THE LIBERAL ARTS IN ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION: PROBLEM AND PROSPECT IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

The growing number of Muslim elite in Indonesia who advocates violence and religious intolerance practices has left Indonesian policy on religious education in question. Islamic universities play a decisive role in educating Indonesian Muslim elites with many graduates who are Muslim thinkers of national and international standing. This paper aims to present an elaborative discussion on Islamic education practitioner's viewpoint towards the Indonesian Liberal Studies Initiative task force's proposal to further Indonesian Higher Education through the Liberal Arts. It will limit its focus on problem and prospects the liberal arts might bring to address the issue of religious illiteracy currently faced by Islamic universities in Indonesia. Through qualitative interview and observation at Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, it is revealed that integration of knowledge and revitalizing the content of civics education subjects are key strategies to address the issue. An analysis of both the history of Liberal Arts education and interviews shows problem faced by Islamic higher education in responding to the task force's proposal; politicization of language of liberalism and partial implementation of the integration of knowledge concept in the body of Islamic university in Indonesia.

Keywords

Religious Illiteracy, State Islamic University, Indonesian Higher Education, Liberal Arts

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1. Introduction

As the home for approximately 207 million Muslims, Indonesia is world's largest Muslim populated country in the world. According to the 2010 Indonesian Central Statistic Bureau report, approximately 87.1% of the population identified themselves as Muslim. However, the country is far from being religiously homogeneous. The other 12.9% religious minority are; Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism or other indigenous religion. This diversity was resulted from Indonesia's long history of trade, immigration, colonization, and post-colonial political history which contribute to a vigorous interaction of the people.

Indonesia today is not simply a country with diverse race, culture, and religious belief, but also a country with growing challenges related to issues of religious intolerance. Once known for a model on religious harmony, later founding proofs the opposite. In 2009, Gadjah Mada University in cooperation with the Asia Foundation revealed that approximately 832 cases of religious based conflicts were reported during 1990-2008 alone（Ali-Fauzi, 2009. Six years later, Pew Research Centre still ranks Indonesia highly for social hostilities involving religion.

The many alarming phenomena of ethno-religious violence, ethno-religious revival, Islamic separatism and religious terrorism has led many foreign observers to describe the current developments of religious freedom post the 1998 Reform Era exclusively negative (Pew Research Center, 2015). The occurrence of many religious-based violence in Indonesia such as *Laskar Jihad* (The Jihad Troops) and *Front Pembela Islam* (Islamic Defense Fronts) have eventually tumbledown the world outlook of Indonesian Muslim as tolerant and pluralist.

This paper started with a concern that commitment to enforce a very rigid formalistic interpretation of Islam has exceedingly shared among elite Muslim leaders in Indonesia. Human Rights Watch report criticized Indonesian government officials and security forces to have often facilitated harassment and intimidation of religious minorities by militant Islamist group (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Traditionally, Indonesian Muslim put high respect on *Ulama*. As a famous

Javanese poet puts it, "A man has more respect as *ulama* than if he were a regent, [because] he is a minister of God. Even were there ten [ministers of a king], one *ulama* ... would be superior to them. In their heart ... the *ulama* are the best people of the world." (Dhofier, 1980, p. 50).

Later in the development of Indonesian politics, Muslim leaders are inseparable from policymakers. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (in Zulkifli, 2010) even considered them as cultural brokers who mediate the government and local community. These perceptions of Indonesian Muslim leaders continue to persist. In 2005, former president Yudhoyono declared the Indonesian Council of *Ulama* to be the only authorized interpreter of Islam, and pledging his government's openness to their *fatwa's*.

On a global scale, hardline Islamic groups that justify violence on the conservative grounds continue to flourish. To conclude that these groups run by uneducated individuals with limited trainings on Islamic knowledge is an understatement. Gambetta and Hertog (2007, p. 3) claimed that, "… many Islamic radicals are not economically dispossessed, are often better educated than their peers, and went to universities". To an extreme level, both reveal that more than 60% of individuals take part in series of religious-based world terror are university graduates, or at least once in contact with higher education experience.

