The second tradition and the most important alternatives of customary Islam is revivalist Islam and also popularly known as Islamism, Fundamentalism, and Wahabism (Dakmejian, 1980). This tradition opposed costumary interpretation which is regarded as being less in giving more emphasize to Islamic doctrine. To face its local deviation, revivalist wants to point out the importance of referring back to God vision, firmly against local politic institution falsification which is considered to seize God's absolute authority, the authority of revivalist as the only qualified Islam interpreter as well as the reawakening of religion practice in early period of Islam. An example of the revivalist Islam movement tradition is the movement of Muhammad bin 'Abdul Wahhab in the XVIII century which later became the prototype of all Islam purifying movement purposing to purify Islam from local costumary practices and non-Islamic practices.

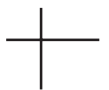
The third tradition is liberal Islam. Liberal Islam defines itself differently from costumary Islam tradition by stating the prominence of early period of Islam to firmly state about illegality of present Islamic practice. In certain aspect, It can be said that there is similarity between revivalist Islam and liberal Islam. The difference is liberal Islam brings past time back for the need of modernity, while revivalist Islam firmly state modernity on behalf of the past. Though

there are several versions of liberal Islam, the common element is, its critics to both customary Islam tradition as well as to revivalist Islam, which is said in phase of backwardness. According to liberal Islam, both traditions has obstructed Islamic world to enjoy the results of modernity, such as: economic improvement, democracy, and law rights. Islam, according to liberal Islam, if it is well comprehended will be in harmony, or even become the pioneer to western liberalism which is comparable to modernity (Kurzman, 2003).

Those three Islamic traditions are dialectically involved among debates and rivalry until present. Revivalist Islam has often againts customary Islam and liberal Islam, while liberal Islam is being less powerful in giving influence. Liberal Islam even tends to be the victim rather than the winner. Some liberal Islam figures have experienced torture, being exiled or even prosecuted and hanged into death penalty, for example: Mahmoud Muhammad Taha (Sudan, 1910-1985), who opposed the revivalist government was executed after prosecuted murtad in 1985; Subhi al Salih (Libanon, dead 1986) who suggested to open all possibilities for ijthad and forbid taqlid, was killed by Syiah shooter in 1986; Faraq Fuda (Egypt, 1945-1992), a liberal politician and columnist who opposed extrimism in Islam was also killed in 1992.

Less harmful outrage treatment were also experienced by some figures of liberal Islam, such as: 'Ali 'Abd. Al-Raziq (Egypt, 1888-1966) who was fired from his position at al-Azhar for his opinion that Islam lets its government form to be determined by human thinking creation; Muhammad Khalaf Allah (Egypt, 1916-1997) was not only forced to burn all his works, but also forced to restate his belief and renewing his marriage; Mehdi Bazargan (Iran, 1907-1995) was purged from his position as prime minister which later followed with his exile from Iranese parliament; Muhammad Shahrour (Syria, born in 1983) witnessed his works as being banned in Middle East area; Abdul Karim Soroush (Iran, born 1945) was forbidden to speak in front of Iranese public and threatened by death penalty (Kurzman, 2003).

Those realities later resulted in pesimism to some liberal Islam community. Even liberal Islam was assumed to be fading along with the increasing strength of revivalist Islam since 1970. Thus Since then, liberal Islam can be said as being in the state of facing an impossible life (Kurzman, 2003). Hasan Hanafi (Egypt, born in 1935) is a person who was being pessimistic to liberal Islam future. Kurzman's pessimistic view towards liberal Islam was considered to be too premature, since it has currently appeared new generations who were



accustomed to western education and community. Let say, ‘Abdullah Ahmed al-Na’im (Sudan-USA, born in 1946), Mohammed Arkoun (Aljazair-France, born in 1988), Fazlurrahman (Pakistan-USA, 1919-1988), they were people who owned position in several western universities. Factor like the increasing level of Islamic education can also be part of the reason in building optimism toward liberal Islam. Better literation within Islamic community will open possibilities for its people to read al-Qur’an and other resources for their own empowerment needs rather than just counting on to religion figures (*ulama*).

