

RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN SUNNISM AND SHIISM IN INDONESIA Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

Throughout Islamic history, we observe enmity and conflicts between Sunnism and Shiism, nonetheless there has been also reconciliation between these sects. This article examines the opportunities and challenges of Sunni-Shia convergence in Indonesia. Such a picture will reveal a better understanding of the features of Sunni-Shia convergence in the country and their relationship with the notion of 'Indonesian Islam'. The hostility between Shiism and Sunnism in Indonesia is triggered by misunderstandings between these sects, politicisation of Shiism, as well as geopolitical tensions in the Middle East. These constitute the challenges of Sunni-Shia convergence. One may also observe the ventures of Sunni-Shia convergence which have been undertaken by the scholars of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, and other Islamic civil society organisations. Grounding on these enterprises and the enduring elaboration of 'Indonesian Islam', the opportunities of and the prospects for Sunni-Shia rapprochement in the country are envisaged.

[Sepanjang sejarah Islam, kita dapat dengan mudah menyaksikan serangkaian pertikaian dan konflik antara kelompok Syiah dan Sunni. Namun demikian, terdapat pula serangkaian kisah rekonsiliasi antarkeduanya. Artikel ini



mendiskusikan peluang dan tantangan dalam mendamaikan kedua kelompok tersebut di Indonesia. Selain itu, artikel ini juga memberikan gambaran lebih jelas mengenai karakteristik konvergensi antara Syiah dan Sunni dan hubungan mereka dengan term “Islam Indonesia”. Perseteruan antara Syiah dan Sunni di Indonesia pada dasarnya disebabkan kesalah-pahaman antara keduanya, politisasi Syiah, sekaligus ketegangan politik di Timur Tengah. Ketiga aspek inilah yang menjadi kendala konvergensi Syiah dan Sunni di Indonesia. Namun, kita juga dapat menyaksikan upaya konvergensi Syiah dan Sunni yang dilakukan oleh tokoh-tokoh Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Muhammadiyah, serta organisasi Islam lainnya. Melalui upaya mereka dan upaya peneguhan identitas “Islam Indonesia”, peluang dan prospek rekonsiliasi antara Sunni dan Syiah dapat dibangun.]

Keywords: *Sunni-Shia Convergence, Politicisation of religion, Challenges, Indonesian Islam*

Introduction

The tension between Sunnism and Shiism has become part of Islamic history a long time ago, which can be observed for instance through the tradition of heresiography. Some specialists further argue that aspiration towards ecumenical reconciliation is substantially¹ a recent phenomenon.² The term ‘ecumenical’ has been used to signify “the inhabited world” or “the land which the people dwell”, which is theologically neutral, but then employed to signify universal priestly expressions of belief and comprehension of the church in its wide-reaching nuance.³ In line with this, Crow designates ecumenism as “the movement or tendency towards worldwide Christian unity or

¹ My thankfulness goes to the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Humboldt-Foundation which provided me with fellowship which allowed me to complete the paper. I would also thank Amin Abdullah, Patrick Franke, Azyumardi Azra, Rüdiger Lohker, as well as reviewers and editors of this journal for their comments and suggestions.

² Rainer Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 3.

³ Robert McAfee Brown, “Ecumenical Movement”, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 5, 1995, p. 17-18.

cooperation”.⁴ In the context of Islam, Al-Azhar University is considered as one of the guardians of Islamic ecumenism and moderatism, most specifically since the twentieth century. This standing sustains the contemporary era, and this can be observed for instance from the viewpoints of Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyib (b. 1946). During his visit to Indonesia, al-Tayyib is reported to have said that Sunnites and Shiites are brothers in Islam.⁵ Nevertheless, his statements on Sunni-Shia ecumenism have triggered a negative reaction from the conservative Muslims in Indonesia.

This article tries to investigate the challenges and opportunities of Sunni-Shia ecumenism in Indonesia. To comprehend a broader setting of Sunni-Shia rapprochement, dimension of Sunni-Shia ecumenism in the Middle East is of importance discussion of the article. Particular attention is devoted to the ventures of Sunni-Shia ecumenism which have been undertaken by the Indonesian Muslim scholars. Based on these ventures and the ongoing embellishment of ‘Indonesian Islam’, the future of Sunni-Shia ecumenism is assessed. This paper also examines to what extent the Sunni-Shia ecumenism in Indonesia could serve as a model for the reconciliation between Sunnism and Shiism in other countries.

The Broader Context of Sunni-Shia Ecumenism

Muhammad al-Husayn Al Kasif al-Gita (1877-1953), a well-known scholar for his call for Sunni-Shia ecumenism delivered at the World Islamic Congress in 1931, is a modern pioneer of Sunni-Shia ecumenism. The endeavours of Islamic ecumenism (*taqrib*) in the 1930s were however limited to personal dialogues, most specifically between

⁴ Paul A. Crow, “Ecumenism,” <http://www.britannica.com/topic/ecumenism>, accessed 30 August 2020.

⁵ “Grand Syekh Al-Azhar: Sunni dan Syiah adalah Saudara”, <http://www.nu.or.id/post/read/65954/grand-syekh-al-azhar-sunni-dan-syiah-adalah-saudara>, accessed 23 February 2020.

al-Gita and the Pan-Islamic advocate Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905).⁶ The institutionalisation of *taqrib* came into being in 1948, with the establishment of the ‘Community for Rapprochements of Islamic Sects’ (*Jama’at al-taqrib bayna al-madhabib al-Islamiyya*). This institution was founded by such scholars as to the Shiite scholar Muhammad Taqi al-Qummi and the Azharite scholars Mahmud Shaltut (1893-1963), Mustafa ‘Abd al-Raziq and ‘Abd al-Majid Salim.⁷ The 1960s witnessed the ecumenical endeavour by Abd al-Naser but it was indeed a political manoeuvre, based on a premise of preventing political crises at that time, rather than ideological ones.⁸

