



Heritage, Culture and Society: Critical Voices of Young Malays

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Chapter XII

Intellectual Legacies for the Youth: Nurcholis Madjid's Ideas on History and Development in Indonesia

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“The founding fathers of the country have pioneered efforts to explore the best ideas for the common good. However, all these ideas have not been implemented properly, one of which is national development which is the source of various crises that hit us today”.¹

Nurcholish Madjid

Introduction

This paper aims to present another point of view of Nurcholis Madjid, an Indonesian Muslim intellectual, through his ideas in various publications which have tended to be regarded more from an Islamic perspective. Firstly, how he viewed and interpreted Indonesian history. Through critical literary works and articles informed by his experience, personal and educational background, he gave unique and unusual viewpoints on numerous major historical events. Secondly, Madjid highlighted how national development had been implemented with varying degrees of success and failure, resulting in a slew of corrupt and manipulative practices, and the decline of the nation. Because of the

¹ Nurcholish Madjid, *Indonesia Kita*. Jakarta: Gramedia, 2004, p. 74



country's overemphasis on economic growth, Madjid proposed a facet of human development that could be achieved through a fundamental stage that was based on inclusive and humanistic methods. This paper then examines the concepts presented as an intellectual legacy that can contribute and be a lesson, especially for the younger generation.

On 27 March 1992, Abdurrahman Wahid wrote his opinion piece in *Tempo* magazine entitled “3 Pendekar dari Chicago”, referring to three prominent Indonesian scholars and the first generation who graduated from the University of Chicago in the 1970s-80s. They are Amien Rais, Syafii Maarif and Nurcholis Madjid.² Although the first two names made significant impacts on the political and social aspect of society at the national level, whether in a political party such as *Partai Amanat Nasional* (PAN) or a religious organisation such as Muhammadiyah, Wahid noticed that Madjid had taken a different approach in dealing with various social religious and political issues at that time, emphasising openness to society and seeking a place where people could discover common values.³ He was able to articulate Islamic principles that address how Islam may solve a variety of social problems through an open approach that leads to inclusiveness rather than exclusivity.⁴ Madjid was against Partai Islam (Islamic Political Party) because of their exclusivity and the use of Islam

² Abdurrahman Wahid, “Pribumisasi Islam” within Muntaha Azhari and Abdul Munim Saleh *Islam Indonesia Menatap Masa Depan*. Jakarta: P3M, 1989.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Nurcholish Madjid, *Cita-cita Politik Islam Era Reformasi*, Jakarta: Paramadina, 1999.



as a means to serve the political interest of a certain group of people, hence, his assertion in the statement “Islam Yes, *Partai Islam* No”.⁵ He also sought to criticise the stigmatisation of some Muslim circles who advocated Islamic Sharia(law) by presenting critical and liberal ideas as a counter-balance to a formal-exclusive interpretation of the religion.⁶ Wahid's original view prompted scholars to examine Masjid's contribution, particularly in Islamic thought, nationalism, development, and political perspective, which can be useful for future generations.

Madjid's intellectual legacy has recently been preserved by renowned Indonesian scholars, as seen by the establishment of the *Nurcholis Madjid Society* (NCMS) in Jakarta, which runs a series of programmes that include monthly discussions, publication, training, seminars, and the dissemination of various concepts related to Masjid's ideas. His wife is also active in this circle, but it is his colleagues and students that continue to manage this academic circle, with many of them being academics from Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah and the University of Paramadina. Masjid's ideas can also be seen in an organisation called *Himpunan Pelajar Islam* (Islamic Student Association), which is popular among today's students and young activists. As a youth organisation that examines the values and spirit of Muslim students, it is easily found in almost every university in Indonesia.

⁵ Barton, Greg, *Neo-Modernism: A Vital Synthesis of Tradisionalist and Modernist Islamic Thought in Indonesia*, *Studia Islamika*, Vol. 2, No. 3. 1995.

⁶ Amin Abdullah, *Dinamika Islam Kultural*. Mizan; Bandung, 2000.



His experiences and reflection lead him to develop a guidebook for the organisation called *Nilai Dasar Perjuangan* (NDP) or The Basic Value of Struggle, which every member is required to read.⁷ This book influenced how the organisation moves forward, how it responds to social and political issues, and how it teaches students to think critically. In these two organisations, his intellectual thoughts are well-preserved.⁸ However, the examination of his ideas can be broadened to encompass various interpretations, especially through the perspectives offered by his students or predecessors within an academic setting, most notably through his Islamic perspective. In this paper, Masjid's legacy will be examined in terms of how his ideas may be applied to history and development, as well as what lessons can be learned that can be useful for the future generations.