Table 1: *Individuals with higher education, finished or unfinished, in total and in engineering by grou.*

Figure taken from Gambetta and Hertog (2007), p. 13

Event/group	Total	With higher education	% higher education	Subject of edu. known	Engineers	% engineers **
WTC 1993	12	12	100	12	5	41.7
Bali	23	7	30.4	6	4	66.7
African embassies	16	7	43.8	7	3	42.9
September 11	25	17	68.0	14	8	57.1
Central al-Qaeda staff*	22	9	40.9	6	4	66.7
Core Arab cluster*	14	5	35.7	4	1	25
SE Asian cluster*	3	2	66.7	1	0	0
Maghreb Arab cluster*	9	7	77.8	7	3	42.9
Hamas	81	52	64.2	48	19	39.6
Palestian Islamic Jihad	17	8	47.1	8	1	12.5
Ibrahim sample	34	29	85.3	25	9	36.0
Jemaah Islamiah	31	6	19.4	6	5	83.3
Further sundry cases	39	34	87.2	34	16	47.1
Total	326	196	60.1	178	78	43.8

* These groups are taken from Sageman (2004). If cases overlapped with the event-based categories of Bergen, they are included in the Bergen groups; so, with the exception of the Maghreb Arab cluster, the Sageman's categories are residual sets including individuals from the same network who were not directly implicated in the events.
** The share is calculated on the number of cases whose degree we know.

This paper aims to present an elaborative discussion on Islamic education practitioner's

viewpoint towards the Indonesian Liberal Studies Initiative task force's proposal to further Indonesian Higher Education through the Liberal Arts. It will limit its focus on problem and prospects the Liberal Arts might bring to address the issue of religious illiteracy in Indonesia. A qualitative interview and observation at Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University (hereafter referred to as SHSIU) were conducted to understand key strategies taken by the university to address the issue. A study to trace the original philosophy of Liberal Arts is also conducted to understand Islamic education practitioner's viewpoint towards the Indonesian Liberal Studies Initiative task force's proposal to further Indonesian Higher Education through the Liberal Arts.

2. Islamic Higher Education Reform in Indonesia

Given the above consideration, the question that follows might be: Is education determinant in Muslim's legal thinking? Akh. Muzakki (2007, p. 286) provides summary of this belief saying that although sociological factors such as family background, engagement with epistemic community and social acquaintance play important role in forming one's Islamic legal thinking, higher education is decisive for its role as an intellectual bent [1] . Muzakki further highlights Azra's argumentation that higher education could contribute positively for "… learning at higher education equips them (Muslim intellectuals) with scientific methodology, including a broader perspective, which is needed for them to engage with these works (classical works of Islam)."

To a considerable degree, pressure from Muslim political leaders to establish an Islamic State was very strong at the time of independence. However, Indonesians secular, liberal art educated founding fathers insisted that Indonesia would achieve true meaning of independence only when the people are free from any kinds of oppressions, and religion was no exception.

Under the supervision of the Ministry of religious affair, Islamic universities play a decisive role in educating Indonesian Muslim elites. State Islamic universities have been one of the most productive universities in the nation to date. Many graduates are *ulama* and Muslim thinkers of national and international standing. However, latest developments indicated that Islamic university students and graduates are proner than ever to advocating blunt conservative ideas by accept radical understandings of Islam (Affiant, 2011). The fact that some of the terror bombers were graduates and current students of Indonesian State Islamic Universities was a

surprise for the university has been so far perceived as an Islamic institution that pioneered inclusive and pluralist methodologies for the teaching of Islamic subjects such as Islamic law, Islamic theology and Islamic philosophy. The unexpected surprise has led many Indonesian and foreign observers to pay serious attention to Islamic curricula in Indonesian higher education.

Long before the issue of intellectual radicalism arises, discontent over higher education system in Muslim societies has been an underlying crisis. Symposium of Reform of Higher Education in Muslim Societies (2013) concluded that poor governance, centralized planning, lack of support and curricula, and above all – lack of freedom to think, express, and act are some major problem plaguing Muslim societies. Criticism, experimentation, and self-discovery are seldom practiced. In Islamic studies courses, students are required to memorize facts and rules, but do not usually engage in moral and ethical reasoning and issue oriented discussions.

