Muslim Cosmopolitanism: Southeast Asian Islam in Comparative Perspective

Khairudin Aljunied
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Does cosmopolitanism exist in the Muslim world? Does it reflect a distinct ambience in Muslim societies that links to other expressions of cosmopolitanism beyond Islam?

This deftly-crafted book amounts to a manifesto that answers both questions with a resounding: YES! Yes, there is a cosmopolitan trajectory with Muslim overtones and undertones, and yes, it can be found in places and persons identified with Islam, especially but not solely in Southeast Asia. There it becomes part of what the author labels, following Azyumardi Azra, Islam Nusantara (86-91).

The author begins by reviewing several previous efforts to locate, then describe, and interpret or explain what is cosmopolitanism and who are Muslim cosmopolitans. He correctly notes that "as a concept, Muslim cosmopolitanism suffers from being used too loosely and too indiscriminately to describe anything that Muslims say and do which points towards some degree of inclusivity" (xix). He then looks to forms of everyday expression—"a style of thought, a habit of seeing the world, and a way of living"—all linked to Islam in its broadest formulation as *maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*, that is, the purposes of Islamic law defined in five mandates that apply to Muslims but also to all humankind: to preserve self, to preserve mind, to propagate via marriage, to preserve society, including property, and also to preserve and defend belief in God.

While it is not possible to exhaust all the elements of such a Muslim cosmopolitan outlook in a single book, the author makes a bold effort to scan the horizon of Southeast Asia specifically, and more generally the Indian Ocean, through urban sites and major figures. In Part II, listed as persona, he explores three prominent public intellectuals: Chandra Muzaffar, Azra Azyumardi, and Hussin Matlib. Moreover, he promises a forthcoming monograph on the famous Indonesian preacher and prolific writer, Haji Abdul Malik bin Abdul Karim Amrullah *aka* Hamka. Of these individuals, Azyumardi stands out because, like Aljunied, he is intent on demonstrating how Islam Nusantara, or Southeast Asian Islam, becomes a bridge to understanding Muslim cosmopolitan both regionally and globally. What distinguishes this approach is its historical focus and its contemporary expression. Surveying the advent of Islam to the archipelago, Azyumardi argues that Malays, the dominant group, while they accepted Islam, did not share features favored by its Arab-Persian predecessors and co-religionists. Theirs was an alternative Islam, one that, above all, accented accommodation with non-Muslims not merely as a necessity but also as a virtue.

The author repeatedly returns to the importance of engaging, and valuing, non-Muslims, so much so that when in Part III he addresses the difficult challenge of Islam politik (or political Islam), he follows Azyumardi in seeing it as an external challenge to the true core of tolerant or inclusive

Islam (90). It is Muslim cosmopolitans, he avers, that "have benefited much from the agency of non-Muslims in their midst, to withstand the intolerance of radical and extremist groups in Muslim Southeast Asia." (170)

Elsewhere, he argues that it is not just fringe or radical groups but also central states, their supporters, and officials who are opposed to cosmopolitan ideals and practices.

> That these states [Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia] have yet to become responsible cosmopolitan states is unsurprising given that the very notion of cosmopolitanism runs contrary to what most states stand for. States often seek to impose a sense of allegiance and loyalty that would glue society together to achieve the state's ends. (161)

Yet this blockage within the nation-state system, not just in South-east Asia but also in the rest of Asia and Africa as well as Europe and North America, is subtle in expression and durable in its force. How do the state and its advocates restrict the arc, and so limit the influence, of cosmopolitanism? Rather than offer further encomia for this pioneering monograph, let me provide some reflection on how its bright vision has been, and will continue to be, contested by both state and non-state actors.

An example of the difficulty cosmopolitans face, even within the expansive frame of Islam Nusantara, has been illustrated by Jowel Canuday in his brilliant yet still unpublished Oxford DPhil dissertation, *Music, Dances, and Videos: Identity Making and the Cosmopolitan Imagination in the Southern Philippines* (2013). "On the one hand," notes Canuday,

