ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA IN THE ERA OF AEC: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract. The implementationof ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015 will mark a new era of the relationship between countries in Southeast Asia. Proposed and agreed on during the Bali Concord II in 2003, the AEC agreement assumes a free flow of goods, investments and services among Southeast Asian countries in 2015. While the agreement provides more opportunities for the ASEAN countries and their people to enhance their economic development, some countries and people may find it more difficult compare to others to turning challenges into opportunities. One of the key factors is education. Education is the only way to improve the quality of human resources.In many Southeast Asian countries, Muslims make up the majority of the population, and hence the roles and responsibilities of Muslims are very significant in the region. Southeast Asian Muslims have a long history in providing education and human resources development to their communities. The continuing existence of *madrasah*, *pondok* or *pesantren* in almost every Muslim community indicates that education has been important part of Muslims' lives. These institutions continue to exist amid rapid development of "international" or secular schools in many countries. The reason is that not only because most Muslims regard religious education remains important, but also because the ability of the institutions to adapt to the changing world. The realisation of AEC in 2015 provides opportunities and challenges to Islamic educational institutions. As indigenous institutions, Muslim schools could serve as the place where local values can be transmitted together with global and universal competencies.

Keynotes: education, human resources, madrasah, pondok pesantren

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Introduction

The advancement of communication and information technology has lead the world into a new direction, namely borderless society. People can communicate easily and without delayfrom one place to another. At the same time, growing economic development in Southeast Asia allows people in the region to travel back and forth from one country to another for various purposes. The increasing demand of airline services in the region indicates the latter. The above two reasons, among others, signify the importance of having regional integration. Besides, countries in the region should also compete with countries all over the world in advancing their economy. Hence, the creation of regional integration between Souteast Asian countries is necessary.

Bali Concord II 2003 signifies the creation of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). The AEC agreement assumes a free flow of goods, investments and services among Southeast Asian countries in 2015. This means that countries within the region agree to allow business people to have easier access to a wider market. This certainly gives more opportunities to people in the region to expand their businesses and careers. The opportunity is even greater for well-established business entities and well-trained people.

There are certainly challenges that people in Southeast Asia will face with the implementation of AEC. One of the biggest challenges is the helping less-educated people to compete with those highly educated. Likewise, helping small and medium business to compete with big business in the same area.While AEC means more opportunities for people to find better jobs and for companies to expand their businesses, less-educated people and small business enterprises will find it more difficult to compete with others.

In a number Southeast Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, Islamic education exist in communities of less educated and low income families. Therefore, it is very significant to discuss the role that Islamic schools could play in welcoming the AEC era.

Islam and Muslim Society in Southeast Asia

Vaughn (2005) identifies that Islam is considered as the fastest growing religion in the world. Citing A CRS report, Vaughn further estimates that World's Muslim population will constitute 30% of world population by 2025. The estimated fact indicatesthat the role of Muslims increasingly significant to the world. In many Western countries the number of Muslim population is consistently growing. The roles that Muslims play in the society are also increasing. In countries like England and the US, more muslims are involved in professions that are traditionally dominated by non-Muslims, such as politicians and scientists.

While many religions exist in Souteast Asia, including Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism; Islam constitutes one major religion in the region. Weiss (2010) notes that the number of Muslim in Southeast Asia represents 18 percent of world Muslim population. Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam are countries in Southeast Asia that made up by Muslim majority. Except until recently, the huge number of Muslim population in Southeast Asia did not make Islam in the region special within the Muslim world. Many experts, as Weiss (2010) mentions, view that Islam in Southeast Asia is placed in the periphery of the Islamic world. This was at least because of two reasons. The first is the geographical location that places Southeast Asian Islam far from the center, i.e. Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The second is the nature of Islam in the region that is considered deviant from the "original Islam." There are a

number of traditions that are popular among Muslims in Southeast Asia, but not in the Middle East, such visiting and saying prayer in the graves of ancestors, marriage celebration, and many others.

The harmonious interactions between Muslims and believers of other religions in Southeast Asia have also constituted an Islamic culture that differs from the one in the Middle East. Interreligious marriages, life-cycle celebration, political participation and religious festivals are among religio-cultural acitivities that make Muslims in Southeast Asia distinct. Weiss (2010), however, notes that eventhough Southeast Asian Muslims are considered in the periphery, they are somehow always connected to the center.

Problems with Islam and Muslim Society

While Muslims constitute a large number of Southeast Asian population, they are not homogenous in practicing their religion. Islam is interpreted and implemented differently within different Muslim communities. There are a number of groups that represent Muslim communities, such as NU and Muhammadiyah in Indonesia, Muslim society in Southern Thailand, Muslim society in South Phillipines, and many others. Each has different agendas ranging from ethnic, economic to political. The problem is then who actually represents Islam. Each organization or community claims themselves as the actual representation of Islam, and this may confuse those who do not really understand Islam within the context of Southeast Asia. Problem of representation leads to the core problem among Muslims, i.e. problems of interpretation.