Intellectual Journey of Nurcholish Madjid

Masjid's academic career was influenced by his family and academic background. He grew up in Jombang, East Java, where the largest and influential traditional Islamic organisation, *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), was founded and studied in the traditional Islamic institutions or *pesantren* in Darul Ulum Jombang and Darussalam Gontor Ponorogo. He then went on to Jakarta to further his studies at IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah

⁷ Ana Urbaningrum, *Islamo-Demokrasi : Pemikiran Nurcholish Madjid*, Jakarta: Republika, 2004.

⁸ M. Hari Zamharir, *Agama dan Negara: Analisis Kritis Pemikiran Politik Nurcholish Madjid*, Jakarta: PT Raja Grafindo, 2004.



before enrolling in the University of Chicago. These were critical moments for him in terms of forming and formulating his ideas, especially when he served as chairman in the Islamic Student Association of Southeast Asia between 1967-1971. He then made his journey to the Middle East, visiting Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, learning about Islam from a broader perspective, and soon after, enrolling and completing his PhD dissertation on Ibnu Taimiyah.⁹ His academic and activist career moulded his perspective on Islam, which is more culture-oriented and inclusive than formal legalistic exclusivity. Masjid's views on Islam from a cultural approach serve as a primary source of Islamic ethical principles and standards in Indonesia. His religious understanding is more global in character, such as upholding the principles of *ijtihad* (monotheism), adhering to rational and school of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), understanding *tauhid* (oneness), and is more future-oriented and not limited to one theology.¹⁰

In the 1970s, Madjid initiated an intellectual movement that was known as the Renewal of Islamic Thought. The significance of this movement stems from its efforts to articulate the most fundamental Islamic theological postulates about the divine, human, and global concerns, as well as the kinds of relationships between all these elements

⁹ Munim Sirry, *Secularization in the Mind of Muslim Reformist: A Case Study of Nurcholish Madjid and Fouad Zakaria*, Journal of Indonesian Islam. Vol 1 No 2, 2007.

¹⁰ Ahmad Taufik, *Sejarah Pemikiran dan Tokoh Modernisme Indonesia*, Jakarta: Raja Grafindo Persada, 2005.



in political and national realities. Furthermore, he developed an Islamic thinking paradigm that was relevant to the condition of modern society at that time. In one of his well-known texts written in 1972, entitled “Keharusan Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam dan Masalah Integrasi Umat” or The Necessity of Renewing Islamic Thought and the Problem of Integration of the Ummah, Madjid emphasised that Islam in Indonesia was stagnant. Muslims faced a critical choice; the path of renewal which required a re-examination of the meaning of Islam amidst modern life, or the loss of Islam’s function as a moral force. The movement pioneered by Madjid was often referred to by William A. Liddle as quoted by Shaleh as the substantialist Islam, meaning that Madjid was more concerned in extracting the core of Islamic teaching and properly adapting to specific social situations, rather than merely translating from sacred religious texts.¹¹ Because of his ideas, Muslim Abdurrahman considered Madjid as *Pendekar* or Warrior from Jombang. Urbaningrum categorised Madjid alongside Harun Nasution, Abdurrahman Wahid and Jalaluddin Rakhmat as neo-modern Islamist.¹²

In that significant text, Madjid also proposed a liberalisation process in four areas, including secularisation, intellectual freedom, the notion of

¹¹ Fauzan Shaleh, *Teologi Pembaruan: Pergeseran Wacana Islam Sunni di Indonesia Abad XX*, Jakarta: Serambi, 2001.

¹² Anas Urbaningrum, *Islamo-Demokrasi: Pemikiran Nurcholish Madjid*, Jakarta: Republika, 2004.



progress, and openness.¹³ First, what he meant by secularism here is a form of liberating development. This process is necessary due to the constructed history produced by a certain religious authority, which causes Muslims to be unable to differentiate between values they thought were Islamic, transcendental and temporal. So, this secularism is not intended to convert Muslims into secularists, but rather to assure Muslims of their responsibilities to allow them to conduct decent deeds in religious or non-religious matters. Second, intellectual freedom is a critical feature that must be upheld amidst the people's lack of initiatives. Madjid was taught by his religious teachers since he was young that to do this, people needed to acquire knowledge.¹⁴ One objective of this intellectual freedom where thinking and ideas are challenged is to empower individuals to think and act freely and take a stance on certain issues. Third, the concept of progress is basically a belief that decency, purity, and love are human traits that must be preserved throughout one's life. The last factor emphasises openness to diversity among people to foster solidarity rather than hostility.

