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'We should not fear being called radical'

by Farish A. Noor

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Cleric Abu Bakar Bashir, founder and head of the Pesantren al-Mukmin of Ngruki, based in the Indonesian city of Surakarta, is widely known in Southeast Asia and around the world.

Following the bombings on the island of Bali in 2002, he was accused of being involved in the attack and subsequently jailed. After his early release last month, he has once again appeared on the Indonesian political scene.

Despite the accusations that were leveled against him, many Indonesians have expressed support for the man and skepticism over the trial, arguing that the Indonesian government was forced to act against Bashir due to pressure from Western governments including the United States and Australia.



Malaysian academic and commentator Farish A. Noor recently visited the Pesantren al-Mukmin in Solo and met with Bashir himself. The following is a transcript of his conversation (conducted in Bahasa Indonesia) with Bashir:

FN: We have just returned from a demonstration where you and the students of Ngruki were present along with members of the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), Front Pembela Islam (FPI), Front Pemuda Islam Solo (FPIS), Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) and others. When you spoke to the crowd you focused mainly on the current conflict in Lebanon and the aggression of the Israelis. You also criticised the weakness of the Muslim leaders of the world. Why has it come to this? Recently there was the OIC meeting in Kuala Lumpur and the statement they came up with was lame and non-conclusive; why are Muslim governments so scared to speak up and call for united action?

ABB: This is to be expected from them. What else can they do? What else can they say? There is not a single Muslim leader today who has the courage and commitment to defend Islam and Muslims, they are all in awe of the United States and other Western powers, and are indebted to them. This is what we call 'Wahn'. Our Prophet warned that this would be the case in the future, that the Muslim ummat would be great in numbers, but weak in spirit - until they are trampled upon again and again.

"There is not a single Muslim leader today who has the courage and commitment to defend Islam and Muslims"

The Arab leaders and other Muslim leaders in Asia all suffer from this disease called 'wahn', this weakness brought about by wealth and privilege, and thus they have become soft. That is why they cannot stand up to the kafirs and they cannot be firm in their statements and policies. Their love for the world and all things worldly means that they only think of themselves. Arab leaders worry more about making money from the profits they get from oil and gas than they turn the other way when Lebanon is being destroyed right next to them. Their neighbours are

being murdered, but they only make calculations for their own benefit.

This is why I have always said that it would be better if Muslims were poor. Oil wealth has been a curse on us, made us weak and docile. Look at the Afghans, during the time of the Soviet invasion. They were among the poorest Muslims in the world, yet they were sustained by their faith in God, and God alone.

Muslims must believe that all power, success and victory comes from God alone. If God wills it, they will win - no matter what the odds may be. The Prophet defeated the enemies of Islam even when he and his followers were small in number. Why? Because they had the ultimate power, God, on their side. This is the real superpower. The Afghans did not have sophisticated weapons like the Soviets did, but with their faith they defeated a superpower. That is when the kafirs feared us Muslims, when we had discipline and faith, when we were strong in our hearts and not weak in our stomachs.

This jihad spirit is not in the OIC now. Show me an OIC leader who can talk about jihad. Not even the leaders of Malaysia or Indonesia have this, so how can we do anything?

The only Muslim leader who has some spirit left is your former leader Mahathir Mohamad, who called for a boycott of US and other Western currencies. He was right, when he said that Muslim countries should abandon the US Dollar and trade with their own currencies instead. Why should we use the Dollar even when we trade among ourselves? Even though Mahathir did not openly call for jihad, at least he said something. This was the least we could have done.

But the leaders of the OIC could not even accept Mahathir's proposal, yet they talk about respect and honour. What honour have we got left, when nobody is listening to us?

FN: Some would argue that this weakness stems from the fear of being seen as being 'too radical'. I have problems with this concept, for I believe that being a radical is not necessarily a bad thing. After all Nelson Mandela, Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, Ghandhi, Nehru, were all radicals in their time; and they did not compromise in their opposition to colonialism, imperialism, racism and apartheid. So why can't we be radicals now?