### MAIN THEMES OF LIBERAL ISLAM

According to Kurzman (2003), there are six main themes of liberal Islam which have always been studied and discussed by liberal Islam community. First theme is against theocracy. This theme can be observed from the thought of ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq (2003), which later strengthen by Khalaf Allah. Both were pointing on God vision which let all government forms to be determined by human thought construction. Khalaf Allah can also be said goes beyond ‘Ali ‘Abd Raziq since he stated that Islam is compatible with democracy. According to him, al-Qur’an has composed several principals base of democracy which demand Islamic community to form its implementation. God vision not only allow but also demand democracy (Allah, 2003). Works of Mahmud Taleqani (Iran, 1911-1979), a leader of Iranese revolution were also revealed his concern about the emergence of theocracy in Iran. Objection to theocracy can also be noticed trough Muhammad Sa’id al-‘Asmawi’s writing (Egypt, born in 1932) which stated that al-Qur’an puts syariah as a path and not as law system which is ready to either be used or be applied.

The second theme is democracy. This theme was debated by special focus on concept of *shura* which use to allow others’ rights in stating their opinion or making public statement about nation affairs. Mehdi Bazargan, a democrat who was once pointed by Imam Khomeini as prime minister was main supporter to the concept of shura as part of democracy. S. M. Zafar (Pakistan, born in 1930) argued that government’s responsibility system needs to be adjusted to meet various social needs. To him, parliamentary government is the most effective tools to guarantee responsibility in contemporary era.

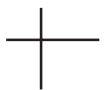
Other arguments about the application of democracy can also be observed from the writing of Muhammad Natsir (Indonesia, 1908-1993). Natsir was known as a very strict guard of tradition (Woodward, 1995). In his writing

entitled "Indonesian Revolution", Natsir quoted several articles of al-Qur'an to support his argumentation about the importance of democracy in certain conditions of a nation (Natsir, 2003).

The third theme is women's right. This theme is commonly used to respond to the articles of al-Qur'an and Hadith which appears to show contradiction to women's rights, as comprehended by liberal Islam. As examples, articles which explain about right of poligami for men, unilateral right for men to divorce, legacy right and law for men to witness which has a bigger portion. So with Hadith which talks about hijab, gender differences and right for women to be leader. Figures as Benazir Bhuto (Pakistan, born in 1953) and Aminah Wadud Muhsin (USA, born in 1952), are figures who suggested us to reanalyze those statements (al-Qur'an and Hadith) and concluded that those statements are not actually reduce women's rights as assumed by some parts of society. Both persons are also known very concern in bringing broader discussion about articles of al-Qur'an and hadith which often mean to justify men's dominance over women.

Despite stating for occurrence of misconception in translating *syariah* that it came to a conception of limiting women's right, some writers also stated that the anti women statements were actually considered to be referred to Arabic condition in the VII century which does not fit to apply in other time and place. Nazira Zain al-Din (Libanon, born in 1905) stated that al-Qur'an allows pra Islam Arabic habits, such as poligami and slavery just to ease transition process from Arabic period into Islamic period and because Muhammad has died before he completely eradicate those habits, as wanted by Islam. Muhammad Shahrour has also added statement that jurisprudence rules have historical marks of an era when it was created and people in where it was formed. Fatima Mernisi (Marocco, born in 1940) also stated if al-Qur'an and other resources has sistematically misinterpreted issues dealing with women's position.

The fourth theme is the rights of non-Muslim. This theme discussed about relationship among religions, rights for non Muslim especially ahli kitab (Jewish and Christian) to keep doing their religion activities as long as they show loyalty and pay taxes to the authorized Muslim leader. This matter appears in the first year of Islam within context of Muslim conquering toward non-Muslim. Ali Bulac (Turki, born in 1951) was among intelektual who accepted the tradition as humanly treatment model in treating non-Muslim. Base of reference of



Bulac is Medinah Document (*Mithaq al-Madinah*), signed by Muhammad, Jewish, and Musyrikin community.

