

GÜLEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO A MODERATE ISLAM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract

This paper aims to demonstrate the relevance of the Gülen movement as a counter to extremist ideology and an encouragement to inter-religious dialogue in the Southeast Asia region. The movement presents a Middle Way Islam, which can accommodate local cultural differences and make a hospitable space for positive relations between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Following an account of Fethullah Gülen's views on extremism and inter-religious dialogue, the paper turns to case studies of Gülen-inspired organisations in Singapore and Indonesia to show how they have applied his ideas to enable inter-religious dialogue and offer an effective alternative to legalistic teaching of Islam. The case studies allow for comparison of the movement's approach to a Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority context. The paper concludes by charting the trajectory of the movement's role and contribution to the development of a Middle Way Islam in Southeast Asia.

The paper is based on a combination of fieldwork with a qualitative approach and documentary research. The fieldwork comprises data gathered through participatory observation in Singapore and interviews with key members of the two organisations and their local partners. The documentary research comprises data from the movement's publications – books, magazines (*Asya Pasifik*), newspaper articles, brochures and online materials.

The emergence of Islam as a political force is a recent development in Southeast Asia. Earlier, the impact of the resurgence of Islam had been felt both in the social and cultural realms, through the mushrooming of Muslim organizations attempting to promote a 'purer' form of Islam in the region. In more recent times, however, the expression of religiosity has been brought about by way of participation in political parties and groups. More shockingly, some of these groups, such as the terror network known as Jemaati Islamiyah, have sought to use violence to achieve their aims. This has had severe ramifications for both intra-Muslim relations and Muslim-non-Muslim relations in the region. In this chaotic socio-political climate, a group has emerged in the region advocating peace, tolerance and understanding between people of different races and religions. This group is known as the Gülen movement, or is commonly referred to as the *hizmet*, in Turkey.¹

This paper will demonstrate how the Gülen movement has addressed the issues facing them and remained relevant by developing a counter-trend through proactive measures to oppose extremist ideology and enhance inter-religious discussion in the Southeast Asian region. Its key thrust is to show that the Gülen movement can reverse the current distorted state of Islam back to its original form. The teachings of Islam which is the teachings of the Middle Way can accommodate the cultural differences in Southeast Asia and enhance inter-religious ties between Muslims and non-Muslims in the region. The paper will first examine Fethullah Gülen's views on extremism and inter-religious dialogue. The paper will then proceed to examine case studies of organizations inspired by Gülen in Singapore and Indonesia and how these organizations utilized his ideas to enhance inter-religious dialogue and provide an alternative to the legalistic discourse on Islam. This section will also attempt to compare and contrast the approach of the organization in a Muslim-majority country (Indonesia) and in a Muslim minority country (Singapore). The paper will conclude by charting a trajectory of the movement's role its potential contributions to the development of moderate Islam in Southeast Asia. It will be argued that these contributions will become an important counter to extremist ideologies and enhance ties amongst Muslims and between members of different faiths in the region.²

Fethullah Gülen and His Movement

Fethullah Gülen is an important Turkish scholar, educationalist and popular preacher, influential not only in Turkey but also in other parts of the world. His reach transcends world borders and cultures. He is well respected by many world leaders including those in Southeast Asia. The former President of Indonesia and a prominent Muslim scholar, Abdurrahman Wahid said "it is a must for us to study from Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen in Turkey who emphasized good moral standard" (PASIAD, 2006, p. 2). His standing as a widely respected religious scholar has inspired many people in Turkey to establish educational institutions. Commonly known as the Gülen movement, the movement is loose in nature. Due to this, it has been difficult for one to assess the real numbers of those involved in the movement. This has led an observer to suggest that, "Gülen has made himself a most likely candidate for

1 *Hizmet* literally means service to humanity in Turkish and is often used by followers of Gülen to describe his movement.

2 The research for this paper combines field and documentary research methods with a qualitative approach. The field research component was based on data gathered through participatory observation (in the case of Singapore) and interviews with key figures of the Gülen-inspired organisations as well as local partners of these organizations. The documentary research component of the paper gathers data from the movement's publications, including books, newspaper articles and online materials.

religious leader of the new Turkey”(Bulent, 1998, p. 27). Hakan Yavuz described the Gülen movement as a web of formal and informal relations that constantly activates its members’ loyalty. These relations are carried out within a set of networks in which commitment to the goals of the movement are maintained through informal living spaces—the lighthouses, the dormitories, the summer camps—and through regular fund-raising activities (Yavuz, 2003, p. 32). Perhaps, more importantly, these networks are gelled together through a common belief in the ideas of Gülen. In the next section of this paper, a discussion of Gülen’s ideas on extremism, tolerance and dialogue will be discussed.