The history of intellectual innovation in Indonesian higher education can roughly divided into two periods; before the 1970s Indonesian higher education curriculum structure were influenced by Al-Azharite alumni and rest the teaching methodology on memorization and repetition. Given the fact that the earliest forms of Indonesian education were Islamic with most teachers graduated from Middle East universities, inclination towards this type of pedagogical approach is very much understood. After 1970s, a series of intellectual's innovations were led by Harun Nasution (1919 – 1998), Mukti Ali (1923 – 2004), and Munawir Sjadzali (1925 -). Under their leadership, Islamic higher education adopted various methodologies for reformation. Given the educational backgrounds of the three intellectual innovators [2], many perceived this transformation was a transitional shift of Islamic *qibla*[3] from the traditional religious Middle Eastern values towards modern liberal values of the West. But transition has never been easy. Preference over traditional, scriptural model of Islamic studies remains strong in the structure of formal Islamic education in Indonesia. Furthering Indonesian Islamic Education through the Liberal Arts? Problem and Prospect

Failure to properly address the rising numbers of formalistic[4] Muslim elites in Indonesia will certainly grow a gap between leaders and the diverse people they lead. The term 'liberal education' and 'general education' will be used interchangeably in this paper for it intends to emphasis on a discussion about education that serves breadth of knowledge to student as opposed to the overly specialized education. Ortega (2000) defines general or liberal education as: "A

curriculum (or part of a curriculum) aimed at imparting general knowledge and developing general intellectual capacities in contrast to a professional, vocational or technical curriculum." It is characterized by "… its focus on the whole development of an individual, apart from his occupational training. It includes the civilizing of his life purposes, the refining of his emotional reactions, and the maturing of his understanding of the nature of things according to the best knowledge of our time." It is clear that Indonesian universities come with various shape and size. Each faces its own problem and thus, should be able to address issue based on their capacity, according to their educational philosophy. The next section will discuss problem and prospects the Liberals Arts may face in Indonesian context.

2.1   Politicization of Language

The ultimate challenge concerning the idea of presenting liberal education in Indonesian higher education is the strong tendency to associate liberal arts with Western idealism. Given the historical background of colonialism in Indonesia, it is common to have a negative stereotyping over any Western ideals. Liberal arts education has a long history in a Western education. A student attends rigorous study of the liberal education are aware of diversity of values, disputed ideals and social issues around him. This grows awareness that the world is not a static state and hence life is a never-ending journey of learning. This characteristic, at least to my personal concern, answers critics who believe that general education is too naïve in the 21st century reality where world economy is demanding more and more specialized and trained individuals. In a world that is developing very quickly, a lifelong learning is useful to help workers capable of adjusting the rapidly changing economies.

A typical core curriculum in a liberal arts college reflects the attitude that a well-educated person should be exposed to a broad base of knowledge. Donald Markwell (2007, p. 32-3) sums up liberal art education as an educational philosophy that "… has at its heart; an emphasis on intellectual and personal freedom, critical thinking, and being an active citizen in society, who has thought carefully about his values and beliefs, and has wide and humane international and inter-cultural awareness and understanding."

The aforementioned negative perception towards liberal arts is an issue that needs to be addressed. Most concern arise around the discourse are the idea of liberalism as a Western concept and to apply a Western ideals in national education system means to Westernize

Indonesian education system. These, for many, are understood as devaluing the greatness of Indonesian local wisdom and to some extent, are sign of inferiority towards the West. Responding to the liberal concept of State Islamic Universities, one of Muslim academicians of a private Islamic Universities stated his concern on his personal blog[5] as follow: As a Muslim, we ought to question why Islamic Universities are very proud to adopt an orientalist method. Those orientalists, even though know some parts of Islamic teaching, are unbelievers who develop religion based on skepticism beyond the mask of pluralistic approach. This method teaches students to reject belief on absolutism. Eventually, this 'neutral' method will bring destruction for producing graduates who are proud in their doubt and confusion (who are) also doubtful about truth in Islam.

Considering this typical perception, implementing liberal education concept sounds impossible. However, I subscribe to the belief that resistance to liberal arts education lays on the politicization of the word 'liberal' resulted in unjustifiable criticism which eventually diverted the concept from its original meaning. The challenge of Indonesian Liberal Studies Initiative is to convey the original meaning of liberal education to Indonesian society in general.