Some other authors has slight different opinions because Muslim has faced various different conditions since *syariah* was formed. Moreover, if those rules is to be applied into countries in which Muslims are positioned under non-Muslim government authority. Humayun Kabir (India, 1906-1969) and Dimasangcay A. Pundato (Phillipine, born in 1947) represented respond of liberal Islam toward the situation, as occurred in India and Phillipine. Both were even taking opposite position to Islam separatist movement. Candra Muzafar (Malaysia, born in 1947) and Rusmir Mahmutcehajic (Yugoslavia-Bosnia, born in 1948) proposed different situation happened in Malaysia and Bosnia Herzegovina, a small government with Muslim majority but have less authority to non-Muslim community. The interesting issue to be noticed is that they do not interest to follow the earlier path of Islam government model but trying to build argument about themes of tolerance among religions.

Muhammad Talbi (Tunisia, born in 1921) theoretically explained the correlation between topics among religion. He quoted positive ideas about kindness to non-Muslim. He also added about tolerance which allow dialogues within communities by ignoring past time. Therefore, he againts intolerant syariah elements, such as death penalty to apostate (*murtad*) people.

The fifth theme is freedom in thinking. This theme is the central of liberal Islam problems. As liberal community has to keep their freedom in thinking in order to be able to bring the base of the truth as revelation of other thoughts. Freedom of thinking is discussed within *ijtihad* context and correlated within discussion of: who can talk and what can be talk about. Question who can talk (related with who can do *ijtihad*), is very important problem for liberalist. Shahrour for instance, as someone who has technical background stated that his method in analysis al-Qur'an is scientific, an effort which clearly different from method of *mazhab* in traditional community (Shahrour, 1990). Its Question: Is it legal for someone with no religious education background to do *ijtihad*?

Answering the question, some Islamic community explained if God creates human to be a thinker and syariah drives Muslim to have reflexion and observation. Ali Syari'ati (Iran, 1933-1977) is the prominent Muslim philosophers who often criticize religious figures who want to monopolise interpretations of Islam. Al-Qardawi (Egypt-Qatar, born in 1926) quoted



studies about tolerance and respect to perspectives differences, especially related to obligation in religion and criticized extremist who plans to deceive Muslims by their interpretation of religion obliques.

Within liberal Islam perspective, religious interpretations can be resulted from certain historical conditions. Therefore, to keep Islam *salib li kulli zaman wa makan*, it needs a comprehensive study. In related to this, Mohammed Arkoun (Aljazair-France, born in 1982) pointed out the importance of using socio contemporary method of study, particularly linguistic. Abdul Karim Soroush (Iran, born in 1945) was also suggested to use sosiological approach in studying religion in order to build freedom of thinking for the philosopher. To him, religion can be rationally studied, similar with other phenomena. Religion is devine, while religious interpretation is human since it can be wrong or even sosiologically determined (Soroush, 2003).

The sixth theme is the idea of progress. This theme refers to Muslim intellectual perspective who sees modernity and change as potential positive progress. This option reflects significant transformation process from traditional Islam perspective which used to see contemporary changes as backwardness; and significant transition of worship of the earlier period of God vision. Muhammad Iqbal (India, 1877-1938) placed the principal of movement into the centre of its theology (Iqbal, 1991). The principle of movement stated by Iqbal means the admonition in doing *ijtihad* to open creativity and originality of thinking in order to solve problems. The advice of al-Qur'an to human being to use their ratio/thought and faith to an existence of human historical cycle, strengthen his perspective in seeing Islam thought about dinamism and refuse statism.

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha (Sudan, 1910-1985), the author of "The Second Message of Islam", differed between what he called the first message of Islam and the second message of Islam. To him, the first message of Islam contended orders for Muslim to be believer (*mu'min*) and Muslim, as reflected in the articles of Makkiyah and Madaniyah. This order is intended for Arabian society in the VII century, while the second message of Islam contended evolutioner signs which hoping Muslim to reach higher religion level. Through the second message of Islam, reformation has always been sounded.

Nurcholish Madjid (Indonesia, 1939-2005) and Shabbir Akhtar (Pakistan-England, born in 1960) thought that the refusal of modernity and historical changes has made Islam philosophers become rigid in deactivating religions



ability to communicate with modern Muslim and sacrificing positive potension of its modernity.

