

Negotiating State Neutrality and Religious Freedom in Muslim-Majority Countries: The Case of Liberal-Progressive Islam in Indonesia

Supriyanto Abdi

(PhD candidate, Asia Institute, University of Melbourne)

Despite the reaffirmation of the non-sectarian character of the Indonesian state and the strengthening of the constitutional guarantee for religious freedom during the constitutional reform period (1999-2002), religion-state relations and religious freedom in Indonesia remain subject to conflicting interpretations. Among the most illustrating examples of this ongoing contestation were a fierce public debate sparked by the petition for the judicial review of Law No.1/PNPS/1965 on Blasphemy. The Law established the so-called “official religions” in Indonesia and allows the state to intervene with protecting what it deems as the “official” religious interpretations. Liberal-progressive Muslim intellectuals and activists have been highly critical of the law and they played an important role in initiating and bringing the petition for the judicial review of the Blasphemy Law before the Indonesian Constitutional Court in 2010. This paper seeks to examine the voices of these liberal and progressive Muslim intellectuals in these debates. More specifically, it will closely look at the extent to which liberal-progressive Muslim intellectuals and activists have advocated liberal discourse of state neutrality and religious freedom and how they reconciled these liberal discourses with the main ideological narrative of the Indonesian state as a compromise between its “religious” and “secular” orientations. The paper will be divided into four main parts. The first part will look at the intellectual roots and theological bases of liberal-progressive Muslim discourse with special reference to the religio-political ideas of Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid as two key leaders of the country’s seminal generation of liberal Muslim thinkers and the younger generation of liberal-progressive Muslim activists in the post-New Order period. The second part will then focus on the views and arguments of liberal-progressive Muslim intellectuals and activists in the public and legal debate on the Blasphemy Law. In the third part, an attempt will be made to analyse the Court’s decision to uphold the Blasphemy Law and the extent to which it might pose discursive limits for liberal discourse on religion-state relations and religious freedom in Indonesia. Finally, the fourth part will offer a theoretical reflection on the possibility and limits of crafting liberal discourse of state neutrality and religious freedom in Muslim majority contexts, especially those characterised by competing, but not mutually exclusive, trends of political liberalization and Islamization like Indonesia.