In 1989, we witnessed the emergence of the ‘World Congress for the Reconciliation of Islamic Schools’ (*al-majma’ al-‘alami li al-taqrib bayna al-madhabib*) which was founded in Tehran.⁹ However, the conservative Sunnis contest this initiative as they were worried that the Islamic Republic of Iran would export the Islamic revolution under the guise of intra-Islamic rapprochement.¹⁰ The suspicion of some conservative Sunnites towards Iran’s project of Islamic ecumenism is reasonable. As far as socio-political condition of Post-Revolution Iran, exporting Iranian Revolution constituted one of the main slogans of Ayatollah Khomeini and it was included in the constitution of Iran.¹¹ Thus, it is clear that Iranian and Iraqi Shiites strive to expand their teachings and influence to the Muslim world including the rest of the Shiite world. This can be observed or instance through the trans-nationalisation of Shiite Islamic

⁶ Behnam Said, *Islamische Ökumene als Mittel der Politik* (Berlin: Schwarz, 2009), p. 56, 101.

⁷ Rainer Brunner, “Interesting Times: Egypt and Shiism at the Beginning of the ‘Twenty-First Century,” *The Sunna and Shi’a in History: Division and Ecumenism in the Muslim Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 223.

⁸ Ofra Bengio and Meir Litvak, “Introduction”, *The Sunna and Shi’a in History*, p. 10.

⁹ Stephan Kokew, *Annäherung an Toleranz* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2014), p. 34.

¹⁰ Behnam Said, *Islamische Ökumene*, p. 22.

¹¹ Ahmad Naderi, *Shia Geopolitics and Political Islam in the Middle East* (Potsdam: WeltTrends, 2015), p. 192-193.

movements by the late twentieth century. The trans-nationalisation of Shiite is however an old phenomenon. The term “Shiitisation” which is rooted to the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736) reflects the effort to expand Shiite influence in which the Shiite preachers actively promote their teachings to the eastern lands of the Muslim world, most notably Indian Subcontinent.¹² Since the end of the nineteenth century, the Shiite clerics of Najaf were the prime actors of such trans-nationalisation endeavours.¹³

In January 2007, the Faculty of Sharia of the University of Qatar, Al-Azhar University and the Teheran’s ‘World Assembly for the Rapprochement of Islamic Schools’ organised the Doha Conference which reserved as a contemporary significant endeavour for Sunni-Shia ecumenism.¹⁴ At the conference, the subject of *taqrib* was discussed from a theological and political perspective. Importantly, the conference was concerned with the politics of international relations, most specifically the relations of Iran with Arab-Sunni world and it is worth mentioning that this conference did not fade with the final session, but continued even after with the public discourse.¹⁵

At the occasion of Doha conference, the President of Al-Azhar University Ahmad al-Tayyib criticised the *takfir* (declaring another Muslim as non-believer) and the violent clashes between the Islamic schools which have been significantly increasing. He condemned the *takfir* since it became the biggest obstacle to rapprochement between Islamic schools. These viewpoints were also shared by the Shiite scholar ‘Ali al-Taskhiri.¹⁶ Nevertheless, there was criticism towards the conferences on Sunni-Shia ecumenism, as the substance of dialogues in some ways exhibited the worries of the Sunnism towards the increasing power of the Shiism,

¹² Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti, “Shia Devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt in Historical Perspective,” *Shi’ism in South East Asia*, p. 24-25.

¹³ Laurence Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 3.

¹⁴ Ahmad Naderi, *Shia Geopolitics*, p. 98.

¹⁵ Behnam Said, *Islamische Ökumene*, p. 117.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

accordingly embodying political tactics rather than sincere ventures of doctrinal rapprochement. Some critics further argue that the conference was only ‘the exchange of compliments’ and would not play a significant role in solving the tension between Sunnism and Shiism. There has been also criticism of the support of the Sunnites for ecumenism as it was geared to maintain the Sunnite dominance and Shiite recognition of their inferiority.¹⁷

‘Alid Piety and the Emergence of Shiism in the Indonesian Archipelago

The emergence of pre-sectarian reverence and devotion to the Family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*) in Southeast Asia is worth remarking. Some specialists designate this tendency as ‘cultural Shiism’ or ‘cultural Shiite practices’. This reverence is observable for instance from literary treasures of Southeast Asia, in which the family members of the Prophet are frequently mentioned. Such a reverence also manifests in the local rituals devoted to them.¹⁸ The respect to the *ahl al-bayt* in the context of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago is for instance found in the *hikayat*-genre (tale). One of these *hikayats* is the anonymous *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiyya* which is popular in the archipelago even up to now.¹⁹ This *hikayat* was not only written in Malay but also in some other local languages in the archipelago, such as Bugis, Minangkabau, Aceh and Makassar. It narrates the epic struggle between the Umayyad rule and Muhammad Ibn al-Hanafiyya, the third son of ‘Ali.²⁰

¹⁷ Ofra Bengio and Meir Litvak, “Epilogue: The Sunni-Shi’i Paradox,” *The Sunna and Shi’a in History*, p. 248-249.

¹⁸ Chiara Formichi, “Shaping Shia Identities in Contemporary Indonesia”, *Die Welt des Islams*, Vol. 54, No. 2, 2014, p. 214.

¹⁹ Christoph Marcinkowski, “Selected Historical Facets of the Presence of Shiism in Southeast Asia”, *The Muslim World*, Vol. 99, No. 2, 2009, pp. 381.

²⁰ Siti Maryam, *Damai dalam Budaya* (Jakarta: Badan Litbang dan Diklat, 2012), p. 185.