Gülen on Dialogue and Tolerance

Gülen’s emphasis on dialogue is on the basis of his belief that Islam is a religion of peace and dialogue. He advocates an Anatolian-Islam that puts an emphasis on tolerance and Turkish modernity emphasizing that this discourse of Islam is not in contradiction with the modern world (Yilmaz, 2005, p. 397) Gülen had written that the Qur’an strongly urges and also calls for tolerance, forgiveness and humility, which he sees as central Islamic ethical values that are also interrelated. For Gülen, those who close the road of tolerance are beasts who have lost their humanity. It is only through forgiveness and tolerance that wounds could be healed (Gülen, 1999, p. 76). Gülen finds the roots of these themes in the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. He gave the example of the Prophet and Abu Jahl.³ Once in an assembly where Abu Jahl’s son Ikrima was present, the Prophet admonished a companion for insulting Abu Jahl (Ünal & Williams, 2000, p. 196). This is despite the fact that Abu Jahl was strongly opposed to Islam.

For Gülen, dialogue and tolerance must first start amongst Muslims. He exemplified this spirit through his engagements with the Alevi and Kurdish communities in Turkey. Of the Alevis, he noted that the community enriches Turkish culture. He also supported the setting up of Alevi meeting or prayer houses (Ünal & Williams, 2000, p. 70). Gülen’s emphasis for dialogue and tolerance is not limited to Muslims but also extends to include non-Muslims. Gülen wrote about this need by citing a story of the great Sufi scholar Mevlana Jalaleddin Rumi and a Christian priest. According to the story, a priest had visited Rumi and wanted to kiss his hands out of respect but Rumi kissed the hands of the priest first. According to Gülen, therefore, dialogue with adherents of other religious traditions is an integral part of an Islamic ethic that has been neglected for a long time (Gülen, 1999, p. 76).

Gülen once again acted upon his own calling by meeting important Christian leaders such as Pope John Paul and the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew. The visit was an important step in Muslim/Christian relations. Their efforts bore fruit in the form of an interfaith conference organized by an interfaith dialogue organization, the Foundation of Journalists and Writers in Turkey. This conference, called the Abraham Symposium, was held in southeast Turkey in the city of Urfa, believed to be the birthplace of Prophet Abraham (Saritoprak & Griffith, 2005, p. 336). The meeting with the Greek Patriarch also brought about better relations between Greeks and Turks, two communities long known for their enmity. The spirit that Gülen creates amongst Muslims ensures that the true teachings of Islam, which is moderate and characterized by a path of the Middle Way, are emphasized.

Beyond expressing support for peace, tolerance and inter-faith dialogue, Gülen is also vehemently against violence and extremism. Gülen points to misinterpretation of Islamic

3 Abu Jahl or Amr ibn Hishām was one of the chieftains of Makkah during the life of the Prophet. He was known for his cruelty and given the name Abu Jahl or Father of Ignorance for his opposition to the Prophet.

teachings and lack of education as being prime reasons for Muslim extremism and terrorism. He believes that many extremist Muslims read Islamic texts and sources literally and mostly out of context without understanding the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions or the interpretations of prominent Muslim scholars (Albayrak, 2007, p. 140). For Gülen, in true Islam, terrorism does not exist (Ergün, 2004, p. 1). He stated clearly that in Islam no group or individual could declare war. The prerogative of such an action is that of the state (Ergün, 2004, p. 2). To counter the threat of extremism and terrorism, Gülen has proposed enhancing the reach of education and inter-religious dialogue amongst Muslims. To implement this, Gülen called for the establishment of schools, with a comprehensive educational system, that will produce well educated, cultured people who are cognizant of their religious and civic duties (Ergün, 2004, p. 5). Gülen's vision was achieved when many of his students and supporters started schools all over the world extending from Papua New Guinea in the South Pacific to Tanzania in Africa. The success of these schools in encouraging tolerance and inter-faith dialogue are best encapsulated in the observations made by Thomas Michel, the secretary for Inter-Religious Dialogue of the Society of Jesus in Rome. He remarks that the Philippine-Turkish School of Tolerance in Zamboanga, Philippines offers Muslim and Christian Filipino children a positive way of living and relating to each other (Michel, 2003, p. 71). This is especially important in a country bogged down by more than 300 hundred years of conflict between Christians and Muslims. The school also marks an important step in countering terrorism, as the value system taught in the school prevent students, especially from the Muslim community, from being influenced by Muslim terrorist groups in the region.⁴

Gülen's thinking on the issues of tolerance, dialogue and terrorism have enhanced relations among Muslims as well as between Muslims and non-Muslims in many parts of the world. It has also provided a blueprint for the development of a Middle Way Islam, which is none other than the original and traditional teachings of the Prophet. The case studies of the movement in Southeast Asia will reveal that his ideas are not abstract or theoretical in nature but are in fact practical and easy to implement. The examples of the movement in Singapore and Indonesia will attest to this.

