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The Islamists Are Coming!

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Exchange of dialogue between the Western and Muslim worlds has been going on for decades, and has intensified in the wake of the attacks on the United States of America on September 11, 2001. Yet one of the factors that has hindered this dialogue process is the apparent fear of “radical” Islam, a label attached to grassroots Islamist movements and parties that struggle for an Islamic state, if not an Islamic so-

ciety. Consequently many of the dialogues that have taken place have tended to be inter-elite affairs, bringing together Western elites and their Muslim counterparts who often share similar educational backgrounds, cultural affinities, and political viewpoints. Accordingly, many of these dialogues have, thus far, tended to take place in the absence of those who might be labelled as “real” Islamists.

Yet it has to be noted that, in many Muslim countries today, it is not possible to avoid or ignore the reality on the ground, where political Islam is often seen as a legitimate and popular force that appeals to the masses. The numbers alone testify to the relevance of such groups and movements. The Pan-Malaysian Islamic party (PAS), for instance, counts among its numbers around one million members and active supporters; the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) has a quarter of a million supporters; the Justice and Prosperity party of Indonesia (PKS) which began as a campus-based student movement not only contributed to the fall of President Suharto but is now installed in power as one of the key coalition partners in the government of Indonesia.

It was the desire to reach out and engage with such grassroots Islamist movements that prompted a change of approach by the German government recently, with the Task Force for Germany’s Dialogue with the Muslim World (of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs) working with the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) of Berlin to host a two week lecture and study tour by Islamists from Malaysia and Indonesia. In a landmark project going against the grain, the Task Force was willing to invite Islamists from Malaysia’s PAS and ABIM and Indonesia’s PKS to Germany to engage in a series of important dialogues with the German public, meeting local German political parties, funding agencies, foundations, journalists, academics, and students.

Open disagreement

One of the conditions of the dialogue tour was that all discussions would be frank and open, with no taboos or restrictions on subjects discussed. In several of the discussions this rule was put to the test, as the firmly held positions of both sides left no room for agreement or compromise. A discussion on the issue of freedom of religion, for instance, witnessed the Islamists of Malaysia and Indonesia insisting that freedom to convert to Islam did not entail the freedom to *leave* Islam; while representatives of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung were unable to accept the rationale behind this position. In such cases, it became clear where the lines of difference and disagreement lay, and it was equally important to have these differences stated openly, albeit in a civil manner. Other thorny issues discussed included the meaning of “secularism” and whether the Islamists were able to accept the notion of a secular state that plays the role of honest broker between the different faith communities of a multireligious nation-state.

Having said this, it is noteworthy that the Islamists of Malaysia and Indonesia—particularly the representatives of PAS, ABIM and PKS—were more interested in questions of political-economic structural reform than anything else. During discussions held at the offices of the SPD and the Frederik Ebert Stiftung, for instance, much time was spent discussing the future of the welfare state in Germany and Europe. The Islamists of PAS and PKS were particularly keen to understand the evolution of the welfare state system in Germany, and whether the economic changes brought about by the unification and economic integration of the EU meant that the welfare state was doomed. In some ways these concerns reflected the Islamists’ own seriousness when dealing

In an effort to counter the unfruitful labelling practices that have characterized dialogue between Western and Muslim Worlds, the German government in cooperation with the Zentrum Moderner Orient invited Southeast Asian Islamists to Berlin to engage in a more fruitful exchange of viewpoints. The authors point out that although the discussions did not necessary lead to agreement, the encounters did create room for nuance and understanding.

with questions of economic structural reform, and demonstrated their readiness to assume political power.

Pleasant surprises

All in all, many of the discussions were enlightening for those who took part. The meeting with the organizers of the Berlin demonstrations against the invasion of Iraq, for example, was instructive in the sense that it showed

how solidarity between peoples and nations could be generated despite cultural and religious differences. During the discussion with the organizers of the demonstrations, the Islamists were interested to learn that most of those who took part in them were ordinary Germans of non-Muslim background, including a significant representation of German Jews and Christians. Such examples provided a healthy model to contrast with the usual tide of anti-Semitic and anti-Western discourse so prevalent among many Islamist movements in the Muslim world today.

The Islamists were also pleasantly surprised by the positive reaction from the German public who seemed open to the idea of listening to the Islamists speak for themselves, even if they did not necessarily agree with everything that was said. As Dzulkefly Ahmad of PAS noted: “Before arriving in Berlin we were somewhat sceptical about the reception we would receive. We assumed that there would be much anti-Muslim hysteria and that as Islamists we would be dismissed as ‘conservatives’ or ‘fanatics.’ But I have to say that we were very impressed by the level of understanding of the German students and general public, and how they took us seriously and listened to what we had to say, even if we did not agree on everything. This has made us change our earlier viewpoint and assessment of Europe and has given us a new perspective on life in the West.”

A new realism?

To what extent this project will have a lasting impact on the Malaysian and Indonesian Islamists’ view of the West is uncertain, though the follow-up process has already begun with the Malaysian Islamic Party requesting the German government to send the German academic Dieter Senghass to Malaysia for a series of public lectures and seminars to be hosted by PAS. Much of the credit has to go to the Task Force for Germany’s Dialogue with the Muslim World for taking up the ZMO’s project and supporting it wholeheartedly; for this venture has opened up new avenues for the inter-religious dialogue process to proceed in the near future, and marks a new level of realism on the part of the governments of Western Europe who appreciate that political Islam is a factor to be taken seriously, albeit with reservations.

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