The devotion to the Family of the Prophet also embodies in the form of ritual practices. This can be observed for instance from the ritual commemorating the death of Husayn, a son of 'Ali in the Karbala. This ritual is called *Ashura*, *Tabuik*, *Tabok* or *Tabut* in Indonesia.²¹ The festival of 'Ashura is also seen as typical of Shiism. During this festival, one may observe the performance of *ta'ziyya*, which for them serves as a moment and ritual to recall and re-enact the lives and struggles of the Family of the Prophet.²² In the contemporary era, the 'Ashura rituals have been developed into a prevailing movement in the political mobilisation, for which Husayn is assigned as the symbol of resistance to oppression.²³ The ritual of *Tabut* has been present in Bengkulu, Aceh, Palembang, Minangkabau since the seventeenth century. This ritual was introduced by the Indian soldiers who worked for Britain. The term *tabut* means box. This term is employed to symbolise the catafalque of Husayn which was carried by his followers after his martyrdom in Karbala. The *tabut* ritual in Bengkulu since the New Order has been considered as a tourist attraction.²⁴

The notion of 'Alid piety is based on Hodgson analysis of the fragments of classical Islamic history, most particularly the emergence of *Shi'a 'Ali* (Party of Ali). He argues that after the overthrow of 'Ali, his followers split into two factions: (a) those who assign 'Ali and some of his progenies a special role in religious systems; (b) those who express and incorporate the reverence for 'Ali and his descendants in

²¹ Dicky Sofyan, "Kebangkitan Syiah di Asia Tenggara?" Dicky Sofyan (ed.), *Sejarah dan Budaya Syiah di Asia Tenggara*, (Yogyakarta: Sekolah Pascasarjana UGM, 2013), p. xx-xxi.

²² Negar Mottahede, "Ta'ziyeh: A Twist of History in Everyday Life", Kamran Scot Aghaie (ed.), *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam* (Austin Texas: University of Texas Press, 2005), p. 25.

²³ Laurence Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, p. 6.

²⁴ Siti Maryam, *Damai dalam Budaya*, p. 132-136.

the culture of Sunni Islam.²⁵ The ‘devotees’ or ‘lovers’ of *ahl al-bayt* have also been present in Southeast Asia, most notably in the Indonesian archipelago. There are not necessarily the followers of the Ja’fari school; some of them even identify themselves as Sunni Muslims. The latter groups include for instance the adherents of the Ba ‘Alawi order. This order—which is also known as the ‘Alawiyya—has been also widespread to the Indonesian archipelago. It is due to transnational encounters that intra-groups relations in contemporary Indonesia are changing. This transformation can be observed for instance from the disintegration of a broader community of sympathisers of *ahl al-bayt* and the mounting clashes between Sunnites and Shiites.²⁶

The notion of ‘Alid piety can be located within the ongoing debates²⁷ on the emergence of Shiism in Indonesia. Some scholars believe that the Shiites were present in the early days of Islamisation in the archipelago; some of them even argue that there have been Shiite kings in the region. Some other scholars argue that the arguments of the presence of Shiites in the early days of Islamisation are weak. These scholars argue that pioneers of Islamisation in the archipelago are predominantly Sunnites. The seeds of the Shiite community in the region are those hailing from Hadramawt, especially those from the *ahl al-bayt*, which is commonly known as ‘sayyid’ and ‘sharifa’.²⁸ This corresponds with what is hinted by Formichi²⁹ about the ‘Alawiyya or Ba ‘Alawi in the Indonesian archipelago.

The term Ba ‘Alawi (literally means the children of ‘Alawi) is employed to designate the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad via the line of ‘Ali who lived in the Hadramawt Valley of Yemen. The Tariqa ‘Alawiyya was established by the Ba ‘Alawi scholar Muhammad ibn ‘Ali (d. 1255). This order is described by the Ba ‘Alawi personage ‘Abd Allah

²⁵ Chiara Formichi, “Shaping Shia Identities,” p. 215.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

²⁷ Azyumardi Azra, “Kaum Syiah di Asia Tenggara,” Dicky Sofyan (ed.), *Sejarah dan Budaya Syiah di Asia Tenggara*, p. 19-20; Siti Maryam, *Damai dalam Budaya*, p. 132-136.

²⁸ Azyumardi Azra, “Kaum Syiah,” p. 22.

²⁹ Chiara Formichi, “Shaping Shia Identities,” p. 216.

ibn ‘Alawi al-Haddad (d. 1719) as emulating the Prophet, both outwardly and internally, by studying hadith and sticking to the footsteps of the family of the Prophet.³⁰ Alatas indicates the role of the ‘Alawiyya in paving the way for the establishment of the Shiite community in the Indonesian archipelago. To some extent, the Iranian revolution has strengthened the Shiite tendencies which had already existed among ‘Alawiyyun from the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, which was expressed with greater enthusiasm, clarity and sense of mission. There are two groups of ‘Alawiyyun which are pertinent for the development of Shiism in Indonesia. The first is Shafiites with Shiite sympathies. This group sticks to the Shafi’i school on the *‘ibada*, but comes close to Shiism on the interpretation of early Muslim history. The *second* is *alawiyyun shi’a*. This group is converted from Shafiite into Shiism in terms of *‘ibada* and worldview.³¹

After the Iranian revolution in 1979, Shiism drew more attention from Indonesian people, most particularly among students and young intellectuals. These learned people were eager to read the works of Iranian intellectuals. Some of them were even attracted to study in Iran on theology, philosophy, and mysticism in the *busayniyyat*. Some others were enrolled in such a university as Daneshgha-e Tehran to study literature and architecture. Upon returning home, they established a kind of *busayniyyat* or study club to learn the thoughts of Iranian scholars like Ayatollah Khomeini, Murtada Mutahhari, Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i, Mulla Sadra.³² There are a few personages who have played a role in explaining the doctrines of Shiism to various communities in Indonesia; one of them is Jalaluddin Rahmat (b. 1949). He is also involved in debates with individuals and groups who consider Shiite rising popularity as a threat

³⁰ Syed Farid Alatas, “The Tariqat al-‘Alawiyya and the Emergence of the Shi’i School in Indonesia and Malaysia,” *Oriente Moderno*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 1999, pp. 323.