All Muslims agree that Al-Quran, the holy book, and Hadith, the prophet traditions, are the main references in understanding and implementing Islam. The two references, however, are open for interpretation, as there is no single

authority within Islam that can justify specific interpretation of the Quran and hadith. As a result, Islam is represented differently by different Muslim groups. These differences can be seen as the richness of the Islamic culture in Souteast Asia, but can also be seen as a potential for disintegration, like the Sunni – Syiah case in Madura.

Beside the problem of representation of Islam, there are three other major problems that Muslims in Southast Asia are facing, namely Economy, politics and education. Economic development has been the major concern of ASEAN Economic Community. Various countries in Southeast Asia continue to show growing economy (See KFH Research, 2014). This indicates that AEC provides prospects and opportunities for economic development of each country. However, it should also be noted that economic disparity remains exist between people that live in cities or sub-urban areas and those who live in villages. People in East Indonesia, Southern Thailand and South of the Phillipines, for example, experienced slower economic development compared to the other side of the countries. Because the issue of separatism in the area, the governments tended to use military approach to secure the country. However, with the increasing use of information and technology, the Security approach, that has long been used in those area to maintain the integration of the country, can no longer be applicable. Instead, economic development or welfare approach should be imposed. Local people should be facilitated to earn their own income at the same rate with people in different part of the country. Therefore, as Edy Irawan notes, every government should give more attention to infrastructure development, education and Small and Medium Enterprises development (Edy Irawan, et. al., 2013).

Southeast Asian countries, especially Muslim majority of them, are examples on how politic is interrelated with religion.

Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, are examples of different interpretations in implementing Islam in politics. Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam take Islam as the official religion of the countries, while Indonesia, despite Muslim being majority of the population, accommodates different religious beliefs as official religions of the country. Constitutionally, all believers of different faiths have equal rights before the constitution.

Recent political development in Indonesia represents how democracy can be run smoothly in a Muslim majority country. There are certainly groups that have different interpretations in translating Islam into politics, but they are not the mainstream of Indonesian Muslims. Groups such as *Hizbut Tahrir* and *Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia* are among those who do not accept democracy as the country's political system. The majority, however, prefer to adopt democracy, in which Muslims can play an important role in exercising Islam, as their political way. In other words, the idea of Islamic ideology as opposed to nation state, that many transnational Islam organization promotes does not work in Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries. Hasan identifies that Indonesian transnational Islam groups cannot grow in Indonesia because they have to face the government and pro-democracy alliances (see Hasan, 2009) that are mostly also Muslims.

Education is the greatest challenge that Muslims in Southeast Asia is facing. Education can lead botheconomic development and political involvement. While access and participation are no longer important issues for many, quality education remains in question, except for Singapore. Many Southeast Asian people, for instance, will go to Europe, Australia or US to get better education. Looking Southeast Asian people as market opportunities, a number of Western

schools start operating their schools in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia and Malaysia (See for instance, the Economist, 2011). Quality education is the key for succesful human resource development. With Singapore as an exception, Southeast Asian countries are struggling to improve their education quality.Phan and Coxhead (2013) identify that the government of Southeast Asian countries have stronger commitment for human resource development as the education budget explains. Curriculum changes, teacher trainings and schools infrastructures are among other things that governments in each country are improving.

Muslim Education in Southeast Asia: Challenges and Prospects

Southeast Asian Muslims have a long history in providing education and human resources development to their communities. The continuing existence of *madrasah*, *pondok* or *pesantren* in almost every Muslim community indicates that education has been important part of Muslims' lives. These institutions continue to exist amid rapid development of "international" or secular schools in many countries. The reason is that not only because most Muslims regard religious education remains important, but also because the ability of the institutions to adapt to the changing world.

The existence of Islamic educational institutions in Southeast Asia indicates Muslims' awareness on the importance of education, although at the beginning most Islamic schools only provided religious subjects to their students. In Indonesia, Islamic schools also becomes the home-bases of anti-colonial spirit. A number of *ulama*s, notably KH Hasyim Asy'ari, proclaimed anti-colonialism through Islamic educational institutions. This way, Indonesian Muslims were able to maintain their identities as Muslims and as indigenous people.

Moreover, Islamic schools also became places where the spirit of nationalism was disseminated.

One of the distinct characteristics of Islamic schools is its adaptability to social changes. Zuhdi (2013) observes that Islamic schools are able to respond to changing demands of the society concerning the needs of education. That is the main reason why Islamic schools continue to grow despite increasingly modernized society.

Initially, Islamic schools were places where students learn various kinds of Islamic subjects, such as Arabic, Al-Quran, *Fiqh* (Islamic Law), Islamic theology, etc. Then, when the demand for non-religion-oriented subject increased, majority of Islamic schools change their curricula to include subjects such as Math, Science and Social sciences. In recent years, the demand for Islamic schools is surprisingly increasing.