ABB: You are right, but the weakness does not come from the millions of Muslims in the world. They do not mind being radical, they have no fear to speak out and to protest and to jihad. But the weakness comes from these Westernised co-opted Muslim leaders who just want to look good in the eyes of the West and Western media. They are scared that the BBC or CNN may call them radicals, so they remain soft instead. The problem lies there, with the Muslim leaders, not the Muslim masses.

The Muslim leaders swallow the advice of the Western powers and bodies like the IMF and World Bank, even when it is bad for their countries and they know this. They are the real hypocrites and traitors to Islam and Muslims. Yet as you say we should not accept the idea that being a radical is a bad thing. Any movement for change will be radical. Our Prophet was a radical too- he fought against the injustices of his community and challenged the feudal order of his society, so they called him a radical. So what? We should be proud of that!

We should be proud that our Prophet came into the world with the message of Islam to change it for the better, and not for the worse, or to keep things as they are. What use is revelation or

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"What honour have we got left, when nobody is listening to us?"

"We should not accept the idea that being a radical is a bad thing. Any movement for change will be radical"

religion if it doesn't change anything?

Today the Western powers and media want to domesticate us like sheep, to keep us tame and domesticated. But why are animals domesticated? So that they can be slaughtered in the end!

That is why they use the label 'radical' in the way they do, to keep us scared and to keep us under control. This is true for our leaders, who have all been domesticated and trained to speak the way their Western bosses want them to.

FN: So where do we get our role models then?

ABB: The only model to follow is pure Islam. Because Islam in its original form was tough and hard, not weak and pliable. Islam is fixed, stable, ordered and disciplined, and so are Muslims.

"Islam in its original form was tough and hard, not weak and pliable"

If we return to the real practice of true Islam we would be much stronger and that is when the kafirs will fear us. That is why we need to uphold the Shariah and return to real Islam. But the West is trying to weaken Islam from outside and inside. They attack our people and invade our countries from outside, and they weaken us from within with ideas like secularism, liberalism and democracy. This is all designed to contaminate our pure Islam.

Why do we Muslims have to learn from them? Islam is perfect, there is nothing to be added or changed. We have shown that Islam can rule the world perfectly for 14 centuries, and during this time of Muslim power we did not borrow ideas like democracy from others, so why do we need to learn democracy from them now? As long as Muslims were confident they could not be defeated, but now we are just puppets.

"We want the state to be Islamic, with Islamic leaders who have the courage and will to implement the Shariah in total. There is no other way"

This is why we are calling for the upholding of the Shariah here in Indonesia. We demand an Islamic state, and not some form of Islamisation of society. We want the state to be Islamic, with Islamic leaders who have the courage and will to implement the Shariah in total. There is no other way.

FN: Can you elaborate a little more on that? What do you mean by 'enforcing Shariah with determination?'

ABB: Islam's laws are fixed and that is why Islam is stable. Laws are to be enforced justly but firmly, with an iron hand. This is the case anywhere, even in a family.

Look at my own case: I am the father in my family. It is my duty to enforce the Shariah in my family and I do so with an iron hand. If my children do not behave according to Islam, if they do not pray for instance, I will punish them. Likewise the leader of any state has to do the same, he has to enforce Shariah firmly, for he will be held in account later in the afterlife if he fails. If his society breaks Islamic law, who is responsible? Is it not the leader, who has failed to enforce the laws of God? Here in Indonesia we have such laws but they are never enforced, that makes a mockery of Islam and Shariah.

"We want an Islamic state where Islamic law is not just in the books but enforced, and enforced with determination. There is no space and no room for democratic consultation"

So we want an Islamic state where Islamic law is not just in the books but enforced, and enforced with determination. There is no space and no room for democratic consultation. The Shariah is set and fixed, so why do we need to discuss it anymore? Just implement it!