³¹ Syed Farid Alatas, “The Tariqat al-‘Alawiyya,” pp. 338-340.

³² Dicky Sofyan, “Kebangkitan Syiah,” p. xxii-xxiii.

to Sunni orthodoxy.³³ Islamic publishing houses in Indonesia also play an important role in propagating Shiite ideas. The Mizan Publishing House and the Mutahhari Foundation are active in this field and they get a tremendous welcome from Indonesian students and intellectuals. Such interest is due to their thirst for fresh and contextual messages of Islam, most particularly during the New Order regime.³⁴ During the New Order regime, Suharto was very cautious against Iran. He considered Shiism and its revolutionary ideology had the potential to destabilise the status quo. At the National Working Meeting which was held on March 7, 1984, the The Council of Indonesian Ulama (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI) issued a recommendation that the Indonesian Muslims should increase their watchfulness against the intrusion of Shiite teachings in the country. Although the formal reason for vigilance was based on theological arguments, there implied also a political reason behind it, namely the fear of the spill-over of the Iranian revolution.³⁵

The Endeavours of Sunni-Shia Ecumenism in Indonesia

In Indonesia, the project of Sunni-Shia Ecumenism are undertaken by the figures of the Muhammadiyah and the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as well as other Muslim organisations. This can be observed from the endeavours of such figures as Habib Husein al-Habsyi (1921-1994), Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009), Quraish Shihab, Syafii Maarif (b. 1935), Said Aqil Siradj (b. 1953), Haidar Bagir (b. 1957) and Masdar F. Mas'udi (b. 1954). They suggested that the tension and confrontation between Sunnism and Shiism which took place in the Near East will not be imported to Indonesia.

To be more specific, this study delves into the activism of three Muslim personages: Habib Husein al-Habsyi (1921-1994), Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009) and Quraish Shihab (b. 1944). These three

³³ Azyumardi Azra, "Kaum Syiah," p. 23.

³⁴ Dicky Sofyan, "Kebangkitan Syiah," p. xxii-xxiii.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

personages exemplify Indonesian Muslim personages who have been energetically involved in the projects of Sunni-Shia rapprochement in the Indonesian society. Al-Habsyi is considered one of the pioneers of Sunni-Shia dialogue in modern-day Indonesia. Wahid substantiated the rapprochement between Sunnism and Shiism by maximising his role at the NU. He represents one of the personages who actively defended the minorities including Shiites. Shihab represents the contemporary Muslim scholar who felt the necessity of Sunni-Shia rapprochement, and accordingly, he devotes his time to reveal misunderstandings between these two denominations.

Habib Husein al-Habsyi (1921-1994)

Habib Husein al-Habsyi obtained his primary education in Madrasah Al-Khairiyah, Surabaya. He pursued his further training in Penang, Malaysia, in which he got an opportunity to learn from some Muslim scholars in Malaysia. Besides, he taught at the Madrasah Al-Aththas in Johor, Malaysia. After returning to Indonesia, he was active in the field of *da'wa* and politics. He was known as the founding father of the Foundation of Islamic Pesantren (*Yayasan Pesantren Islam*, YAPI), Bangil, Pasuruan, East Java.³⁶

Al-Habsyi wrote a book on “the Dialogue between Sunnism and Shiism”. The dialogue was concerned with some issues relating to Sunnism and Shiism, most notably the heterodoxy of Shiite teachings, the position of Shiism towards the Prophet’s companions, Shiite stand towards the three caliphs of Islam: Abu Bakr, ‘Umar and Uthman, the authenticity of the Qur’an, and the *jam’ al-sala* (combining two prayers). On the question of heterodoxy of Shiism, al-Habsyi asserts, “We do not need to dispute the issue of Sunnism and Shiism. We need Islamic brotherhood (*ukhuwwa*), we need fundraising to protect millions of young Muslim who will be Christianised”. He goes on to criticise those devote

³⁶ “Biografi Ust. Husein Al-Habsyi,” <https://yapibangil.org/biografi-ust-husein-al-habsyi/>, accessed 11 August 2019.

their energies in denouncing other groups of Muslims to be infidels:

Now we invest the money for something useless, printing the books and disseminate them freely, but it only contains accusations, condemnation and denouncing other groups of Muslims to be infidels. We spent a hundred thousand million to destroy our own home. Is such an act in conformity with the spirit of shari'a and common reason? We, the Sunnites declare the Imamiyya Shiites to be infidels only based on our text-books, subjectively and in-absentia.³⁷

Besides, al-Habsyi explains the misunderstanding of some people on the position of *sahaba* according to Shiites. According to the Shiites, the *sahaba* are classified into three clusters: (a) those who were pious and loyal to the Prophet, (b) those who once showed their disloyalty to the Prophet, (c) those were hypocrites and accordingly fell into the category of infidels (*kuffar*). It is worth remarking that the Shiites only denounce infidels to this last group of people.

Al Habsyi also devoted his time to translate the work on Sunni-Shia ecumenism, namely Sheikh Ja'far Subhani's *The idea of rapprochement between Sunnism and Imami Shiism*. This translation appears as an appendix to the Indonesian translation of Izzuddin Ibrahim's book entitled *al-Sunna wa al-Shi'a dujja musta'ala* (Shiism and Sunnism: Engineered polemics). This translation was published by the Yayasan Pesantren Islam Bangil. One may see accordingly the role of this institution in the dialogue between Sunnism and Shiism.

Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009)

Abdurrahman Wahid is an Indonesian Muslim scholar and activist who served as the president of the country from 1999 until 2001. He was known as the prominent leader of the NU, of which he served as the chairman of this organisation for three periods: 1984-1989; 1989-1994; and 1994-1999). Wahid belongs to scholars who are appreciative of Shiism. He is narrated to have stated that Shiism is similar to the NU plus

³⁷ Habib Husein Al Habsyi, *Sunnab-Syiah dalam Dialog antara Mahasiswa UGM dan UII dengan Ustadz Husein al Habsyi* (Surakarta: Yayasan Ats Tsaqolain, 1991).

imama, whilst NU is similar to Shiism minus imama. Wahid's statement designates the parallels between Shiism and NU, especially in the domain of culture and ritual. Some ritual practices of the NU can be considered as a form of devotion to the Family of the Prophet ('Alid piety). It is also worth mentioning that the NU represents the 'Indonesian Islam' which is eclectic and accommodative towards cultures and traditions.