The Gülen Movement in Southeast Asia

One cannot be sure of the exact point in time when the movement began to make a presence in the region. Individuals from Turkey who were influenced by Gülen's idea first arrived in the region in the 1980s. However, it was only in 1993 that the first school was started in the region. Today, the movement has started schools in virtually all the Southeast Asian countries. Interestingly, the movement started a school in Cambodia in the late 1990s, when the country was just recovering from political turmoil following the genocide perpetrated by its dictator, Pol Pot, against the Cambodians. Members of the Gülen movement, through the encouragement of peers, made their way to certain cities after first assessing their needs.

Similar to other parts of the world, the movement in SEA adopts the same method of spear-heading and promoting its activities. Businessmen from a particular city in Turkey will concentrate their efforts on a particular Southeast Asian city. For instance, the city of Gaziantep in the South-eastern part of Turkey, partially supports activities of certain cities in SEA, such as Singapore and Manila. Unlike Central Asia, where members of the Gülen community were sent by the movement with the aim of making contact with important companies, bureaucrats

⁴ Conversation with Amina Rasul-Bernardo is the Lead Convenor of the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy. She is a Senior Research Fellow with the Asian Institute of Management Policy Centre.

and personalities, the followers of Gülen who came to Southeast Asia did so mainly due to self-motivation or due to a sense of duty to serve in places that badly needed assistance.⁵ This probably explains why a follower of Gülen from Malaysia subsequently left for Papua New Guinea, a place often linked to cannibalism and a tribal way of life, to set up a school.

An organization that plays an important role in the development of the movement in the region is the Pacific Countries Social and Economic Solidarity Association (PASIAD). PASIAD plays an important linking role. It assists Turkish businessmen and students who are interested to invest or study in a particular Asia-Pacific country by linking them up with the local Gülen movement operating in a particular country. It also plays a 'middle man' role in the disbursement of funds from Turkish businessmen to the respective Gülen movement-school or institution they are supporting.⁶ PASIAD does not however oversee or direct activities of the local movements. Its role is merely a supportive one.

The Turkish Cultural Centre in Singapore

Context and Historical Background

Singapore is small country of four million people. Muslims make up about 14% of the population while the remaining populace are Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and Jews. Most Muslims in Singapore are ethnically Malay. Due to historical and political reasons, the Muslim minority in Singapore is often seen to be a 'problematic' community.⁷ Their increased adherence to Islam and the emergence of a more puritan version of Islam amongst Singaporean Muslims is often viewed with trepidation by the Singaporean government. Since 1990s, several controversies such as the banning of the headscarf in schools, the government's attempt to reform the madrasas in Singapore, and the arrests of several members of the Jemaati Islamiyah terror network, had created tensions between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities.⁸ There was little effort made in formulating any form of inter-religious dialogues among the different religious communities. The ignorance about one another's religion only went on to exacerbate the uneasiness between Muslims and non-Muslims in the country. The emergence of the Gülen movement was timely in easing some of these tensions.

The Gülen movement first found a foothold in Singapore when Mr Sadik Yildiz, a journalist with the Zaman newspaper, first came to the island state in 1997. He was in Singapore as Zaman's representative in Singapore. Similar to other members of the Gülen movement elsewhere in the world, he began to establish relations with members of the Singaporean community. In particular, he made important contacts with members of the ethnic Chinese and Indian communities, who are mostly non-Muslims, as well as with several important politicians including Mr Sidek Saniff, the then Senior Minister of State for Education as well as Mr Harun Ghani, the Senior Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Home Affairs. In addition, he built strong relations with several Singapore based Turkish businessmen including Mr Ismail Cem, owner of a prominent Turkish restaurant (Candemir, 2007). These important links facilitated in the work of the Gülen movement in the country. Yildiz, with

5 Refer to Balci, Bayram. (2003), Fethullah Gülen's Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their Role in the Spreading of Turkism and Islam. *Religion, State & Society*, 31, 2, 151-177 for the Central Asian cases.

6 Conversation with Irfan Tibet, a staff of PASIAD in March 2007 during his visit to Singapore.

7 For more on the problems of Malays in Singapore, see Rahim, Lily Zubaidah. (1998) *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay community*, (Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press).

8 For more on these issues, see Mohamed Osman, Mohamed Nawab. (2004) *Activism of Ulama in Singapore*, (Unpublished Academic Thesis, National University of Singapore).

the assistance of the local Turkish community and Singaporeans, formed the Turkey-Central Asia Cultural Centre on the 3rd of April 1999. Later the centre was renamed as the Turkish Cultural Centre (TCC). Since its formation, the TCC has had three directors, Sadik Yildiz (1999), Halit Yuksel (1999-2001) and Necmettin Eskici (2001-present).