Right now we are drafting our own constitutional amendments for Indonesia, the framework for an Indonesian Islamic state where Islamic laws are enforced. Indonesians must understand

that there is no Islamic state without the enforcement of Islamic laws. Otherwise it is just talk and nothing else.

FN: What about the Muslim leadership here in Southeast Asia? Earlier you criticised the leaders of Indonesia and Malaysia. How have they failed in your eyes?

ABB: Indonesia is in a mess as you can see. We are a very rich country, with plenty of resources and good people who want to live decent lives, but look at how corruption has destroyed our country. We should be a rich country but successive Indonesian leaders have left us weak and dependent on external aid. We are busy paying off loans when we should be giving loans instead! And our leaders during the Orde Baru (of former president Suharto) were secular, pro-American and entirely corrupted by global capitalist forces.

As for Malaysia, you may be economically better off but your leaders are weak. Badawi may come from a family of ulama but his faith is weak and so is his spirit. How can Malaysia sign a free trade agreement with America and Japan? Are these not kafir countries? And America today is an enemy of Muslim states and the supporter of Israel. In Islam that makes America a kafir harbi (enemy) state, and we Muslims are obliged to cut off all ties, diplomatic and economic with such an enemy state.

"How can Malaysia sign a free trade agreement with America and Japan? Are these not kafir countries?"

Anwar (Ibrahim) is also someone who does not understand Islam well. How can he talk about dialogue with America and the West? What dialogue? With murderers of Muslims? Anwar is mistaken about his views on Westerners and Jews. The Jews are cunning and cannot be trusted, as it states in the Qur'an. At the moment the United States is just being the donkey for Israel, who is riding the USA.

How can we dialogue for peace in the Arab world as long as Israel exists? Israel cannot dream of having peaceful borders because Israel has no right to exist, no right to be there. That is the land of Palestine, for the Palestinians. How can any Muslim leader say that Israel has the right to safe borders? It should not be there in the first place!

FN: Is there no way to engage in dialogue then?

ABB: In Islam there is only one way, the Islamic way. Dialogue with the kafirs is useless unless we Muslims are already living in Islamic states and not secular democracies. When you want dialogue with Muslims, Muslims need to be in power in their own countries first, on their terms. If the (Muslim) government does not impose Shariah, it has to be replaced. As long as the government does not go against Islam, we can still tolerate it. But once it goes against Shariah, we must oppose it.

"When you dialogue with countries that are anti-Islam and kill Muslims, how can you call yourself an Islamic state?"

When our governments engage with enemy kafir states, is that not going against Islamic principles? When you dialogue with countries that are anti-Islam and kill Muslims, how can you call yourself an Islamic state?

It is the duty for Muslims to oppose their governments when their leaders dialogue with our enemies. It says so in the Quran (Surah 60:9), that those who oppose Islam are our enemies and we must fight against them. So before we dialogue with kafirs, we need to go on jihad against our own hypocrite governments first that are apostates and against Islamic principles.

FN: So what kind of Muslim leadership are you talking about? What kind of Muslim leader do you want to see?

ABB: All the answers are in Islam. As the scholar Ibn Taymiyyah has argued in his work Kitab Fatawa, Islam is in two parts: the Quran and the Sword.

The Quran has all the guidelines, rules, norms, laws and punishments we need. The enforcement of the Shariah is the sword we are talking about. Without enforcement of the Shariah the Quran is just words in a book. It is a text with no practical meaning. That is why the message has to be implemented and realised with determination.

"If the Prophet carried a spear, then for us today we can carry an M-16!"

Look at the sunnah (practice) of the Prophet. When he gave his speeches and surmons he had a spear (tombak) in his hand. Why? This was the symbol of power. His followers knew he was serious, and not simply giving empty talk. He meant what he said and he did what he said he would do.