> an armed secessionist movement seeks to consolidate and transform multilingual areas of Mindanao where Muslims are majority into a Bangsamoro (Moro nation) body politic that associates with the global Islamic ecumene (Frake 1980: 316, Tan 1994). On the other, the Philippine state has pursued a sustained but fumbling effort of integrating Muslim Mindanao communities into its vision of a broader multicultural, multi-faith, and multi-linguistic Filipino nation that aligns with the non-secular democratic world. A closer scrutiny of these contrasting nationalist imaginations, however, reveals a remarkable degree of similitude between them. The two sides pursue homologous sentiments of nationalism that are far from ethnocentric but more reflective of the cosmopolitan sensibility of coming to terms "with the evaluation of differences within the nation" (Fardon 2008: 239). Both the Philippine state and Moro rebels open up to "the possibility that everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of his or her own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking

> pleasure from the presence of the other, different, places that are home to other different, people" (Appiah 1996: 22). Inherent in these competing nationalist imaginations are contrasting sense of rooted cosmopolitanism and of being cosmopolitan patriots with ethical responsibility towards the world (Appiah 2007). Each adversary envisions a collectivity of multilingual and multicultural communities that is mindful of their variegated roots and desire for trans-local connections.

And it is just this clash of similar dispositions that leads to the following donnybrook:

> The state's and the rebels' cosmopolitan notions of the nation stopped right at each other's visions, ending where each other's imagined nation begins. These positions illustrate that when similar ideals of rooted cosmopolitanism actually exist on the same competitive political field, they complicate the notion of cosmopolitan nations and the case for patriotic cosmopolitans. (Canuday, ms. 2-3)

Far from refuting the approach of Aljunied, what the above analysis from Canuday illustrates is the institutional limits imposed on Islam Nusantara due to the preeminence of the state at molding discourse and promoting its vision of the imagined community in language that echoes, even as it overshadows, its rivals.

The same dilemma marks efforts to identify, then pursue Muslim cosmopolitanism beyond Islam Nusantara. A site where many have sought to locate, define, and defend cosmopolitan resources, actors, and projects is Iran. One keen insight into the slippery slope for a cosmopolitan agenda in twenty-first century Iran comes from Lucian Stone's edited volume *Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism: Spheres of Belonging* (2014). Like Aljunied, Stone is alert to the grounding value of place, in his case, Iranian space. But is that space solely marked at home in Iran, or is it also diffused abroad through Iranians in exile? Successive authors in the Stone volume acknowledge the locational distance between themselves, Iranians abroad, and their "fellow protestors," Iranians at home. The former have the freedom to express, but no effective vocabulary, while the latter have the experience of dissent, but no channel to voice it.

This difficulty is best framed in the tension between belonging and longing. All who identify as Iranian claim a past that embraces nearly three millennia. Their historical vision is even longer than Islam Nusantara. It was Persians who challenged Greeks, conquered most of the Mediterranean

world, endured the Arab conquest, and then created an Iranian epic, the *Shahnameh*, as well as Iranian Shiʿism. They forged a series of empires that endured until the modern period of first European, then American global hegemony. It is traces of that past which shape the options for Muslim cosmopolitanism with an Iranian accent. Yet the flexibility and subtlety of Iranian engagement with multiple registers of belonging (to some vision of the past) and longing (for some process of moral-political inclusiveness) is forever at risk of being collapsed into its opposite. As one contributor to the Stone volume, Farhang Erfani, observes, belonging and longing must converge, reinforcing one another, if cosmopolis is not to become a "fantasy of integration," allowing capitalist and metropolitan, rather than ethical and cosmopolitan, interests to prevail (157).

In other words, in Iran as in Mindanao, as also in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, the flip side of genuine cosmopolitanism is a shadow cosmopolitanism that claims the name but subverts the reality of what longing and belonging, or *maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*, the genuine goals of a fully humane and universally inclusive Muslim society, portend. In several dimensions of his book, Aljunied has identified the hope for a pervasive, enduring cosmopolitanism in Islam Nusantara. There are cosmopolitan mosques with no restriction on women's attendance. There are Muslim bloggers who defy state strictures and, as nimble netizens, promote online ethics of tolerance, respect, and constructive criticism. There is also the artful use of women's headdress, producing what could be, and is, labeled "hijabis as purveyors of Muslim cosmopolitanism" (Chapter 5). All these sites of activity and portals of hope underscore the persistent cosmopolitan ethos of Southeast Asia. Will it prevail, despite the political headwinds that challenge and curtail its force? *Wallāhu aʿlam bis-sawāb,* "God alone knows what is right", but Aljunied's remains a courageous, defiant plea for the vision of Muslim cosmopolitanism, at once rooted and durable.

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