Yildiz also encouraged students from the Gülen inspired schools in Turkey to come to Singapore to further their studies. These students began to enrol in several universities in Singapore by 2001 (Eskici, 2007). These students, including Dr Erkan Polatdemir, were to form an important component of the movement in Singapore. The TCC grew in prominence after the 1999 earthquake, when it coordinated the assistance that Singapore gave to Turkey. Subsequently, it also played a more important cultural role, promoting Turkish culture in Singapore. In August 2001, TCC assisted Junction 8, one of the largest shopping malls in Singapore, to promote the movie, 'Accidental Spy', by bringing Turkish folklore dancers to Singapore. TCC also used the promotion period to start booths selling Turkish handicrafts and products, which led to a huge profit for the TCC. In more recent times, TCC has also assisted students from Turkey and Central Asia, most of who were studying in Gülen inspired schools, to acclimatize to Singapore (Polatdemir, 2007). The support for its activities comes mainly through PASIAD, but in recent times TCC has successfully obtained support from local businessmen and partners to support some of its activities.

Encouraging Tolerance and Dialogue

At the initial stage, TCC under the leadership of Yildiz latched on to the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO) to promote inter-religious dialogue in Singapore. However, due to the internal problems of the IRO, TCC started its own initiatives (Polatdemir, 2007). The flagship event that the TCC organizes annually is the iftar dinner, held during the month of Ramadan. The first such dinner was organized in 1999, when about a hundred people, of whom one-third were non-Muslims, attended. A large number of the Muslim attendees were members of the Turkish community in Singapore. The event served as a platform whereby the community could gather and enhance their relations. Some Singaporean Muslims were also invited. These were often family members or friends of Turks staying in Singapore. Among the non-Muslims, the attendees comprised of members of the IRO including its then chairman Venerable Gunaratna, Christian community leaders, Buddhists and Hindus. The Guest of Honour was Mr Sidek Saniff, the then Senior Minister of State for Education. The iftar dinner was a watershed event given the context of the time when it was organized (Eskici, 2007). Firstly, the Muslim community in Singapore was divided along religious and ideological lines. Several issues, such as the ban on the wearing of headscarf and the perceived attempt by the Singaporean government to ban Islamic religious schools, had given rise to differing opinions amongst Muslims. Secondly, these issues had resulted in tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims in Singapore. Both the Singaporean government and the non-Muslim communities perceived the Muslims as being exclusive and failing to integrate with the larger Singaporean society. Most importantly, the iftar was often seen to be an exclusively Muslim event and most Singaporean Muslims were not comfortable with inviting non-Muslims for it. The smooth running of this annual event thus served as an important milestone in bridging the gap between the communities, which otherwise would have widened. Such an initiative is a replica of the larger Abant platform that the Gülen Movement had initiated and utilized in Turkey. The Journalists and Writers Association, an organization inspired by Gülen in 1998, first initiated the Abant platform.⁹ It was a platform for the discussing issues considered to be

9 For all the declarations for various Abant meeting, see <http://www.gyv.org.tr/bp.asp?caid=174>

sensitive and divisive in Turkey. Ihsan Yilmaz noted that the Abant Platform has shown the Turkish public that it is possible to bring together intellectuals, academics and civil society leaders from all walks of life, discussing and in most cases agreeing on every single sensitive issue in the country (Yilmaz, *Today's Zaman*, 23 March 2007).

TCC's iftar dinner attendance has since grown larger in number and includes more non-Muslims. When the author attended the iftar dinner in 2005 and 2006, the diverse background of the attendees pleasantly surprised him. The Muslims who attended the dinner were from different ideological types- from the puritan Salafi types to the more Sufi-oriented types.¹⁰ Despite their different religious ideology, they sat at the same table and interacted well. Leaders of all the major Muslim organizations were also invited for this function. More interestingly, members of various religious communities were also present. These included members of the Jewish community and various church communities including representative of the City Harvest Church, a church known for its staunchly conservative and evangelical position. The fact that representatives of the Church even came to the function was a matter of amazement for many of the attendees, and is in fact a big achievement for the TCC.¹¹ The programs of these iftar also featured non-Muslim speakers, Brother Michael Broughten from the Catholic community and Mr Hsieh Fu Hua from the Methodist community. The success of these iftar was acknowledged even by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), a government statutory board dealing with affairs of Muslims in Singapore, when they decided to partially sponsor the 2006 iftar dinner (Eskici, 2007).

