

## ASIEN AKTUELL

### Debates on the Danish Cartoon Affair in Islamic Southeast Asia

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#### 1 Introduction

When the journalists of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published twelve caricatures of the Prophet Muhammed in September 2005, they probably did not anticipate the global dimensions of the subsequent controversy. According to the specialized web-page [www.cartoonbodycount.com](http://www.cartoonbodycount.com), until April 2006 alone, 139 people were killed and 823 injured worldwide in demonstrations and violent acts related to the Danish cartoon affair.<sup>2</sup> Danish exports were hurt considerably, and Danish tourists are facing difficulties when travelling to a number of Islamic countries. These circumstances also pose a major problem for the Danish foreign policy that has to try to repair the international damage caused by the affair. Interfaith relations in general have become more difficult, and followers of Samuel Huntington's well-known hypothesis of a 'clash of civilizations' feel themselves once again justified.

This complex and critical situation requires analytical approaches from a number of academic disciplines. In the following, I would like to give an account of the public debates on the Danish cartoon affair in Islamic Southeast Asia. From the estimated ca. 220 million Muslims in this area, 200 million live in Indonesia on which lays therefore the main focus of my analysis.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cartoonbodycount.com/>, April 12, 2006.

## 2 The Danish cartoons in Southeast Asian media and politics

After the initial appearance of the twelve caricatures of the Prophet Muhammed in *Jyllands-Posten* on September 30, 2005, a number of other newspapers reprinted some of the cartoons. In Indonesia, the tabloids *Gloria* and *Peta* reprinted several cartoons in February 2006. Immediately, protests from Muslim groups emerged. In the case of the tabloid *Gloria* which appears in Surabaya, East-Java, the local leaders of the rather militant *Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia* (MMI) and the youth organization of the otherwise rather moderate modernist *Muhammadiyah* organization held a joint press conference where they uttered threats towards the tabloid *Gloria*. As a consequence, the editors of *Gloria* apologized and withdrew the entire printed edition from circulation.<sup>3</sup> The publishers and the editor-in-chief of *Peta* were indicted at court.<sup>4</sup>

In Malaysia, the initial reaction of several media was also to republish at least some of the Danish cartoons. The English-language newspaper *Sarawak Tribune* reprinted all twelve cartoons on February 4. As a consequence of the subsequent protests, the responsible junior editor had to resign.<sup>5</sup> The Malaysian Chinese-language daily *Guang Ming* that had also reprinted several cartoons, was suspended for two weeks.<sup>6</sup> A caricature on the affair in the Malaysian English-language newspaper *New Straits Times* immediately triggered angry reactions from the government.<sup>7</sup> According to statements of several Malaysian ministers, the issue of the Danish cartoons was considered so provocative that a republication of the cartoons was seen as endangering public security in Malaysia.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the main opposition party in Malaysia, the Islamic *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS), organized anti-Danish protest demonstrations in Kuala Lumpur that immediately received the attention of international media.<sup>9</sup> Apart from uttering purely religious outrage, it seems, the opposition party PAS attempted to instrumentalize the issue politically in order to gain support from the public. Since the ideological line of PAS is not acceptable to the non-Muslim parties in the government, notably the parties of the ethnic Chinese and Indians, the government policy of calming the issue by limiting press freedom was probably supported even by many non-Muslims. One of the probably unintended consequences of the initial provocation by *Jyllands-Posten* was thus an aggravation of the domestic political situation in Malaysia. Due to the fierce protests and the subse-

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.detiknews.com/index.php/detik.read/tahun/2006/bulan/02/tgl/09/time/164907/idnews/535964/idkanal/10>, April 12, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.detiknews.com/index.php/detik.read/tahun/2006/bulan/02/tgl/09/time/205719/idnews/536159/idkanal/10>, April 12, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.muslimscholar.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=2](http://www.muslimscholar.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=2), April 12, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> <http://bernama.com.my/bernama/v3/bm/news.php?id=181866>, April 12, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> <http://bernama.com.my/bernama/v3/bm/news.php?id=181866>, April 12, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.parti-pas.org/>, April 12, 2006.

quent limitations of public discourse on the issue, the Danish cartoon affair has also reached a rather uniform framing in Malaysian public discourse, namely mainly using the keywords "*Hina Nabi*" ('Insulting the Prophet').

In contrast to this rather univocal public debate in Malaysia, it seems that in Indonesia, the situation was much less standardized in terms of keywords, perceptions, and political and cultural analysis. Smaller Muslim youth organizations in Indonesia such as *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI) organized protest demonstrations, attracting much international media attention, for instance, a rally at the Royal Danish Embassy in Jakarta in February 2006. However, since the Indonesian government coalition includes a number of Islamic parties and prominent Islamic politicians, their protest against the cartoons was not so fiercely instrumentalized in terms of opposition party politics. In political statements, the President of Indonesia, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and many other high-ranking officials condemned the cartoons as well as the violent acts, attempting to calm the situation.