Sadly over the centuries Islam grew weak and we forgot that the Prophet carried a spear when he spoke. The spear was replaced with a staff (tongkat) instead, as if Muslims were weak and needed a walking-stick to stand up! We need to go back to this original, strong, robust Islam. Like the Prophet we need to carry the spear (tombak) again. If the Prophet carried a spear, then for us today we can carry an M-16!

Muslim leaders today have fallen short of the Prophet's example. They mouth empty pious phrases about how they yearn for an Islamic state, but they dont have the guts or will to do it.

"The closest we ever got to an Islamic state was the Taliban government in Afghanistan"

There is not a single Islamic state in the world, not even in Saudi Arabia. The Saudis are hypocrites and friends of the United States; their leaders are all corrupt and worldly.

The closest we ever got to an Islamic state was the Taliban government in Afghanistan, but the Americans destroyed that, with their Western allies.

FN: But the Saudis claim that they are the defenders of the holy sites of Islam and Muslims. What is more they are the promoters of Wahabism. How do you reconcile that?

ABB: Wahabism is just a school of thought. The Saudi regime used the Wahabis for their own political ends, to justify their rule and to control their people. Occasionally they may implement one or two Wahabi ideas, but then again only for cosmetic reasons. They impose laws on dress and public behavior, but what about the moral obligation to jihad against the enemies of Islam? How can you promote Wahabism when you remain a close ally of the United States, the supporter of Israel?

The Wahabis in turn are just conservatives with no agenda for social transformation. Look at what they did to Islamist movements like the Ikwan'ul Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood) of Egypt: They condemned the Ikwan as revolutionaries and radicals, just like the Western media!

FN: This tendency of Muslim groups to condemn each other has always been a problem since the beginning of the Muslim community. Why is this? How come Muslims cannot stop attacking each other?

ABB: They have left the path of true Islam, that is why they are divided into so many sects and streams of thought. But the hadith tells us of how a follower of the Prophet once asked him: "What will be the future of the ummat?". The Prophet predicted: "In the future you will be great in numbers, but you will be small and weak, like froth, bubbles, floating". The follower was shocked when he heard this, but the Prophet insisted that that would be so, because the Muslims will be divided and leaderless.

is one family, and every Muslim is your brother. It doesnt matter what the colour, race, or country the other Muslim is from, he is still your brother, you must support him and help him when he needs your help.

"All our divisions come from the West, from Western ideas like nationalism and from

But the opposite is also true. Those who are kafirs are not your family. Even if your own parents are not Muslims, they are not your family. They are kafirs, outside Islam. You need not think of them as members of the Ummat. When we forget our ummat, then we become weak and divided. All our divisions come from the West, from Western ideas like nationalism and from their ideologies like democracy and secularism.

their ideologies like democracy and secularism."

FN: If it is unity that you wish to see, then surely someone has to lead this community. Who, then, has the right to speak about Islam and on behalf of Muslims?

ABB: Those who speak for Islam and Muslims can only be the ones whose ideas come solely from the Quran and Hadith. Not the liberals, who try to use reason and rationality to interpret the Quran. This has become fashionable now, but it is against Islam and is not allowed.

How can the Quran be interpreted rationally? These intellectuals and liberals want to interpret the Quran according to circumstances, whereas it is the circumstances that have to be adapted to the Quran.

"Intellectuals and liberals want to interpret the Quran according to circumstances, whereas it is the circumstances that have to be adapted to the Quran"

It is clear that the Quran is not to be discussed by those who do not follow the rules that are set. There is no democracy in Islam, so do not try to interpret the Quran and turn Islam into a democracy to suit your needs. God's law comes first. It is not up to the will of the people to decide what is right and how to live. Rather the will of the people have to be bent to suit the will of God. It is not democracy that we want, but Allah-cracy!

The principles of Islam cannot be altered and there is no democracy in Islam or nonsense like 'democratic Islam'.

