ROLE OF RELIGION IN PROMOTING DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL WELFARE

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I. Introduction

It is my pleasure to be here to participate in this interfaith dialogue. This kind of engagement is important in order to establish a peaceful and just order in the world. We have to continue unceasingly to build understanding and respect among the people of the world so that we may find common ground for the global community. It is in democracy that we find common ground for living. Although we acknowledge that democracy is not the only unconditional guarantee for peace and justice, it is indeed by far the most available system and set of values that is vital for improving human life. Now it is our turn to develop democratic systems and values in such a way that can fulfill our hope in the future.

It has been said that democracy became stronger after the end of the Cold War. A number of states that were previously members of the socialist or communist block are gradually undergoing significant changes. However, in a number of states, the transition is not easy. That is because democracy is not only a form of government but also a state of mind. Democratic culture is essential in order for political structures to function. In this place, religion plays an important role in the formation of state and culture.

Democracy is not an end goal in and of itself. It will be meaningful when it can pave the way to social welfare. Although democratization does not necessarily bring about an improvement in the quality of people's lives, it is the best way to achieve this goal. Democracy is the most effective way to empower people, to motivate them, to distribute resources. It is useful to eliminate a monopoly of power and economic resources. There is no meaning of democracy in a poor and uneducated society. Thus, social welfare concerns not only economic issues, but also deals with education and culture. The economy is only one aspect of social welfare. It is not very meaningful if economic standards increase, but the people are still ignorant and the culture is not developed. So, religion plays an important role in the education and cultural development of society.

II. Indonesian Experience

Religion can be important in the formation of society. Indonesia is known to be a religious society. This goes back to Indonesia's ancient history, when Hinduism and Buddhism had a strong foothold in the region. Around the seventh century, Islam came to Indonesia, followed by the emergence of Islamic kingdoms. With this, the people voluntarily embraced Islam. Along with the coming of the Portugese and then Dutch colonists, Christianity became known to Indonesian people. Ultimately, although Islam became the dominant religion, there is a substantial community of Hindus, Buddhists and

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Christians. It can be said that almost a hundred percent of Indonesians follow religion. That is why Indonesians are religious people. Their life is very much influenced by religion.

As a religious society, Indonesia underwent some phases of ideological history that have involved the use of religious justification. In the 1930s pre-independence Indonesia, there was a debate among intellectuals whether the next independent Indonesia will use Islam or a kind of secular nationalism as the basis of state. The debate was repeated in the 1940s, on the eve of independence, and raised again in the 1950s when the Constituent Assembly had to decide the basis the state. Along with the development of Indonesian politics since independence in 1945 up to present, we generally have come to agree upon democracy with the recognition that religion is important to the spirit of state and society. Since this ideological debate used a religious argument to support each of the opposing sides, Islamic and secular, we must bear in mind that religion is important in the life and thinking of Indonesians. It also signifies that the use of religious language is one of the most effective ways to convey political messages in Indonesian society.

III. Religious values

Indonesia can be viewed as one of largest democratic countries following its short, turbulent transition from a centralized semi-authoritarian government to decentralized democratic one. In spite of the fact that many problems have remained persistent, such as corruption, many people see many positive developments in terms of democracy. Now the people tend to look at democracy in a more rational way. They have moved away from some sorts of parochial thinking, such as in terms of ethnicity and religious affiliation. The last election in March 2009 is an interesting phenomenon. Most of the political parties participating in the election proclaim that every person, regardless of his/her religious affiliation, is welcome to be a member of the parties. During the campaign period, three weeks prior to the election, there were hardly any significant religious issues being exploited by party spokespeople. However, frankly speaking, this positive appraisal of democratic development is disturbed by money politics, that is the candidates seeking voters and the voters seeking money, a practice which is forbidden by law.

What I just mentioned above is a significant step in the consolidation of democracy in Indonesia. After a long process of discourse and dialogue among intellectuals and *ulama'* (religious scholars) it seems that they have come to agree that religion is the basis of spirit, values and culture of Indonesians. With regards to politics, religion provides an ethical foundation for a democratic state.

The discourse on civic values also indicates progress in democratic development. In the last two decades the interest of scholars in the subjects of civil law, especially the relation between *shari'ah* (Islamic law) and positive law, has been increasing. The issues of gender, religious pluralism, and family law have become more open to debate. This debate, I believe, will support a democratic atmosphere within Indonesian society and bring about understanding of the compatibility of religious and democratic values.

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IV. Social Welfare

Indonesia is one of the largest countries in the world. Its total population reaches 237 millions at present. It is also a pluralistic country in term of religion and ethnicity. There are hundreds of languages spoken in the country of approximately 17.508 islands. The national economy is growing. However, the poverty and inequality still persists. Due to limited sources, natural as well as human, which are controlled by government, there is a great need that must be met by society, including participation from faith-based social organizations.

These types of organizations have a long history that extends before Indonesian independence. Let me mention the two largest Islamic organizations, namely Nahdlatul Ulama (Rise of Muslim Scholars) and Muhammadiyah (Followers of Prophet Muhammad). Being a member of Muhammadiyah, I am better able to speak about this organization and prefer to let other people talk about the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU).

Since its establishment in 1912, Muhammadiyah has concentrated on social welfare. It established Islamic schools, which develop both religious and secular subjects, hospitals and orphanages. Since the organization was initiated through synergy between ulama and entrepreneurs--indeed the founder himself was an alim (plural: ulama)--the exploration of Islamic teaching about work ethic and philanthropy is emphasized. It is told that Muhammadiyah's founder Ahmad Dahlan traveled from one place to another to do his business and at the same taught people Islam. One of the topics he spoke about was philanthropic verses of the Qur'an (Chapter al-Ma'un). He repeated the same verses over and over in his consecutive religious lectures. One day, one member of the audience dared to question his selection of the Quranic verse. The founder said, "I will not stop teaching these verses until you go and help the poor." This message is eventually internalized in the mind of Muhammadiyah members. Today, throughout Indonesia Muhammadiyah owns and controls more than 8,000 kindergartens and 9.800 elementary and high schools. It also possesses 162 institutes of higher education, nearly 500 health facilities and more than 300 orphanages, many economic institutions, such as markets, cooperatives, gas stations, and banks.

In addition to these programs, it is important to remember that religion provides certain values that motivate people to work hard. These values have become a prioritized subject of religious engagement. Islam, for instance, is proclaimed a religion of fighting against poverty and injustice. To the people of religion, the program of social welfare is engrained in the conviction that material wealth belongs to God and people possess it as a trust. People have to acquire it and distribute it lawfully and justly. People must help each other and not let others live in misery.

The importance of values is unquestionable. However, these values must be materialized in concrete actions on the ground. We have to teach people how to elevate their standard of life and provide them tools to obtain their rights to live prosperously. Finally, it is necessary for the people of religion to advocate, especially politically, for the

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establishment of social welfare for all the people regardless of their political and religious orientation.

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