### 3 Perspectives from traditionalist Islam

One of the features of the Danish cartoons was that they employed the stylistic means of humour in their provocative mocking. As this affair has proven, this kind of Danish humour<sup>10</sup> was not received well in many other parts of the world, most notably the Islamic world. Most protests stated that the Danish cartoons had overstepped cultural taboos in the supposedly humorous critique of religious values. With regard to these Islamic reactions to the provocation in *Jyllands-Posten* one possible Western view could be that Islam in general does not tolerate humour. This is of course nonsense. Humour is a general human emotion that occurs in every culture in history. The history of Islam is full of humour. According to tradition, even the Prophet himself was laughing. However, as Amman (1993) has pointed out, the question lies in whether or not one is entitled to make jokes, and specifically, what kinds of jokes and about which topic. There is a long tradition of theological debates in Islam about this issue. Apparently, apart from pure theological aspects, culturally-specific values also play a role. A further analysis of the reactions in the so-called Islamic world on the Danish cartoon affair should therefore take into account the various humour cultures in the different countries and historical periods and their respective enculturations of Islam.

Indonesia, with more than 350 ethnicities, has an immensely rich and complex spectre of traditions of humour. In the context of the Indonesian Islamic reactions to the Danish cartoons, it is particularly interesting that the American anthropologist

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James Peacock (1978) distinguishes two main variants of Indonesian Islam according to their attitudes towards humour. According to Peacock, the more rural, traditionalist currents within Indonesian Islam generally have a much higher tolerance for humour than the city-based modernists and reformists whom he calls Puritan Muslims.<sup>11</sup> If we apply this general scheme to the debates on the Danish cartoon affair in Indonesia and Malaysia, then it is amazing to see that many protesters could be grouped into the category of the more Puritan, modernist, reformist Islam. The mentioned protests in the city of Surabaya were, for instance, organized by two modernist urban groups, namely the local youth group of the large modernist and reformist *Muhammadiyah* movement and the rather puritan-militant *Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia* (MMI).

This makes it interesting to look closer at the statements issued by the representatives of the more traditionalist, rural-based Islam in Southeast Asia on the cartoon affair. In Indonesia, this current is mostly associated with the big movement *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU). It is estimated that it has between 30 and 40 million followers, making it one of the largest Muslim organizations in the world.

The first intellectual contributions that I would like to refer to are from the official web-page<sup>12</sup> of Abdurrahman Wahid who is also called Gus Dur. He is one of the most influential spiritual leaders of the *Nahdlatul Ulama* movement. In the difficult years of 1999 to 2001, he also served as President of Indonesia, heading at that time the fourth-most populous nation in the world. Apart from this, his sense of humour is famous beyond the cultural boundaries of Indonesia or the Islamic community in Southeast Asia.<sup>13</sup> The representation of the Danish cartoon affair on his web-page has clearly great significance far beyond intellectual circles.

On the official web-site of Gus Dur, the first article that the search for the keyword "Denmark" yields is a transliterated interview that he gave *Radio Nederland* on February 10, 2006.<sup>14</sup> In this interview, Abdurrahman Wahid emphasizes that the affair should not be taken too seriously. In the introductory sequence he states that neither the Danish people nor the Danish government can be blamed for the affair. He states that the American government, the Pope, and the European Union have all declared their regrets. Further, he points out that it is not true that the publication of the cartoons made the entire Islamic community (*ummah*) angry. He states literally:

From the 900 million Muslims worldwide, there were three million who felt insulted.  
The rest was not.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. also A. Graf (2006) for more aspects on the general relations between Islam and humour in the Malay World.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.gusdur.net/>.

<sup>13</sup> For an account of the use of humour in his time as President of Indonesia, cf. A. Graf (2003). For examples of his humorous stories, cf. A. Graf and J. Pangestian-Harahap, eds. (2005).

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.gusdur.net/indonesia/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2434&Itemid=0](http://www.gusdur.net/indonesia/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2434&Itemid=0), April 12, 2006.

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(Dari 900 juta kaum muslimin di seluruh dunia, *nggak* ada tiga juta yang tersinggung kok. Yang lain *nggak*.)<sup>15</sup>

Further, he stresses that he only understands peaceful protests of people who feel insulted. Violent acts have to be suspected as being orchestrated. He sees the reasons for the emotional uproar in Indonesia as a general lack of education. With this lack of education he also explains the existence of fundamentalists who do not value democracy and the rule of law.