Negative conception towards liberalism in education is common considering the fact that historians and educators generally do not trace the origin of liberal arts education to ancient Nile civilization. It is not the purpose of this paper to take a stand to support or against this typical way of thinking within the discussion of liberal arts education in Indonesia. What this paper would suggest is to reconsider the historical concept of liberal arts education way further than the 18th century Magna Charta of Liberalism.

John Bencoman (in Cook, 2014, p. 684) asserted that the inhabitants of Alkebu-lan (now African continent) were the earliest formally educated people who conceptualized and practiced the liberal arts disciplines. In ancient Kemet (Egypt), liberal arts became the core of university studies. Kamet's Mystery Schools original sequence of studies was the seven liberal arts, which featured mystic science (religion and spirituality), philosophy, history, science, mathematics, language, and music. Spiritual framework supports the educational philosophy associated with studying the seven liberal arts in higher education, which serves as the major component of the learning experience. Ancient Egyptian educators viewed the study of liberal arts as an academic system that would minimize and eventually eliminate a learner's tendency to display irrational

behavior that emanated from illogical thoughts. The study of liberal arts acted as a medium for building life experiences necessary to become a moral, spiritual, ethical, critical, liberated, balanced thinker. Study time would take spent 40 years resulting a generalist-specialist intellectual who not only know their discipline but general knowledge.

Today's liberal art is closely associated with American ideal of liberal arts. To refer one's understanding of liberal arts based on the American practice is not the best option for regression of American scholarship in liberal arts is apparent in American higher institution today. Harold Cruse (in Cook, 2014) adds American scholarship has developed immaturely as educators have promoted social conventions and superficial content centered on Western traditions of racism, ethnic-group discrimination, class privilege, female subordination, and conservatism.

Redefining liberal arts concept based on its original philosophy rather than political definition of European liberalism is an alternative to open possibilities on introducing liberal arts concept in Indonesian Islamic higher education. Misunderstanding the root history of one of world's oldest educational approaches should lead one to question the education model of individuals who fails to trace the originality of a very substantial viewpoint prior to opposing it. After all, what is more dangerous than a sloppy thinking of an intellectual?

2.2 Liberal Arts in Islamic University; the Case of Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University

Early in 2015, the Indonesian Liberal Studies Initiative task force, chaired by Prof. Chaedar Alwasilah of Indonesia University of Education, presented a white paper "Furthering Indonesian Education through the Liberal Arts" in response to the growing tendency of an overly specialized-narrow education in Indonesia. The task force believes that Indonesian education has the roots of liberal arts practices through the implementation of core general subjects mandated by the Indonesian law i.e. Indonesian, Pancasila & civics, and religion education.

On the recommendation to improve religion subject, the task force underlines the need to consider religious literacy in the subject. Religion education subjects focuses too much on ethic and morality and lacking of content on religious literacy (Puncochar & Alwasilah, 2015, p. 12). On the importance to equip Indonesian students with religious literacy, the task force asserts: Religious literacy is an understanding of the basic tenets of the world's major religions, whereas, religious illiteracy is a lack of understanding of the basic tenets of world religions. Religious

illiteracy fuels misunderstandings between a study of religions and the practice of religions. Ignorance of other religions promotes religious illiteracy and increases prejudice, bias, and antagonism.

Similar to the goal of liberal education, the goal of Islamic education is the cultivation of insane al-Kamil (a perfect individual). The perfect human being, thought al-Farabi (in Al-Yasin, 1983, p. 89), "… is the one who has obtained theoretical virtue; thus completing his intellectual knowledge and has acquired practical moral virtues; thus becoming perfect in his moral behavior. Thus, becoming role models for other people". From an Islamic perspective, a perfect individual is an existential being and therefore cannot be separated from his environment. SHSIU embodies this vision into its own formulation of; integration of science with Islamic and Indonesian value.