Since the beginning, Madjid's thoughts did not exist in a socially void environment since it was theologically linked to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism at the time, and the strong impact of exclusivity.¹⁵

¹³ M. Deden Ridwan, *Gagasan Nurcholis Madjid, Neo Modernisme Islam dalam Wacana Tempo dan Kekuasaan*, Yogyakarta: Belukar Budaya, 2000.

¹⁴ M. Hari Zamharir, *Agama dan Negara: Analisis Kritis Pemikiran Politik Nurcholish Madjid*. Jakarta: PT Raja Grafindo, 2004.

¹⁵ Ibid.



Furthermore, it was encouraged by the existence of the discourse on the socialisation of Islamic law in society and the nation, as well as political power. Madjid believed that when Islam was interpreted formally, what more if it entered the political realm, it would inevitably lead to sectarian tensions and polarisation based on religious sentiments. In other words, formalising religion in the country would result in identity politics, which greatly hinders the pace of pluralism needed by Indonesia in facing the cultural and religious diversity of its people and to build a shared commitment as one nation.

Interpretation and Reflection towards History

Madjid's *Indonesia Kita* is an important book to understand his ideas when it comes to Indonesian history, not only providing his own perspective but also contextualising it within certain conditions. It contains his thoughts and reflections on history and development from the colonial era to independence, nationalism, the 1998 reformation, and the early 2000s. In one of the chapters, Madjid highlighted the education system during the Dutch colonial period and its impact on the Indonesian people at that time. It was widely known that the education system and structure during the colonial period continued to use the colonial stratification concept that created different levels of education and division based on race and social status. Europeans were at the top, followed by the Chinese, the Arabs, then the *priyayi* or local aristocrats,



and lastly, the rest of the people. Schools and facilities were provided for the first four groups of people, ranging from the basic level to the highest level of education and expertise, such as the Higher Institution for Medicine in Jakarta, School of Technology in Bandung, whilst most of the population received only one level of education, the basic level, called *Sekolah Rakyat* or School for the People.¹⁶ Hence, this situation prompted the *ulama* or local religious scholars to create their own institution as a form of resistance towards the educational system administered by colonialists. The institution is known as *pesantren*, an Islamic traditionalist institution that has been anti-colonial since its inception.¹⁷ Madjid recognised that the creation of *pesantren*, particularly on Java Island, was mostly in response to what the colonialists had established that caused the backwardness of the society.¹⁸ The notion of nationalism, fighting for the land was also discussed in that institution.

Madjid was aware of the need to avoid the term “nationalism”, which has a history of barbarism and destruction. Instead, he defined “modern nationalism” as the right to self-determination, and “anti-imperialism” as the power that generates stability and force to unify the different ethnicities¹⁹ Madjid regarded this modern nationalism as an unintended consequence of education, even among the Dutch Indies and

¹⁶ Nurcholish Madjid, *Indonesia Kita*. Jakarta: Gramedia, 2004, p. 25

¹⁷ Nurcholish Madjid, *Khazanah Intelektual Muslim*, Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1994.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Nurcholish Madjid, *Indonesia Kita*. Jakarta: Gramedia, 2004, p. 31



local aristocrats, who had the privilege to study in Colonial Schools such as STOVIA and NIAS. More and more youths became more conscious of the importance of forming youth associations based on ethnicity and geography, such as *Jong Java*, *Jong Sumatera*, *Jong Ambon*, *Jong Celebes*. The Youth Declaration in 1928 was later initiated to pledge youth unity across the archipelago. This spirit then triggered a movement among oppressed communities by establishing a local trade union, which Haji Samanhudi spearheaded. Following the creation of the youth and trade platforms, additional local platforms, namely the JIB *Jong Islamieten Bond*, SISC *Studenten Islam Studies Club*, etc, emerged. This spirit of nationalism then spread widely, along with the use of the term Indonesia as a collective identity, derived from the name of an Indonesian student organisation, *Perhimpunan Indonesia*, in the Netherlands. News agencies then came to spread this term through printed newspapers, discussed in congresses, and was also used extensively in the speeches of the first President of Indonesia back then, Soekarno. Therefore, the spirit of nationalism here may be viewed as a meeting point that can unite people despite their differences.