In fact, this particular explanation of Islamic fundamentalism as lack of education is not new in the thoughts of Abdurrahman Wahid. In June 2003, at the occasion of the visit of the Ambassador of Denmark at the headquarters of the *Nahdlatul Ulama* movement in Jakarta, Gus Dur expressed very similar ideas.<sup>16</sup> According to the report on Gus Dur's web-site, during this visit he also stated that the majority of Muslims in Indonesia are no threat to anybody "because they hate violence since the essence of Islam is peace, not violence". According to him, people who commit violent acts just happen to be Muslim by incidence (*kebetulan*). Few in numbers, they erroneously think that they are fighting for their religion. He states:

In general, they still have a superficial and only partial understanding of their religion so that it is easy to provoke them to commit acts that are destructive for other people and also for themselves.

(Mereka pada umumnya masih dangkal dan secara parsial memahami keagamaannya, sehingga mudah terprovokasi untuk melakukan tindak destruktif yang merugikan orang lain dan mereka sendiri, ujarnya.)<sup>17</sup>

As an example, Gus Dur quotes the erroneous interpretation of the Qu'ranic term *kuffar* (non-believer) as a legitimization to be harsh to non-believers of Islam, such as Christians, Catholics, Hindus, Buddhists, or Jews. In fact, the Qu'ranic term *kuffar* originally referred to people in Mekkah (Mecca) who did not believe in Islam and who had no civilisation. It is further stated that it is important to educate especially the common people so that they cannot be misled by selfish elites who exploit the ignorance of the people. According to this article on Gus Dur's official web-page, his declared aim is therefore to build a strong civil society based on a high spiritual and intellectual education. This article from 2003 ends with a short report about the reaction of the Danish Ambassador to Indonesia, Geert Aagaard Andersen, to these statements of Abdurrahman Wahid. The ambassador reportedly replied that the Danish government is willing to support the Indonesian people in the way outlined by Gus Dur, for instance by supporting Indonesian NGOs who train and educate local leaders.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.gusdur.net/indonesia/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=604&Itemid=0](http://www.gusdur.net/indonesia/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=604&Itemid=0), April 18, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

This article from 2003 clearly gives a very favourable image of friendly Danish diplomacy and very good Indonesian-Danish relations. It is perhaps remarkable that this article continues to be available online on the official web-page of Abdurrahman Wahid during and after the Danish cartoon affair. This article, together with the quoted interview in *Radio Nederland*, establishes the impression of Gus Dur as one of the major Muslim authorities in the world's most populous Muslim-majority country who has a very consistent and differentiated take on the affair.

It is true that neither Gus Dur nor any other cleric can speak for the entire movement of *Nahlatul Ulama* with its 30 to 40 million followers. The Indonesian version of Sunni Islam does not have a central institution like the Catholic papacy that is claiming absolute obedience of its followers in matters of faith. In this perspective, other schools of thought can of course challenge the theological interpretations of Gus Dur and his followers. It should be highlighted, however, that in Indonesia, Gus Dur is still a very important religious, intellectual, and political Islamic leader with probably millions of followers. His position on the Danish cartoon affair marks therefore one important pole in the spectre of debates and interpretations.

The liberal approach of Gus Dur is in line, for instance, also with most of the contributions on the official web-page of another high-ranking Islamic cleric from the NU, namely A. Mustofa Bisri.<sup>18</sup> He is called Gus Mus, combining the East Javanese honorific title for a high Islamic cleric, "Gus", with the shortform "Mus" derived from "Mustofa".<sup>19</sup> Gus Mus is the head of a traditional family-owned Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) in East Java. He conveys his religious convictions not only with sermons, articles and teachings, but also with poems and oil paintings. One of his well-known oil paintings is, for instance "Committing sins with Inul" (*Berdzikir bersama Inul*). It was even exhibited in several mosques as his contribution to the heated debate on sexuality in *dangdut* songs (2003).<sup>20</sup> This painting depicts ironically the range of reactions of his colleagues in the Islamic clergy to the beautiful popular singer Inul who is usually dressed very lightly and who is moving in a special drilling way and has therefore for some become the object of controversy. Other activities of Gus Mus include the publication of volumes with humorous stories with Islamic settings and messages, often with a mystical theological background in Sufism.<sup>21</sup>

The official web-page of Gus Mus also features a number of his poems and sermon-like articles that address the issue of the Danish cartoon affair. One persistent trait in these writings is that he warns against a generalized perception of an "evil West". He points out that many Danes were protesting against *Jyllands-Posten*. Similarly, he warns against a general anti-Jewish or anti-American attitude, arguing that there are

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<sup>18</sup> [www.gusmus.net](http://www.gusmus.net).