The next iftar event scheduled to be held on the 25th of Sept 2007 will be another watershed event for TCC. For the first time in its history, the Minister of Muslim Affairs, often seen as the highest office held by a Muslim in the country, Yacoob Ibrahim will be attending the function as the Guest of Honour. The fact that the minister decided to grace the event especially in the month of Ramadan, which is often seen to be one of the busiest months in his schedule is an acknowledgement of the importance of TCC in developing inter-religious dialogue in Singapore. TCC has also invited members of The Rock, an evangelistic Christian movement known for their rejection of inter-religious dialogues for the 2007 iftar.

Perhaps, the most important impact of these iftars is the fact that following the events of Sept 11, other Muslim organizations and several mosques began inviting non-Muslims to their own iftar dinners. This was often seen to be a taboo but learning from the example of the TCC, they began to realize the importance and value of this endeavour. For instance, as a student leader, leading the National University of Singapore Muslim Society, the author himself decided to organize iftar dinners ala TCC and invited non-Muslim students for the function. As such, one could argue that the efforts of the TCC have been significant in creating a new method of inter-religious dialogue. At the same time, many of the attendees, who included prominent religious and community leaders of the Singaporean society, continue to come and even look forward to the iftar. This is a reflection of the importance of the event in enhancing their understanding of the others and of Islam.

Intra and Inter Faith Dialogues

The TCC's inter-faith engagements go beyond these iftar dinners. Imbibing the spirit of Gülen's teachings, they also collaborate with various local partners to organize seminars and

¹⁰ Personal Observation of Author at the TCC *Iftar* Dinner at Hilton Hotel in Oct 2006.

¹¹ The church has been at odds with the Muslim community and other communities for its aggressive proselytizing techniques. For more on this church, see the website of the City Harvest Church at http://www.chc.org.sg/main_landing.htm

talks aimed at creating a better image of Islam. One such event was a seminar on Islam and Modernity jointly organized with the Ba'alwi Mosque in April 2006. The seminar featured several prominent academics including Prof Ibrahim Abu Rabi from the Hartford Seminary, and Assoc Prof Farid al-Attas from the National University of Singapore.¹² The key message of the speakers was that Islam is a religion of the Middle Way, which was against terrorism and extremism. Prof Farid and Prof Abu-Rabi also spoke about the ideas of Fethullah Gülen in countering extremism. The session, attended by many non-Muslim Singaporeans was significant in trying to create a better image of Islam post Sept 11.

Another approach adopted by the TCC to enhance inter-religious ties was to invite Singaporeans to Turkey for a 'cultural immersion' program. These trips are not only important in so far as they contribute to a deepening understanding of Turkey and its culture but also enhance the participant's knowledge of Islam. In December 2006, the TCC facilitated a trip to Turkey organized by the National University of Singapore's Scholars Program.¹³ The students, who were mostly non-Muslims, visited various Islamic historical sites and were hosted by academics from Fatih University in Istanbul. They were also introduced to Turkish Islam and the ideas of Fethullah Gülen. Upon their return to Singapore, a seminar was organized at the Harmony Centre, a centre for inter-faith activities, and they presented their impressions of Turkey. It was obvious that their knowledge of Islam was greatly enhanced and many were clearly moved by their experience. One of the non-Muslim participants mentioned in his presentation that the teachings of Gülen would shape a positive perception of Islam, which will be instrumental in the resurgence of the Muslim World.¹⁴

TCC also organized another trip to Turkey in June 2007 for Christian community leaders in Singapore. Participants were taken to visit several institutions linked to the Gülen movement. They also met and had dinner with supporters of the Gülen movement. During such events, they developed an understanding of the Middle Way Islam that Gülen is advocating and gained an insight into why many people devoted their time and effort for the movement (Yap, 2007). One of the participants, Reverend Yap Khiam Hoe, former Bishop of the Methodist Church in Singapore and Malaysia said that Gülen is indeed a gifted Muslim renewer who will change the world's impression of Islam through his enlightened ideals (Yap, 2007). After the trip, Reverend Yap has become an even stauncher supporter of TCC. He has promoted the ideas of Gülen to his Muslim friends and has requested the author to address members of the Contemporary Centre for Islamic Studies on Gülen's ideas and on the movement.

The efforts of TCC at enhancing intra and inter-religious dialogue is indeed commendable. Besides being a trend setter in inter-religious dialogue, the TCC was also in the forefront organizing various events to improve the understanding of Islam. Its efforts has led to better relations amongst Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims in Singapore. The TCC will soon embark on the next stage of its intra and inter-religious dialogue effort by starting a Turkish school in Singapore. While this seems like an arduous task at this moment due to the Singaporean government educational policies, the positive imprint that TCC has left in the shaping of Singapore's society may lead to the Singaporean government shifting their policy on the Turkish school.

12 The author was present at this seminar.

13 Students who are selected for this program are among the best students in Singapore and often occupy important policy making positions upon their graduation.

