Islam resurgence ‘won’t turn RI Muslims into radicals’

Vecramalla Anjaiah
The Jakarta Post/Paris

The resurgence of Islam in Southeast Asia will not turn Indonesian Muslims, the majority of whom are moderate, into radicals, said a renowned Indonesian Islamic scholar at a conference in Paris last week.

"Indonesian Muslims are moderate people and would moderate people in the future," Azyumardi Azra, the president of the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, told the Round Table discussion on the "Islamic Resurgence and Renewal in Southeast Asia" at the European Association for Southeast Asian Studies (EUROSEAS) conference.

Azyumardi who stole the show at the Round Table by saying there is no room for radical Salafi (Wahhabbi) teachings in Indonesia, which has the largest number of Muslims in the world.

"Indonesia’s biggest Mus- lim organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah adhere to moderate Islam and oppose the implementation of the strict form of sharia in the multiethnic and multireligious country," he said.

Azyumardi, who is also an honorary professor at the University of Melbourne in Australia, assured the audience — mainly academicians, intellectuals, scholars and officials from all over the world — that the growing revival of interest in Islam in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia, would not threaten the pillars of moderate Islam.

For the past two decades, Southeast Asia, a region which was home to many of the Asia’s “tiger economies” until the 1997 financial crisis, has experienced an unprecedented resurgence of Islam.

Another relatively marginal aspect of this resurgence — interreligious conflicts and the rise of small but dangerous jihadist movements — has received “disproportionate Western media attention”, he said.

“The main aim of this Round Table is to make an attempt to adopt a more balanced approach and discuss the current movements in Southeast Asian Islam in their full complexity and empha-
sise on the growing religious education.”

Mathias Diederich, an expert on Southeast Asia from the Frankfurt University in Germany, said.

As far as Indonesia is concerned, the resurgence of Islam, according to Azyumardi, has its roots in what it called cultural Islam, in which culture plays a key role in the resurgence of Islam, but it also has political repercussions.

"Though the politicization of Islam began in 1970s, the establishment of the powerful Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals’ Association (ICMI) by former president B.J. Habibie gave new impetus to the resurgence of Islam in Indonesia," he said.

Simultaneously, there was a shift during the Soeharto era: from conflict to a conciliatory approach toward Islam, which changed the entire scenario.

Another important aspect of Islam’s revival was the increase in religious education.

"Since the Sukarno era (1945-1985), we have had a parallel system of education. On one side, national education under the education ministry and on the other, religious schools under the ministry of religious affairs. It’s a balanced system," Azyumardi said.

He thus expressed confidence about moderate Islam’s future in the country.

In the Philippines, the religious schools will not get any support from the government and they do not teach modern subjects.

“But it was not the religious education that led to the resurgence of Islam in the Philippines. It is the decades of injustice and oppression that led to the birth of radical Islam,” Carmen A. Abubakar from the University of the Philippines Diliman said at the meeting. It was co-hosted by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) and the Association Francaise pour la Recherche sur l’Asie du Sud-Est (AFRASE).

Another Indonesian participant, Mujiburrahman from Utrecht University in the Netherlands, said the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims was good.

"The conflicts like in Poso and Maluku are nothing to do with Islam. Because of vested interests, some small groups are painting these conflicts as religious strife," Mujiburrahman told The Jakarta Post.