Democracy is shirik (unbelief) and haram. Here we do not compromise. Those who claim to be Muslims and do not support Shariah one hundred per cent are all munafik and kafirs, they are out of Islam. No need to discuss with these people, they are not part of the ummat anymore. There is no need to listen to public opinion: kafirs, apostates, liberals, atheists - they are all non-believers.

FN: But how can this attitude lead to social and political change? Here you and your followers in groups like the Majlis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), Front Pemuda Islam Solo (FPIS), etc are calling for an Islamic state, with a legal constitution based on the Shariah. But how will you achieve this in the context of Indonesia today which remains a constitutional democracy?

ABB: Islam's victory can only come through dawah and jihad, not elections. That's why Islamic parties are on the wrong path, even the better ones like the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) here (in Indonesia) and your PAS (in Malaysia). As long as democracy is their chosen path, the end result is haram. Nothing good can come from that which is haram, is that not the case? So if democracy is haram, then what kind of Islamic state can come from that? Certainly not a pure Islamic state. Elections are quite useless.

The struggle for Islam can only come through crisis and confrontation. Islam is here to change the world, not to be changed by the world. So there is bound to be resistance, that is why the West fears us.

"Islam is here to change the world, not to be changed by the world"

If we accept Western norms like democracy then we can never reach the Allah-cracy I mentioned earlier. Democracy must be replaced by Allah-cracy and this cannot come from elections. Those who oppose us must be educated, that is why dawah is important, to show them that Islam is the only way. But if they still resist, and are wilfully stubborn, or if they create obstacles for us, then they must be opposed. In particular all the Muslims who oppose

us are apostates (murtad) and they in particular need to be dealt with firmly. We need not care for them, or feel sorry for them. They were the ones who chose to reject Shariah, to reject Islam, and so they chose to become apostates.

FN: And you are convinced that this jihad for Shariah will solve all our problems? Will it solve the economic and political problems of Muslim countries like Indonesia for instance?

ABB: It is the first step and the right step. Economic problems, political problems, all other problems - these can only be solved when we have a firm and committed leadership that is committed to upholding and enforcing the Shariah without fear.

Look at our region now: Muslims are being killed in Patani (Southern Thailand) and Mindanao (Southern Philippines). But what do the weak leaders of Malaysia and Indonesia do? Have they actually done anything, apart from reading speeches and signing documents of peace? Muslims are dying, not in Lebanon but right here, right in front of us. These are our brothers, our neighbours. But the governments (of Malaysia and Indonesia) cannot do a single thing. This is what I mean by the disease of corruption and wealth earlier. They are weak, cowardly leaders.

That is why we need to go back to original, pure Islam, and to follow **"We must always keep our Prophet's example. The kafirs never tried to fool around with our Prophet, they knew he was serious and determined. Yet he was fair and just, and even when he had defeated the kafirs in battles and in Medinah and Mecca, he forgave them. Forgiveness does not mean weakness, but strength. But you need to be strong first, like our Prophet was. He was strong but not arrogant. Muslim leaders today need to be strong like that, and take a firm stand on issues."**

FN: And this sums up your vision of Jihad today? Is this the sum of your own approach to Islam and the problems affecting Muslims?

ABB: This is the Islamic view of things. We must never compromise, relent, give up, submit to our kafir enemies. We must always keep to the Islamic path, jihad in the name of Shariah, and never be apologetic.

So I agree that we must never be apologetic about being called 'radicals' today. Even during the time of the Prophet his enemies called him a madman! So being called a 'radical' is not as bad! We should not apologise for this, or compromise in our jihad. Today they call us 'radicals', tomorrow they will call us something else. These obstacles will always be there, because the kafirs fear us when we get stronger.

Remember that jihad is what brought Islam to power and built our community. There can be no Islam without jihad. Why, even if you want to build a Capitalist or Communist state you need to have a jihad; a jihad for capitalism or a jihad for communism. So why cant Muslims engage in a jihad for Islam and Shariah?

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