Power to the People?

(Con-)Tested Civil Society in Search of Democracy

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Introduction

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Religion and its values constitute an important part of many Asian societies, and as such it is often regarded as an obstacle to processes of societal change, and to democratisation and human rights in particular. This is an observation that unfortunately often is true. However, religion can also provide a vehicle for social and political change but such activities rarely achieve much attention. All religions have two sides, one inward oriented and one outward oriented, and in this session we are most interested in the outward oriented side of religion. Individuals and organisations use liberal, humanistic and gender sensitive interpretations of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions in processes of civil society formation and democratisation; engaged either in ideology production or in faith rights based agency and activism.

Democracy, human rights (and even civil society?) are by many regarded as universal concepts, applicable to all societies around the world. Others, of them many peoples in Asia, regard them as Western or foreign concepts and not applicable to their societies. Many scholars, politicians and activists therefore stress the importance to conceptualise or contextualise such concepts in order to make them understandable, acceptable and even desirable among these peoples. And here religion – as theology, ideology or cultural values in a general sense – can provide a vehicle for this process of conceptualisation or contextualisation. Or to put it differently, religion can provide a language or a strategy of action to make these concepts understandable and meaningful.

Religion has also proven to be a strong mobilising power, creating engaged and committed people. It has for example inspired independence struggles in several parts of Asia. A very recent example is the tsunami disaster in Thailand where Buddhist temples, monks and nuns turned out to be maybe the most important actors in civil society, providing shelter, relief and organisational structures, in the short as well as the long run.
Religion as institution or as spirituality

When we discuss religion as a vehicle for social change, it is of importance to highlight the distinction between institutionalised religion, which is generally conservative and rigid, and spirituality. In Asia, as well as globally, there is today often an option in favour of spirituality over institutionalised religion.

Subjective or social spirituality

We can also make a further distinction here, between subjective, or isolated, spirituality and engaged, or social, spirituality.

Subjective spirituality appeals more to economically advanced societies and focuses primarily on the inner aspect of each individual, aiming at self transformation.

Engaged spirituality is about world transformation as self transformation, through engagement in social service, motivated by spiritual and religious belief or principles and resulting in the betterment of both self and society. A key aspect here is the necessity of new interpretations of religious texts and rituals. It is rarely religion in its traditional or conservative form that becomes this vehicle for change.

Asian examples

In the Asian context most people are active in the field of engaged spirituality and we have a number of examples. We have social-minded urban neo-Sufism (Islamic mysticism). Traditional sufi practitioners are often affiliated with specific orders, closed for non-members, while neo-sufis are practising in open networks that transform while engaging in specific outward oriented activities, such as social work and not least education. Neo-Sufism implies a transformation from an isolated spirituality to a social spirituality.

We have a great number of various Islamic organisations that are engaged in social work of all kinds. In fact, the two probably largest Islamic organisations in the world, the Indonesian Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama with 32 and 35 million members respectively, have primarily been active in the field of education and social work throughout
the major part of the 20th century, thereby constituting very important and substantial actors in Indonesian civil society.

We have engaged Buddhism saying that the showing of compassion in this world leads to the realisation of one’s Buddha nature, and helps toward the truth of the interconnectedness of all living things, of all sentient life. During the war in Vietnam, Buddhists constructed a ‘Third Way’ ideology as an alternative to the opposing sides of North and South Vietnam. This ideology played a part in the process of uniting the country. In Sri Lanka in the mid 1990s, large numbers of Buddhist monks worked side by side with villagers to install roads, latrines and schools, all part of an effort to rejuvenate village life.

In India, millions of so-called untouchables have converted to a form of Buddhism advocated by Dr Ambedkar, actively working for social change and promising an end to the misery caused by the caste system – a Buddhist liberation theology, as it were. Throughout Asia, Buddhist nuns have organised themselves to bring institutional change from a gender perspective to the Buddhist Sangha, within which they have always been second-class citizens. And lastly, no less than two Buddhist leaders, Dalai Lama and Burma’s Aung San Suu Kyi, have been given the Nobel Peace prize.

We have Hindu and Christian organisations, active in education, health and development issues of a wide variety. One example is the cooperation between peasant unions and the Catholic Church in the process of land reform in the Philippines.

In conclusion, what many of these religious organisations and individuals have in common is that they aim to solve problems that are usually outside the scope of religion.

New ideologies with historical roots

Religion is also often used as a tool in order to understand – and influence – the world around oneself through ideology production. Religiously based ideologies are firmly established in a distant and often glorious historical past, which creates a feeling of authenticity or legitimacy, something that is missing in modern secular ideologies. But again, a key aspect here is the necessity of new interpretations of religious texts.
One such ideology or discourse is called liberal or even civil Islam, an ideology that is strong in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country in the world. Proponents of liberal Islam advocate democracy, human rights, religious pluralism, religious tolerance, and have an inclusive understanding of religion, which means that they search for similarities between religions rather than differences. These ideas are based on a contextual interpretation of the Qur’an and *hadith*, which takes the understanding of a problem in both its historical and modern context into consideration. The executing scholar is guided by a concept in classical Islamic tradition *maslaha* (‘public interest’ or ‘common good’).

The most important figures within this school of thought were, and still are, Nurcholish Madjid (died in 2005) and Abdurrahman Wahid (died in 2009). Both have played major roles in the reform of Islamic education, and many younger scholars have followed in their footsteps. This is very obvious when you encounter the sometimes daring ideas among Muslim thinkers around Indonesia, for example among the many scholars, female and male, active in the field of gender-sensitive interpretations of Islam (or, with another word, Islamic feminism), often used in the struggle for women’s rights by judicial instances and NGOs.

Wahid was for many years the leader of *Nahdlatul Ulama* (probably the largest Islamic organisation in the world) and served as President of Indonesia during a short period around the turn of the millennium. As President, he was an ardent advocate of religious pluralism and a defender of the rights of ethnic minorities and women. He actually launched a gender mainstreaming policy that is now implemented in many spheres of Indonesian society.

Both Madjid and Wahid were for many years very active and much demanded in the general public debate, making them important opinion makers on a wide range of issues, most of them not at all religious. Especially Madjid emphasised the ethical values in Islam, in his version very general humanistic values. He stressed every Muslim’s individual responsibility towards God, to live in accordance with these values in order to be good Muslims. This was the base for a good and harmonious society, according to Madjid, and he often accused corrupt politicians and
very rich businessmen on this ground – an unusual but maybe effective way to criticise corrupt people of power.

This, then, is a brief introduction of how religion can provide a vehicle for social and political change, with a variety of examples where this is carried out in reality.

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