14 The author himself was also greatly impressed by the Gülen movement. He had visited some of the institutions linked to the movement during his personal trip to Turkey in Dec 2006.

PASIAID Indonesia

Context and History

Indonesia is the world's largest Islamic country, with 190 to 200 million Muslims out of a total population of around 240 million. Historically, Islam in Indonesia is moderate and is known for its pluralistic nature. Yet, since the fall of the former President Suharto in 1998, a more radical form of the religion has emerged. While the vast majority of Indonesian Muslims are moderate, some are now pushing for an Islamic state to be established, violently if necessary. Religious conflict between Muslims and Christians in some parts of Indonesia has led to thousands of lives lost. The proliferation of Islamic groups and political parties in the country also means that Muslims are increasingly divided along the lines of religious ideology.¹⁵ In these difficult times, the Gülen movement in Indonesia remains one of the few moderate Islamic voices advocating for both intra and inter Muslim tolerance and dialogue.

The Gülen movement arrived in Indonesia in 1993 when three students from Turkey came to study in the country.¹⁶ This decision is indeed a strange one given that none of these students could speak Indonesian or even knew anyone in the country. They first approached a contact of an Indonesian friend (who studied in Turkey). This person, Haji Alwi was initially rather surprised to see the Turkish boys, but nevertheless assisted them to obtain places in various universities in Indonesia. Islamoglu secured a place at the University of Indonesia in the Department of Indonesian Literature. In 1994, after about a year of studying in the university, Islamoglu informed Haji Alwi about the Gülen movement and expressed his desire to start a school in Indonesia (Islamoglu, 2007). Haji Alwi introduced him to the Governor of Indonesia state Bank, Burhanuddin Abdullah who assisted Islamoglu in setting up the first school in Indonesia, the Pribadi High School in Depok. Another person who was instrumental in the setting up of the school was Dr Aip Syarifuddin, an Indonesian politician (Islamoglu, 2007). To ensure that the administration of the school was managed professionally, Islamoglu and his friends tied up with several Indonesians, including Dr Syarifuddin and a Mr Firman Kartiman, to start the Yenbu Indonesian Foundation (Islamoglu, 2007). In 1997, another organization, PASIAID Indonesia, was formed to facilitate in the administration of the school.

In 1996, Islamoglu decided to transfer his studies to the Gadjah Mada University in Semarang, a city located in the centre of the island of Java. Islamoglu quickly became close to the Dean of the University, Prof Siti Chamamah Soeratno and invited her to visit the school in Jakarta. Upon seeing the quality of its education, Prof Soeratno was impressed and was inspired to start a similar school in Semarang. This led to the setting up of the Al-Firdaus Semarang Foundation, which then worked closely with PASIAID Indonesia to start the SMP-SMA Semesta Boarding School (PASIAID, 2006, p. 18). In 2002, a school was built in Bandung. Another school was also built following the tsunami of 2005 in Aceh. The most recent school that was built is the Kharisma National School. This school was built with the support of a rich and prominent Indonesian family (Altun, 2007).

Besides educational activities, PASIAID Indonesia also played an important role promoting cultural ties between Turkey and Indonesia. Since 2001, it has published several books with local partners promoting the Turkish language. This includes the publication of a Turkish-Indonesian dictionary in 2006 (PASIAID, 2006, p. 62). They have also played an important

¹⁵ For a better sense of Indonesian politics and history, see Ricklefs, Merle, (2001), *History of Indonesia since 1200c* (Hampshire, Palgrave).

¹⁶ One of these students is Hakan Islamoğlu who is still in Indonesia till today. Kerim Tursun and Galip Kayar are the two other students.

charity role. Since 1998, PASIAD Indonesia has organized the donation of frozen meat from the Turkish community in Australia to poor Indonesians during the festival of Eid-ul-Adha. During the tsunami crisis that hit the province of Aceh, PASIAD Indonesia coordinated relief work in the region, which included rebuilding schools and houses, assisting in health care and providing food for the victims (PASIAD, 2006, pp. 50-51). In the cultural realm, PASIAD was also involved in organizing a Turkish film festival and being involved in several international cultural festivals (PASIAD, 2006, p. 60-61).

Building Tolerance Through Education

As highlighted earlier, Gülen believed that it is through education that extremism will be curbed and tolerance promoted. It was this philosophy that motivated his followers in Indonesia to build schools in the country. Islamoglu noted that intolerance occurs between the different religious groups in Indonesia due to the lack of education. He cited an incident when he was asked by a Christian priest whether the Islamic criminal laws are applied in Turkey. This is despite the fact that Turkey is one of the most secular Muslim countries in the world (Islamoglu, 2007).