On an interview with the dean of the Faculty of Humanity of SHISU, Prof. Syukron Kamil is confident that Indonesia could generate its own education approach without mimicking other country's education model. In SHSIU, integration of knowledge between general sciences, Islamic knowledge and Indonesian value is fundamental. Kamil further admits that Western scholarship does give influence in formulating SHSIU's strategy of integration of knowledge. He acknowledges that Western liberal arts allow dialogue among disciplines of knowledge, which led to the doors of interaction and innovation, and that Indonesia should have left the colonial model of education that isolates discipline of knowledge. Even when Dutch has abandoned this model, we somehow preserve still this practice, he adds (interview, 12 November 2015).

SHSIU started as institute of Islamic studies, exclusively offering students some disciplines in Islamic studies until Mukti Ali et al. introduced a broader concept of Islamic Education in the 1970s inviting Western social methodology in understanding Islamic knowledge leading the university's formation in 2002. More faculties offering non Quranic studies were established, attracting more diverse profile of students as well as faculty member – many of them are secular middle class Muslim from all over Indonesia. This diversity also brings a more rigorous academic atmosphere, and hence reduces indoctrination of certain academic *qibla.*

Diversity in the body of SHSIU holds a twofold aspect; on the one side SHSIU is enriched by academic and cultural richness of its general attendee but on the other hand, it

should anticipate friction of ideology both from within and the outside. In response, SHSIU officials have initiated support to address the challenge; conceptualize its very own academic approach to inculcate academic freedom and critical thinking through integration of knowledge. SHSIU's concept of integration of knowledge allows dialogue among discipline of knowledge in campus (Kusmana, 2006). This strategy is known as an open paradigm of science, which means SHSIU embraces an open perspective in understanding knowledge, and respects all science openly and critically. SHSIU's openness in perceiving science can be understood as acknowledging that science can be derived from both religion (revelation, intuition of the heart/*kashf*) and 'secular' knowledge (resulted from research, empirical and common-sensual observation) while SHSIU's criticism towards knowledge can be understood as; the university allows constructive criticism between the two kinds of knowledge and support both to coexist in the constructional, existential, and practical level. By implementing this paradigm, SHSIU hopes to broaden its area of communication and area of participation to better serve a wider community.

Based on previous field observation, SHSIU applies partial integration of knowledge in a sense that it integrates Islamic knowledge into other discipline. Another phase of the integration is contextualization of knowledge into contemporary Indonesian issue. For example, it is common to have an Islamic Studies lecturer to teach together with a lecturer of medical science when discussing recent medical cure and prevention for AIDS and other infectious disease from an Islamic perspective or to discuss Indonesian literature to study about the history of Islam in Indonesia. Integration between 'secular' knowledge is another step to be achieved for SHSIU to commit fully in advancing Indonesian Islamic education.

Speaking on the university's attempt to address religious illiteracy, Prof. Sukron Kamil acknowledges that SHSIU is the government's agent in promoting democracy, human's right, and civil society (interview, 12 November 2015). Revitalization of the compulsory civic education subject is the ultimate big step SHSIU took bravely. The university exclusively drafts a textbook for civic education that instills democracy as a national view. The new textbook focuses on promoting minority rights and respect for other religion, suggesting that any religious conflict should be resolved through mutual respect among societal groups. More importantly, teaching civics to students are accompanied with dialogue about and with other religion; a

practice which is quite hard to find in other Islamic universities in Indonesia. All the strategies and paradigm SHSIU suggests that the answer to Indonesian Liberal Studies Initiative's second concern is affirmative.

3. Conclusion

General subjects in Indonesian national curriculum have a deep root in the liberal arts. To stand in opposition to the concepts of liberal arts education while still implementing the practice signifies a blur vision on what liberal arts really is. This misconception is believed to be the result of over politicization of the term 'liberal'. Understanding the original liberal arts concept based on the original philosophy rather than political definition of European liberalism is an alternative to start a discussion prior to suggest liberal arts as an educational approach in current Indonesian curriculum. Through a qualitative interview and observation at SSHSIU, it is revealed that integration of knowledge and revitalizing the content of civics education subjects are two key strategies taken by the university to address the issue. An analysis of both the history of liberal arts education and interviews shows problem faced by Islamic higher education in responding to the task force's proposal; politicization of language of the liberal arts and partial implementation of the integration of knowledge concept in the body of Islamic university in Indonesia.

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