The noticeable dissimilarity between Shiism and the NU is the doctrine of *imama*, which assigns the political and religious leadership to the *imam*. When we look into the notion of *imam* in Shiite tradition and that of *kiai* in the circle of NU, we begin to realise that there is a slight similarity between the two, in the sense that both are highly revered in their respective circle, and both are deemed to hold the charisma and *baraka* (blessing). The difference between the two positions is that the position of *kiai* is embodied in the culture of the NU, whilst the position of *imam* is crafted in the theology of Shiism.

There are at least four reasons behind Wahid's support of Shiism. *First*, Wahid tends to protect the minorities including the Shiites. *Second*, he is against the acts of undermining religious freedom. *Third*, he regards that the Shiism, with its sustainable tradition of *ijtihad* and its openness to speculative metaphysics, as a rich intellectual heritage, which would be advantageous for those to learn it. *Fourth*, he considers that many approaches of Sufism and rituals of the NU owe their origin to the Persian Shiite Islam. In this regard, Wahid was reported to have said that the scholars of the NU have to understand Shiism if they wish to comprehend Sunni traditionalism in Indonesia. Wahid showed his sympathy to Shiism, as can be observed from the case that he allowed his mosque in Ciganjur to be used by the Shiites. He showed his sympathy towards Jalaluddin Rahmat, who became Shiite or at least learned the Shiite thought.³⁸

³⁸ Greg Barton, *Biografi Gus Dur: The Biography of Abdurrahman Wahid* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2003), p. 210.

One Shiite leader acknowledges Wahid's role in minimising the violence towards Shiite adherents in Indonesia, most among the members of the NU. This can be observed for instance from Wahid's advice to NU's leaders in Bangil, East Java against the committing of violence towards Shiite adherents.³⁹ Due to his merit in minimising religious-based violence in Bangil, the Shiite leaders in this area perform a prayer-congregation for Wahid.⁴⁰ It was most specifically within this context that Wahid issued a statement, "Shiism is like NU plus *imama*, correspondingly NU is like Shiism minus *imama*". His statement serves to enlighten his fellow followers of the NU that there are some parallels between the Shiism and the NU, so that the followers of the NU should not confront the Shiism and its adherents.

In this regard, I refer to the characteristics of agency⁴¹ to highlight Wahid's agency, most specifically in implementing his role for the sake of the advancement of Islamic ecumenism in the NU. The *evaluative-practical* aspect of his agency can be observed from his strategy and preference for commencing some practical decisions. He is unwavering to keep his affiliation to the NU even lead this organisation, to advance the progressivism and moderatism in this organisation. Wahid illustrated his role within the NU in the following words: "NU is like a car in which some of its passengers continuously strive to hit the brakes. If this car wishes to move on, there should be somebody who presses the gas. I have to press the gas, and I would not neglect this very duty".⁴²

³⁹ "Kutip Gus Dur, NU disebut Syiah minus Imamah," <http://www.rakyatmerdeka.co.id/news/2010/01/01/85823/Kutip-Gus-Dur,-NU-Disebut-Syiah-Minus-Imamah>, accessed July 28, 2019.

⁴⁰ "Syiah Bangil Tahlil untuk Hormati Gus Dur", <http://www.nu.or.id/a/public-m,dinamic-s,detail-ids,1-id,20854-lang,id-c,warta-Syiah+Bangil+Tahlil+Untuk+Hormati+Gus+Dur-.php>, accessed July 30, 2014.

⁴¹ Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, "What is Agency", *AJS*, Vol. 103, No. 4, 1999, pp. 971.

⁴² Greg Barton, *Biografi Gus Dur*, p. 212.

The *habitual* measurement of Wahid's agency refers to his endeavours in reactivating some past typologies of action and thought, particularly the tolerant milieu which he encountered at home and during his studies at the Pesantren Tegalrejo, Magelang, Central Java and the Pesantren Tambakberas, Jombang, East Java. His education at Al-Azhar University and the University of Baghdad had also widened his perspective on the many faces of Islam, which in the end has moulded his attitude towards the diversity within Islamic tradition including the existence of Sunnism and Shiism.

Quraish Shihab (b. 1944)

Quraish Shihab pursued his study at Al-Azhar University, from bachelor until doctoral level. He obtained his doctoral degree in 1982 with a thesis on "*Nazm al-Durar li al-Biq'a'i: Tahqiq wa Dirasah*" (Al-Biq'a'i's *Nazm al-Durar*: Edition and Study), and since then he has been known as one of the leading scholars on Qur'anic exegesis. In 1998, he served as the minister of religious affairs in Indonesia.⁴³

Shihab was graduated from traditional Pesantren Darul Hadis al-Faqihyah in Malang, Indonesia and Al-Azhar University in Egypt (from bachelor until doctoral degree). The training in these institutions has rendered his qualification as a Muslim scholar. Shihab obtained the training from traditionally widely accepted religious institutions, not training from a western university and similar institutions which employ hermeneutics in interpreting the Qur'an. It is important to note that hermeneutics is often associated with Islamic liberalism. Many Indonesian Muslims are antipathetic to this sort of interpretation.

Shihab's competence in classical Arabic allows him to access and comprehend the main texts of Islam. His competence in Arabic and succeeding grasping of major Islamic teachings, thus have established significant elements of his authority. He possesses an authority as *mufasssir*, a traditionally trained Muslim exegete. His magnum opus *Tafsir al-Mishbah*

⁴³ Quraish Shihab, *Kaidah Tafsir* (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2013).

demonstrates his standing as *mufasssir*. This *tafsir*, which uses the thematic approach (*mawdu'i*) and correlation (*munasaba*), is comprised of fifteen volumes.