At its initial stage, there were only fifteen students in the school, many of whom being from a rural and poor background. Today, the number of students has increased to about two thousand and many are from a more privileged background.¹⁷ This does not mean that the schools are elitist in any way. The higher fees charge to these more privileged students are partly used to provide scholarships to students from poorer background to study in these schools (PASIAD, 2006, p. 20). The diverse backgrounds of the students allow interaction between students, who often would not meet, due to the segmented nature of different class groups in Indonesia. This allows the richer student to understand better the challenges faced by a fellow student from a less privileged background. At the same time, about 10% of the student population is not Muslim. PASIAD Indonesia also does not discriminate in the allocation of scholarships, and about 20% of the non-Muslim students receive scholarships from PASIAD Indonesia.¹⁸ The presence of non-Muslim students allows for interaction and building of trust and tolerance between Muslims and non-Muslims, in an otherwise stratified society where there is little interaction between the two communities. The universal values taught to the students meant that they tend to look beyond ethnic or religious cleavages in dealing with others. At another level, these schools serve as an excellent cultural bridge between Turkey and Indonesia. The students are exposed to aspects of Turkish culture such as its food and language. Due to this exposure, they have become an important ambassador for Turkey in Indonesia

For many parents, the attraction of these schools lies in their high standard of education, which has produced students who have won international physics and mathematics competitions (Republica, July 2006). More importantly, many parents are aware that the teachers of these schools are good role models for their children and that the schools give the students a good education, without inducing any ideological leanings. Moreover, tolerance and an appreciation for what others do are also values advocated in these schools. In an interview with

¹⁷ The changing profile of these students are due to high fees that the schools charges. Parents pay an average of about US\$100 per month in the school. See Radio Singapore International, Turkish Delight, 3 July 2007. Accessed from www.rsi.org.sg on 4th July 2007.

¹⁸ About 13% of Indonesia's population is non-Muslims. Generally, the non-Muslims are stronger economically, which explains the relatively lower number of non-Muslim students receiving scholarships from PASIAD Indonesia.

an alumnus of the school, he echoed Gülen's vision of peace and tolerance when he said that Muslims should cease to have an us against them mindset. There must be a shift in their paradigm to start thinking of everyone as fellow human beings, rather than by their religious affiliations (Riaz, 2007). Mahmud Riaz is an example of the kind of educated, cultured Muslim described by Gülen who will never resort to terrorism or turn to extremism to pursue his aim. The Indonesia government has acknowledged the importance of these schools in countering extremist ideologies. A government leader the author spoke to indicated that the Department of National Education and local governments want more such schools built in Indonesia.¹⁹ This is because they recognize the Islam that Gülen advocates is an important anti-dote to the extremism promoted by radical groups in Indonesia. Interestingly about 70% of the school's alumni, including many non-Muslim students have volunteered to teach in the schools despite their often prestigious educational backgrounds, which could allow them to obtain more lucrative jobs (Altun, 2007). This development would mean that more schools could be built in future as the movement receives more staff support from amongst its alumni.

Intra and Inter Religious Dialogue

Understanding the factional nature of Indonesian Islam and politics, PASIAD Indonesia has sought to maintain good relations with all Muslim groups and political parties in the country. PASIAD Indonesia had paid courtesy visits to the President, Vice-President, various cabinet ministers as well as major Muslim organizations and political parties such as Muhammadiyah, Nahdatul Ulama, The Justice and Prosperous Party (PKS) and Golkar (PASIAD, 2006, pp. 69-82). It is also interesting to note that despite the constant changes in the leadership of Indonesia, PASIAD Indonesia was able to maintain warm ties with all the different leaders of the country. Building intra-Muslim dialogue remains an important focus for PASIAD Indonesia due to the fact that the country is overwhelmingly Muslim.

PASIAD Indonesia does this by initiating various programs such as iftar dinners and Halalbihalal functions. Halalbihalal is a unique Indonesian Muslim cultural practice where Muslims will seek forgiveness from one another for mistakes committed against one another for the year. This often occurs at the end of the fasting month. PASIAD Indonesia adopted this practice and has been organizing Halalbihalal function annually. Staff members of the different PASIAD Indonesia's schools as well as local partners of PASIAD are invited for the function. Interestingly, PASIAD also invites various Islamic community leaders, despite their religious and political ideological differences.

The iftar dinner is another annual event organized by PASIAD Indonesia. Similar to Singapore, iftar functions in Indonesia are overwhelmingly Muslim events. The invited guests include prominent politicians and Muslim community leaders. The event is often graced by the presence of an Indonesian cabinet minister or and was attended by the Vice-President of Indonesia, Yusuf Kalla. Similar to the Halalbihalal function, one could find politicians from secular political parties such Golkar as well as those from more religious parties such as the PKS coming for the iftar. Their religious orientation were also diverse ranging from the more Sufi types to the more puritan types. Non-Muslims were often not invited for these iftar functions. Breaking these norms, PASIAD invites non-Muslim community leaders such as leaders of various churches, Buddhist and Hindu temples to these events so as to bring about inter-religious harmony between the different religious communities (Islamoglu, 2007). For many of these non-Muslim leaders, it is the first time in their lives that they attended such a function and is important in enhancing their understanding of Islam.