Fazlurrahman has also stated that the insistence of absolute common interpretation is impossible and unimportant to be done. Moreover, Rahman stated “ Offcourse, different valuable opinions existed has to be highly valued”. Rahman criticized traditional interpretation as being more bounded to the past time rather than facing the challenge of changing time. In the same time, Rahman has also criticized revivalist for denying early interpretation in order to go back to its original sources. Rahman tend to develop new interpretation of original sources when he learned about past interpretation, whether it is aimed to acquired knowledge and to broaden his perspective in order to understand it as product from its historical context.

#### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF LIBERAL ISLAM IN INDONESIA**

In Indonesia, liberal Islam has marked its popularity since 1970, almost in the same time when revivalist Islam strengthened its position (Kurzman, 2003). Study of liberal Islam began popular and developed since 1970 with Nurcholish Madjid as its main figure although he personally had never used the term of liberal Islam on his idea and thinking (Husaini dan Hidayat, 2002). Observing his writing in 1970, Nurcholish was clearly able to be positioned as the forefrontman of liberal Islam. Nurcholish work entitled; *Kebarusan Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam dan Masalah Integrasi Umat* and *Menyegarkan Paham Keagamaan di Kalangan Umat Islam Indonesia* (The Need of Renewing Islam Tought and Problems of Integration; and Refreshing Religion Understanding Within Moslems in Indonesia), asked us to be part in doing fundamental changes in order to follow the changes of era (Madjid, 1992). Through his writing, he stated his idea and thinking by using a bit vulgar words, such as: secularism, islam yes, islam party no, quantity versus quality, intellectual freedom, idea of progress and inclusivism. Themes brought by Nurcholish are mostly continue to be studied by liberal Islam community in Indonesia.

Liberal Islam study has been developing rapidly ever since, whether in institutional or individual scope. Among institutions which taken part in spreading studies of liberal Islam are: Liberal Islam Networking known as *Jaringan Islam liberal (JIL)* and network of Muhammadiyah Youth Intellectual that known as *Jaringan Intelektual Muda Muhammadiyah (JIMM)* (al-Asya’ri, 2005). The development of liberal Islam in Indonesia has ever been in a dreadful phase/dark period.

Distinctive event which was noticed by its discriminative treatment to liberal Islam community is *fatwa* issued by *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* in July 2005 (contended 11 *fatwa*/ statement), which some contents were forbid and punish liberalism, secularism, pluralism, and different religion marriage. In fact, those issues have become parts which continuously studied in liberal Islam tradition. Despite that, some books with its title expressing arbitrary to liberal Islam has been emerging, such as: *Pengaruh Kristen-Orientalis terhadap Islam Liberal* (The Influence of Christian-Oriental to Liberal Islam) by Adian Armas (2003); *Bahaya Islam Liberal* (The Danger of Liberal Islam) by Hartono Ahmad Jaiz (2002); *Islam Liberal dan Zionisme Internasional* (Liberal Islam and International Zionism) by Adian Husaini dan *Islam Liberal: Sejarah, Konsepsi, Penyimpangan dan Jawabannya* (Liberal Islam: History, Conception, Its Deviation and Answers) by Adian Husaini dan Nuim Hidayat.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the review discussed previously, the following are several conclusions can be drawn. *First*, freedom of thinking in Islam which later becomes spirit of liberal Islam movement was actually authentically derived from Islam tradition, although during its progress, western modernization has also played part in influencing its study. Therefore liberal Islam does not have to be understood within western context by using western barometer. *Second*, liberal Islam can be understood in term of those who oppose revivalist and always study themes which orthodoxly assumed to be settled, such as Islam in politics, democracy, women's right, religion pluralism, freedom of thinking, and idea of progress. By always put those themes into discussion, liberal Islam community believes that Islam can play an important role in contemporary world. *Third*, liberal Islam development in Indonesia can not be separated from the development of Islam thought liberalism in Islamic world. Including the treatments which often discrediting liberal Islam community in Islamic world as well as in Indonesia.

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