Shihab is considered to be one of the Indonesian Sunnite Muslim scholars who aspire towards the unity of Sunnism and Shiism, and seeks to minimise the tension between the two by implementing the so called '*taqrib al-madhabib*' (reconciliation of Islamic schools). His idea of reconciliation of Shiism-Sunnism and Islamic ecumenism in the context of Indonesia is noticeable in his book entitled *Sunnism and Shiism go hand in hand: is it possible?* This book attracts criticism from some conservative Muslim scholars, as observable from a book composed by some Muslim scholars at the Pesantren Sidogiri, East Java, which is entitled *Is it Possible to Witness the Brotherhood between Sunnism and Shiism?* For Shihab, the real difference between Sunnism and Shiism: *imama* (political and spiritual leadership) and the belief that imam is infallible (*ma'sum*). The Shiites hold the principle that "the politics is religion and the religion is politics".⁴⁴ Shihab refers to the opinion of Shiite scholar on the definition of *imama*: What is meant by the *imama* is the divine position which is elected by God based on His eternal knowledge, as He elects the Prophet and asks the Prophet to guide the community and ask them to obey him. The *Imamiyya* Shiites are convinced that God orders the Prophet to assign 'Ali ibn Abi Talib as the guider of the community after him.

Another Shiite scholar reveals the features of imam: we believe that imam is similar to the Prophet in the sense that he is infallible from any sins from childhood until death either out of intention or not, as he is infallible from forgetfulness and mistakes. This is because the imams are the protectors and the implementers of *shari'a*. Their positions are similar to the Prophet. The textual proofs of the infallibility of imam are similar to that of the Prophet.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Quraish Shihab, *Sunnah Syiah Bergandengan Tangan! Mungkinkab?* (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2007), p. 98.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

In this vein, American-Iranian Shiite scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr⁴⁶ points out that *imama* constitutes a distinct institution. The notion of *imama* cannot be detached from that *walaya*, which refers to the esoteric function of commenting on the inner meanings of the Qur'an and the *shari'a*. In line with this, Indonesian Shiite scholar Jalaluddin Rakhmat⁴⁷ stressed that the difference between Sunnism and Shiism lies in their respective perception on the existence of the Prophet's *wasiyya* on his successor. The Shiites maintain that such a *wasiyya* does exist, whilst the Sunnites do not believe in the existence of the *wasiyya*.

It is worth mentioning that the *imama* is distinct to *khilafa* in the sense that the *imama* requires its holder to be the descendant of the Prophet. Imam is normally regarded as possessing supernatural capacities and qualities, like unearthly religious knowledge and infallibility. In addition to that, the imam has to be prearranged by either the Prophet or the preceding imam and this is showed by the existence of an uninterrupted chain of succession (*silsila*).⁴⁸ Shihab points to the perceived difference between Sunnism and Shiism, namely on the notion of *iman* and *islam*. The Sunnism distinguishes between *iman* and *islam*, and each of them has its respective articles. This is distinct from that of Shiism, which does not distinguish between *iman* and *islam*. For Shiites, both are synonymous. Nevertheless, Shihab⁴⁹ is unsure about the future of Sunni-Shia ecumenism. This can be understood from the following quotation:

In the context of reconciliation between schools, there have been some recommendations. There have been also several meetings, once was initiated by Sunnites, another was initiated by Shiites, and the last was

⁴⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Preface", Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Shia* (Qum: Ansariyan, 1981), p. 10.

⁴⁷ Interview with Jalaluddin Rakhmat, 10 December 2019.

⁴⁸ Kamran Scot Aghaie, "Introduction: Gendered Aspects of the Emergence and Historical Development of Shi'i Symbols and Rituals," Kamran Scot Aghaie (ed.), *Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam* (Austin Texas: University of Texas Press, 2005), p. 2.

⁴⁹ Quraish Shihab, *Sunnah Syiah*, p. 260.

initiated by both. Nevertheless, the facts in the society show differently. In some Muslim countries, there have been not only phenomena of discrimination and *takfir*, but also phenomena of killing.⁵⁰

The *evaluative-practical* aspect of Shihab's agency is observable from approach and predilection in taking some normative decisions and standpoints. He is determined to keep his attachment with the NU, one of the established Muslim civil society organisations in Indonesia. The *iterational measurement* of Shihab's agency can be perceived from his revitalisation of former habitus, particularly the tolerant milieu which he encountered at home and during his studies at the Pesantren in Malang, Indonesia. His education at Al-Azhar University had also opened his horizon on the many faces of Islam, which in the end has molded his attitudes on the diversity within Islamic tradition including the existence of Sunnism and Shiism. He asserts that his knowledge of Shiism has been obtained during his study at al-Azhar University. The *projective* dimension of Shihab's agency is observable from his rejection of his friends' suggestion to cancel his intention to publish feature of Shihab's agency his work on Sunni-Shia ecumenism. He said, "I reached the age. The career pinnacles in some disciplines have been achieved. I do not worry anymore about my worldly life. The scholarly *mandate* calls me to deliver what I believe. I am afraid that if I keep silent, God will consider me as one of those who conceal the truth".

The Challenges towards Sunni-Shia Reconciliation in the Present-Day Indonesia

The Anti-Shia National Alliance, which was declared in Bandung, 20 April 2014, rejects the project of Sunni-Shia ecumenism. The leader of Anti-Shia National Alliance Habib Zein al-Kaff is suspicious of the efforts of *tagrib* which are mostly initiated by Shiism. He claims that these efforts have been brought forward since the Shiites are aware that they

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

are a minority. Besides, he is also convinced that the *taqrib* is part of the efforts of Shiite leaders in Iran who failed to propagate their teachings in Indonesia, and accordingly, they try to infiltrate through *taqrib*.⁵¹ This is in line with the common conception of conservative Sunnites in the Middle East, who distrust this initiative of Sunni-Shia ecumenism since they fear that the Islamic Republic of Iran would export the Islamic revolution under the garb of *taqrib*.⁵² Another leader of Anti-Shia National Alliance Buya Abu Bakar al-Habsyi points out the target of Shiism is to divide the Indonesia Unitary State of the Indonesian Republic (NKRI).