There are two major concerns with the increase of Islamic schools, namely Religious radicalism and ethnic segregation. Following the 9/11/2001 incident in New York, the US government launched a campaign on Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). The campaign, not surprisingly, targetted radical Muslims who not only have radical views on Islamic teaching, but also engage in radical activities. Further implication of that is the suspicion towards Islamic schools was increasing. Islamic school, as Abdul Hamid (2010) notes,potentially become a place for spreading Islamist ideology and radicalism. Many cannot really distinguish between moderate Islamic schools and radical Islamic schools. Therefore, generalization towards Islamic schools among non-Muslims is not avoidable.

In Indonesia, one can actually view the difference between radical and non radical Islamic schools by viewing their actual curriculum or implemented curriculum, not just the prescribed curriculum. Moderate Islamic schools will teach subjects as mandated by the government, including subjects on

citizenship and state ideology (known as *Pancasila*). Schools that teach non-religion-oriented subjects but do not includecitizenship and state ideology, can be further investigated on the actual teaching learning that they have.

The majority of Islamic schools in Indonesia and Malaysia, as I assume, fall into the first category, i.e. moderate Islamic schools. Thanks to government's role in managing the existence of the Islamic schools. Government's intervention in maintaining the balance of Islamic schools curriculum is very important to ensure that the schools maintain religious subjects and non-religion-oriented subject, including citizenship, at the same time. Without government's intervention, one cannot guarantee the content of religious education curriculum that the schools teach.

In Malaysia, concern over religious schools is not only limited to radicalism, but also ethnic segregation (Abdul Hamid, 2010). The vast majority of Islamic schools' students in Malaysia is coming from Malay family. Through the school, students learn Islamic teachings and interact with other students from the same ethnicity. In a very rare situation students that go to Islamic schools could interact with students with different ethnic and religious backgrounds. If the schools do not introduce students with different ethnics and faiths in the society, students may become ignorance to the differences. In the future, this potentially becomes seed of social disintegration and conflicts.

The realisation of AEC in 2015 provides opportunities and challenges to Islamic educational institutions. As indigenous institutions, Islamic schools could serve as the place where local values can be transmitted together with global and universal competencies. These schools could promote the distinct characteristics of Southeast Asian wisdoms that can balance the increasingly materialistic world. At the same time,

there are at least two major challenges that Muslim educational institutions are facing. The first is preparing their students to be more qualified and more competitive in welcoming the new era.

The second is to maintain the moderate notion of Southeast Asian Islam as the trademark of Islamic education in the region. Quality of education is the main objective of most education institutions, including Islamic schools in this era. Islamic schools should compete with non-religious schools in advancing academic performances of the students. The problem is that students in Islamic schools learn more subjects than those of non-religious schools. Some schools even oblige their students to memorize the Quran. This means that students of Islamic schools need more learning time than others. The other problem is that for many Islamic schools turning their mission into quality education is a big shift, as they used to put open access and equal opportunity first to serve their communities.Moreover, as the schools were unable to appreciate teachers' time with appropriate remuneration, they ended up having less-qualified teachers.

Maintaining the moderate notion of Southeast Asian Islam is another challenge that Islamic schools should face. To explain the notion, Abdul Hamid (2010, 73) interestingly differentiates between Islamic education and Islamist education. Islamic education, the moderate one, presents Islam as a comprehensive way of life that aims for God's pleasure, which encourage moral goodness towards human beings, regardless of their faiths. Islamist education, in contrast, leads people to negate ideology other than Islam for political purposes.

As I explained in the beginning, the charactersitics of Islam in Southeast Asia differ from those in the Middle East because of its adaptability to local customs. These charactersitics, however, are challenged with the presence of Islamist ideology that can turn the image of Islam into a non

civilized religion. It is at this point, Islamic schools can play its significant role in maintaining the chararcteristics of Southeast Asian Islam.

In answering the above problems, the governments and the Islamic schools need to take the following actions: First, government should continue to facilitate and supervise Islamic schools. Meaning, Islamic schools should continue to be included within the national education system. Having government managing religious education does not necessarily mean the government dictate its people on how to exercise their religion, but rather to maintain the mutual relationship between religion and state. Second, Islamic schools should maintain the balance of curriculum that teach students about their religious duties, academic duties as well as civic duties appropriately. Third, the quality of teachers need to be consistently improved, as they are the key for any succesful education. Fourth, Islamic schools should also introduce their students to different faiths and cultures in order not to create new social segregation. Fifth, Islamic schools should be aware that while it is important to maintain students' Islamic characteristics, it is equally important to improve their academic performances.

With those in mind, Islamic schools should be able to play a significant role in improving the quality of human resources and at the same time maintaining the noble charactersitics of Southeast Asian people.

Conclusion

Asian Economic Community (AEC) that starts in 2015 is a new experience for all Southeast Asian countries and their people. There is absolutely nobody can ensure what kind of implication that each country will have following the implementation of AEC. While integration means more

opportunities and wider area of coverage, it also means more competitive and more challenges. It is all depend on the quality of human resources in each country. Hence, the key education quality.

Islamic education that has long been part of the history of education in the region can give significant contributions to the development of human resources in the region. Islamic schools are challenged to contribute three important factors: Quality education, maintaining Southeast Asian values, and promoting the moderate notion of Islam.

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