Indonesian society is extremely diverse, yet there are remnants of feudalism left from the colonial era that are still entrenched in people's minds. The presence of feudalistic society found not only in Indonesia but other parts in the Southeast Asian regions can be seen from the practice of identifying oneself with a single first pronoun of a slave such as "saya"



(sahaya), “ambo” (hamba), “budak” and “abdi”, “kula” or “kawula”, which means “I”.²⁰ Madjid noted that the proximity of these words correlates with the main characteristics of feudalism, which is to protect and serve the master as a form of structural hierarchical society, in which the dominated one would always feel inferior and the master as superior. Feudalism is also characterised by an owner’s control of the land and a severely unequal distribution of the produce between the owner and the farmer.

Addressing Madjid’s Text: Between Development and Social Justices

One of Madjid’s most renowned essays, addressing development issues, is titled “National Development: The Dilemma of Growth and Social Justice” (1988). Using a metaphor of enlarging and dividing a “cake” Madjid sought to criticise the orientation of development that only benefitted the elites and economic conglomerates, citing G. William Domhonff, who stated that the business run by the elites and conglomerates through their private family firms might be defined as family capitalism. Madjid also cited Stiglitz that a cake metaphor can be regarded as bad economics.²¹ Poverty reduction is indeed difficult to achieve in the absence of strong economic growth. However, the opposing argument—that strong economic growth must reduce poverty—is unquestionably false because growth does not always result in widespread

²⁰ Ibid., 26-27.

²¹ Ibid.



prosperity. The adage “the tide raises all boats” is not accurate. Often, sudden waves, especially during a storm, knock the small boats onto the shore and blow them to pieces. As a result, the direction of the economic growth must be modified to be more people-centred rather than capitalistic, which exposes people to vulnerabilities. People should be supported in becoming self-sufficient, empowered and financially stable which will push them to achieve the highest level of productivity and creativity.

Shifting the direction of economic growth towards the people is the key to attaining development goals. A nation’s understanding of this issue can be attained if it has genuine leadership capable of responding to and overcoming diverse social and political problems. Madjid emphasised that genuine leadership is needed both from the perspective of justice and social moral commitment or “civic morality”.²² Without real leadership, vertical and horizontal political communication would be ineffective or even stalled, making the call to rebuild the national economy with cries of concern and public sacrifice, not the welcome it needs. When it comes to problem-solving, the approach was always top-down, which made people more passive as they waited for what the elite would decide.²³ The power of the centre, which correlates with the overall top-down approach, created a disparity between the centre and the regions. The negative

²² Ibid.

²³ Nurcholish Madjid, *Dialog Keterbukaan Artikulasi Nilai Islam dalam Wacana Sosial Politik Kontemporer*, Jakarta: Paramadina, 1998.



impacts of centralism, which were accompanied by strikingly unfair attitudes toward the division of national resources, were the main reasons for the rise of various regional upheavals.

The objective of social justice in Indonesian society which adheres to the five fundamental state principles known as *Pancasila*, was presumably, not to create a completely new society that is fundamentally different from the present one, where everything seems to be enslaved in the name of great common ideals. Instead, the Indonesian state is attempting to establish a kind of social order in which every citizen is guaranteed their rights. There is a principle that all human beings want to be treated fairly, in the fields of law, politics and economics. Amidst the current global economic circumstances, which are unfavourable to developing nations due to investment from developed countries, the issue of injustices in society often threatened people's rights. Injustices often cause horizontal conflict within societies.

Conclusion

Madjid identified three lessons that the next generation should be aware of when it comes to recognising how his vision and legacy may be reflected in the development of the state.²⁴ First, effective governance must be implemented at all levels of state government. This realisation of good governance is not possible without the participation of all people on

²⁴ Nurcholish Madjid, *Indonesia Kita*. Jakarta: Gramedia, 2004, p. 72.



a shared commitment, upholding the principles of the nation-state with a clear distinction between private and public affairs, between private and public property. Misappropriation of the country's resources cannot be tolerated, even if it is worth only a penny, and without it being investigated. Therefore, monitoring of the possible misuse of the state's resources must be done as strictly as possible. Second, upholding the rule of law consistently. It is impossible to implement good governance without first recognising this concept. Third, implementing national reconciliation to learn from bitter experiences of state responsibilities. It must be acknowledged that any attempt at reconciliation will be met with a collective memory of humiliation and trauma. Such collective memory is usually accompanied by emotions for revenge, which hinder the growth of mutual understanding between the various social components. Bitter past experiences offer us valuable lessons to not repeat the same mistakes in the future.

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