It is interesting to note that many conservative Muslim figures mistrust Shiism and consider Shiism as the teachings which are far away from Islam. When they see that the Shiites present their teachings and show their similarities with those of Sunnism, these conservative Muslim figures distrust and regard it as a kind of *taqiyya*. Interestingly, these conservative Muslim figures accuse the Shiism to divide the country, but they are not aware that the NKRI itself is composed of plural elements of Indonesian society, and it is the diversity that shapes Indonesia as national state. Neglecting this diversity means negating the roots of the NKRI and accordingly forgetting the history.

The conservative Muslims also distrust the Sunnis who propagate the *taqrib*, and label them as Shiites to delegitimise their viewpoints. Shihab, for instance, advocates the *taqrib* but then he is accused to be Shiite. I have also an experience when I looked for Shihab's *Tafsir al-Mishbah* somebody said to me promptly, "Tafsir al-Mishbah was written by the Shiite". The challenges towards Sunni-Shia ecumenism can be also discerned from the negative reactions of some conservative Indonesian Muslims towards the standpoints of Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyib (b. 1946). During his visit to Indonesia in 2016, al-Tayyib underlined the brotherhood between Sunnism and Shiism. For al-Tayyib,

⁵¹ "Annas: Kalangan Syiah banyak Agendakan Taqrib," *Republika*, 10 November 2015.

⁵² Behnam Said, *Islamische Ökumene*, p. 22.

there is no fundamental problem that causes the Shiites infidels, as many teachings of Shiism are similar to those of Sunnism. The substantial difference between these two sects rotates around the notion of *imama*. The Shiites consider the *imama* as part of the fundamentals of religion (*usul*), while the Sunnites are convinced that the *imama* falls into the cluster of branches of religion (*furu*). Nevertheless, the statements of al-Tayyib relating to the rapprochement between Sunnism and Shiism prompted a negative reaction from the circle of conservative Muslims in Indonesia. One conservative media suggested that the Pesantren Modern Gontor should not host Ahmad al-Tayyib since he supported Shiism.⁵³ The negative reaction of conservative Muslims towards al-Tayyib is also observable in social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

Following the Iranian revolution, increasing consciousness of Shiism in some ways fostered anti-Shiism sentiments among the Sunnite majority in Indonesia. Although these sentiments embodied the campaign of Saudi against the possible penetration of Iranian revolution and other political conflicts in the Near East, anti-Shia groups were not restricted to jihadi and Salafi circles.⁵⁴ Authoring an article on the violence against Shiites in Sampang, Madura, which took place from 2011 to 2012, Masdar Hilmy⁵⁵ believes that politics and economy, rather than theology, which drove the conflict. On the economic aspect of the conflict, he points out that the existence of Shiites in Madura constituted a threat to the ‘steady-state equilibrium’ which had been constructed by the Sunnite *kiais* in the region and might break up “long-established subscription of buyers”. As for the political factor of the conflict, he points out

⁵³ “Gontor Terhormat bila Menolak Kunjungan Syekh Mesir Pro Syiah, <https://www.nahimunkar.com/gontor-terhormat-bila-menolak-kunjungan-syekh-mesir-pro-syiah/>, accessed 26 February 2020.

⁵⁴ Ken Miichi, “Minority Shi’a Groups as a Part of Civil Society in Indonesia”, *Middle East Institute*, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/minority-shia-groups-part-civil-society-indonesia>, accessed 26 February 2020.

⁵⁵ Masdar Hilmy, “The Political Economy of Sunni-Shiah Conflict in Sampang Madura”, *Al-Jami’ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 1, pp. 44-45.

that the oppression against Shiites embodies the defilement of the law nevertheless the state apparatus did nothing to enforce the law, and took side with the mainstream Sunnites as the majority.

Another challenge to the enterprise of Sunni-Shia rapprochement is the politicisation of Shiism. Present-day Indonesia witnesses the politicisation of Shiism, most particularly before and during the general election and presidential election. Some political parties exploit anti-Shiite sentiments within the Sunni-majority Muslim country as Indonesia, to maximise their votes from the majority of the population. They blame their competitors as taking side with the figures and teachings of Shiism, and consequently depress the people from contributing votes to these contenders. One may observe that this kind of politicisation is considered tactical in appealing votes and sympathy from the majority of the people. This is due to the consideration that Shiism has been stigmatised by the mainstream Sunnites as a deviant denomination. The politicisation of Shiism makes the latent hostility between Sunnites and Shiites in present-day Indonesia become more perplexing.

The politicisation of Shiism can be observed for instance from the politicisation of Shihab's position towards Shiism is apparent during Indonesian presidential election in 2014. This can be observed from the case Jonru Ginting, who happens to be the cadre of the "Justice and Welfare Party" which attracts the Netizen due to his accusation that Shihab is Shiite. Ginting's ideas are traceable on his Facebook page entitled "Jonru" and his Twitter account "@jonru". According to Ginting, Shihab is categorised as Shiite because he believes that the Prophet Muhammad is not guaranteed to enter the Paradise. For Ginting, this contention is in line with the Shiite teaching that the Archangel Gabriel revealed the Koran to a false person, instead of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, he gave it to Muhammad. Another instance of politicisation of Shiism is Jalaluddin Rahmat's legislature candidacy. Rahmat, one of the Indonesian Shi'ite leaders, participated as legislature candidate in the

2014 Indonesian general election which was held in on May 9, 2014. This triggers opposition from some conservative groups. This can be observed for instance from a reportage of one online media “*voa-islam.com*”,⁵⁶ which sees the planned election of Jalaluddin Rahmat as legislature candidate as a hazard for the Muslim community in Indonesia.