¹⁹ Conversation with a government leader who do not want to be named.

In another effort to increase both intra and inter religious tolerance, PASIAD Indonesia organized overseas trip to Turkey. Once again the leaders of different Muslim organizations are invited to enhance their relations with one another during the trip. Several non-Muslim leaders also accompany the delegation to Turkey (PASIAD, 2006, p. 88-89). In these trips, delegates are taken to various historical sites and are also taken to meet supporters of the Gülen movement to allow them to gain insight into the movement in Turkey. Such trips are important in cementing ties between these community leaders and PASIAD Indonesia.

Perhaps the most important trip organized by PASIAD Indonesia is a trip to Moscow to attend an International Symposium titled “From Terrorism to Global Ethics: Religions and Peace” (PASIAD, 2006, p. 90). The trip saw two Indonesian leaders known for their political differences, Dr Din Syamsudin from Muhammadiyah and Dr Hidayat Nur Wahid from PKS coming together for an inter-religious event.²⁰ The fact that a leader of an Islamic party, PKS known for its conservative Islamic leanings, such as the imposition of Islamic criminal laws, decided to attend an inter-religious is remarkable. Several leaders of the Hindu, Christian and Confucian communities also attended the event. The participants of the event were exposed to the importance of inter-faith dialogue in a climate where terrorism and extremism could weaken ties between faith communities. (Altun, 2007). The dialogue efforts of PASIAD Indonesia have been crucial in enhancing ties amongst Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims. This is especially so at the elite level of the Indonesian society. Such efforts have become essential, especially given the threat of religious strife and extremism that Indonesia faces.

Conclusion

The Muslim World is today in a transition phase. This could be clearly seen from the intolerant and extreme acts of some Muslims. Historically, all major civilizations have undergone this phase where members of these civilizations are insular and weak. Yet, in the midst of these uncertainties, the ideas of Fethullah Gülen emerge to reverse the thinking and attitudes of Muslims. The Gülen movement is a trendsetter movement that has sought to create intra and inter-religious understanding and improve the education standards in the World. As Gülen had highlighted time and again, improving educational standards in the Muslim World is likely to change the mindset and thinking of Muslims leading them to have a more enlightened approach in dealing with their coreligionist and non-Muslims. This development will be especially important where Muslims are in the minority such as in Singapore and Europe. In Europe the misconceptions and prejudices held by Muslims and non-Muslims towards each other are leading to worsening relations. Yet, if Gülen’s ideas are imbibed and practiced by the Muslims, such misconception and prejudices will slowly be eradicated.

The case studies of the Gülen movement in Indonesia and Singapore is reflective of how a small group of Gülen followers have successfully impacted the society they are living in. It is also reflective of the important impact Gülen’s ideas have had for people around the world. Acting upon his vision of tolerance and dialogue, his followers in both countries began promoting this vision by encouraging dialogues amongst Muslims and between Muslim and non-Muslims. In the case of Singapore, such dialogues were especially encouraged between Muslims and non-Muslims given that Muslims are in a minority in the country. The efforts of the TCC proved significant, as they were able to change the perceptions of Islam and even

20 For more on the rivalry between Muhammadiyah and PKS see) Azra, Azyumardi. (1999) Partai Islam Tidak Prospektif, in: Hamid Basyaib & Hamid Abidin (Eds) Mengapa Partai Islam Kalah? (Jakarta, Alfabeta).

gained supporters amongst the non-Muslims for their cause. In Indonesia, PASIAD Indonesia focused on the development of relations amongst Muslims due to the overwhelming number of Muslims in the country. In the process they were not only able to lessen tensions among Muslims but also enhanced ties between the Muslims and non-Muslims through the Turkish schools and their inter-religious activities. The schools in Indonesia are likely to chart a new course for Islam in Indonesia, which is moderate and tolerant. The precedence given to universal values in these schools, inherent in all religions, are important in shaping the educated, cultured Muslim who is tolerant and progressive, as Gülen had envisaged. The common values that the Gülen movement emphasizes on are likely to also reverse the shape of Islam in Southeast Asia, which is tolerant and accommodating to other religions. Beyond the Southeast Asian region, the ideas of Gülen on inter-religious dialogue is likely to change the shape of Muslim-non-Muslim relations in places like Europe where misconception and prejudice on both sides have led to conflict between the two groups.