The Opportunities and the Future of Sunni-Shia Convergence in Indonesia

Indonesia is one of the countries which are relatively friendly to Shiism. The majority of Indonesian Sunnites do not object to the Shiism. Most moderate Sunni leaders defend their Shiite fellows when they encounter difficult circumstances. This is distinct to that of Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, in which Shiism is considered as a deviant denomination. Consequently, the governments in both countries continue to oversee the Shiism and their possibility of its spread in their country. It is worth remarking that some Shiites in Brunei and Malaysia have imported Shiite books from Indonesia.⁵⁷ The future of Sunni-Shia rapprochement is in some ways determined by the continuing role of authoritative figures and organisations in advancing the ventures of ecumenism. They can be regarded as the main guardians of Sunni-Shia reconciliation in Indonesia. The future of reconciliation of Islamic sects rests on the capability of varied components in the society to enterprise a dialogue.

The NU and the Muhammadiyah constitute the mainstream Islamic civil society organisations. These two organisations have done their best to advance inner-Islamic pluralism and the rapprochement between Sunnites and Shiites. The future of this convergence lies therefore among other things in the solidity of these two organisations, most particularly

⁵⁶ “Innalillaah: Tokoh Syiah Jalaludin Rakmat Diprediksi Lolos ke Senayan,” <http://www.voa-islam.com/read/indonesiana/2014/04/22/29986/innalillaah-tokoh-syiah-jalaludin-rakmat-diprediksi-lolos-ke-senayan/#sthash.tk3saQql.dpbs>.

⁵⁷ Azyumardi Azra, “Kaum Syiah”, p. 26.

in nurturing the Indonesian Muslims on the virtues of Sunni-Shia ecumenism and in creating the discourses against the provocation of Sunni-Shia conflicts. Besides, these two organisations play a strong role in eradicating violence against minority sects within Islam including the Shiism. Such strong and pluralist Islamic civil society organisations are needed by the state and society for the sake of the well-being of the country. Importantly, the future Sunni-Shia convergence in Indonesia is in some ways contingent upon the existence of scholars-activists who can advance ecumenism by stressing the commonalities between Sunnism and Shiism as well as by unraveling the predispositions and misapprehensions between these two sects of Islam. Quraish Shihab, Habib Husein al-Habsyi, and Abdurrahman Wahid are among those who are considered authorities in Indonesian Islam (albeit in varying degrees) and therefore they have more chance of seeding Sunni-Shia ecumenism in the country.

It is also of interest to reflect whether the experiment of Indonesia could act as a prototype for convergence between Sunnism and Shiism in other Southeast Asian countries. In this train of thought, the chances and constraints of transferring the Indonesian model of Sunni-Shia ecumenism are worth to be elucidated. I argue that there are promises of employing the Indonesian experience of Sunni-Shia convergence to deal with Islamic ecumenism and tensions in other places in Southeast Asia. Countries which are likely to adopt this model should have the subsequent characteristics, namely: (a) the countries which possess the legacy of pluralism, since their citizens are made up of some ethnic and or religious groups. This legacy serves as the cultural capital for the countries in question; (c) the countries whose nation-building are not shaped by one dominant ethnicity and or religion; (d) the countries which observe the freedom of opinion.

Nevertheless, I am also fully aware that there are also some constraints in transmitting the Indonesian model to other countries, due to the unique features of this country, most notably: (a) the state

ideology Pancasila is unique to Indonesia, and this prevents Indonesia from falling into either a “purely secular state” or “theocratic state”. The Pancasila allots religions to express their religiosity in public space, and at the same time “restricts” these to maintain the coexistence between religions and the sustainability of the nation-state; (b) the nature of “Indonesian Islam” is conceived as one essential capital in coping with Sunni-Shia convergence. This expression of Islam is grounded on the long tradition of merging between Islam and local wisdom, which is now considered as one of the Islamic religiosities which are most compatible with modern ethical concepts, including religious pluralism.

Conclusion

In Indonesia, the ventures of Sunni-Shia Ecumenism are undertaken by the figures of the Muhammadiyah and the NU as well as other Muslim organisations. This can be observed from the endeavors of such figures as Habib Husein al-Habsyi, Abdurrahman Wahid, Quraish Shihab, Syafii Maarif, Said Aqil Siradj, and Masdar F. Mas’udi. One challenge of Sunni-Shia ecumenism comes from the Anti-Shia National Alliance. They consider the *taqrib* as the strategy of the Shiites in disseminating their teachings. The conservative Muslims also distrust the Sunnis who propagate the *taqrib*, and label them as Shiites to delegitimise their standpoints. The politicisation of Shiism constitutes another challenge to *taqrib*. This politicisation occurs most specifically before and during the general election.

One may say that the future of Sunni-Shia ecumenism rests upon the existence of figures and organisations, which are at ease to participate in the ecumenical dialogue and cooperation. The future of Sunni-Shia ecumenism is dependent to some extent on the solidity of Indonesian Islamic civil society organisations in nurturing the Indonesian Muslims on the virtues of Sunni-Shia ecumenism and in creating the discourses against the provocation of Sunni-Shia conflicts. Such strong and pluralist

Islamic civil society organisations are needed by the state and society for the sake of the well-being of the Indonesian people, most specifically in eliminating violence against minority groups within Islam including the Shiism. More specifically the future of Sunni-Shia ecumenism is much depended on the existence of scholars-activists who venture the ecumenism by stressing the commonalities between Sunnism and Shiism as well as by unravelling the misunderstandings and prejudices between these two sects of Islam. Looking at these findings, I underline that there are chances and constraints of transferring the Indonesian model of rapprochement between Sunnism and Shiism to other places in Southeast Asia.

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