<sup>19</sup> Sometimes also spelled "Mustofa".

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.tokohindonesia.com/ensiklopedi/a/achmad-mustofa-bisri/index.shtml>, June 26, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. for instance Mustofa Bisri (2003).

many Israelis outside the government who acknowledge the sufferings of the Palestinians and who would want to make peace with them. Addressing Islamic fundamentalist positions in general, he warns of a self-aggrandizing attitude that assumes that narrow-minded human beings can decipher the all-encompassing divine will.

If we look at these contributions from both Gus Dur and Gus Mus in the light of the mentioned hypothesis of James Peacock, then it is indeed true that these more traditionalist representatives of Southeast Asian Islam show a much higher tolerance for the mistaken "humour" of the cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten*. In comparison, the much more rigid condemnations and protests in Islamic Southeast Asia can be associated with the modernist, reformist, or even, "Puritan" movements.

#### 4 Intellectual analysis: Annuri Furqon

In the Danish cartoon affair, Gus Mus opened his official web-page to a variety of intellectual analyses of the situation, probably in order to provide a deeper reflection of the ongoing crisis. One of these contributions, by Annuri Furqon, is entitled "The fury of the Muslim *ummah*: what are the reasons?" ('Kemarahan Umat Islam, Apa Sebabnya?').<sup>22</sup> The author, a graduate of Middle Eastern Affairs from the University of Indonesia, is affiliated with the Institute for the Study of Islam and Culture (*Lapis Budaya*) in Jakarta. Annuri Furqon begins his article with a reference to the taboo of visualizing God or his prophet. He acknowledges the fact that many Muslims felt insulted by the violation of that taboo by *Jyllands-Posten*. However, he also asks for the special reasons for the tremendous worldwide outbreak of protest and even violence, comparing the harsh Islamic reaction in the Danish cartoon affair with the much milder reaction of the worldwide Catholic community to the violation of one of their taboos in the novel *The Da Vinci Code*.

Annuri Furqon argues that the much harsher reaction of the Muslim community has to be seen in their perception of being constantly the victims of the West, in a historical line that is drawn from the decline of the Ottoman Empire to the defeat of the Arabs in the conflict with Israel. He states that Denmark is only a small country in Scandinavia, but, in this perspective, it has become identified with the West in general. This evil West is also equalled with Europe that defeated the Ottoman Empire, the so-called "sick man of Europe" in the First World War I.

This historical defeat of Ottoman Turkey has been handed down from generation to generation not only as a collective memory, but as a description of one's own position in the world, namely of that of a defeated civilisation. In this long-drawn process of the construction of a collective identity, Annuri Furqon ascribes a special role to the modernist and revivalist currents within the Islamic communities. As an example, he refers to modernist Islamic newspapers from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where this construction of a self-image as defeated community can already

<sup>22</sup> Published on February 16, 2006.

be observed. The main theme in these newspapers is that the defeat of the Ottoman Empire destroyed the self-esteem of the Muslim community. In order to reestablish this self-esteem, modernists have given themselves a central role for the development of their cultures. In this tradition, Denmark only became the scapegoat of a long-established discourse on the Islamic self versus the imperialist others.

Annuri Furqon explains the harshness of the reactions in the Islamic world to the Danish cartoon affair with the current situation where many in the Islamic world feel concerned that they are constantly being associated with terrorism in the wake of America's war against Osama bin Laden. According to him, even some of the violent demonstrations were carried out in mistaken anger about this perceived constant and false association of Islam with violence. For Annuri Furqon, these anarchist acts demonstrate the despair of the Muslim community about their experiences of living in backwater, retarded and underdeveloped situations.

In sum, Annuri Furqon argues that the anger of the Muslim societies has to be seen in the psychological context of defeated people who once got the chance to strike back, which enabled them to get rid of this feeling of defeat. This feeling of defeat has to be also seen in accordance to the long-lasting reference to the golden era of Muslim civilizations in the Middle Ages where Islam was influential from Southern Europe to India. The disrespectful Danish cartoons of the Prophet only triggered such anger because of the collective trauma of being part of a civilisation that is in constant decline since the Middle Ages.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper demonstrates in an exemplary way some important reactions to the Danish cartoon affair in Islamic Southeast Asia. The first and most immediate level of reactions consists of feelings of being insulted in the core part of one's religion. Rising anger led to a number of demonstrations and boycott actions against the responsible newspapers, Danish companies and tourists, and the Danish government. In order to calm this anger, a number of politicians called for restrictions for those newspapers in Southeast Asia who had reprinted some of the Danish cartoons.

A second level of reactions comes from high-ranking clerics who publicly condemned acts of violence and anarchy on behalf of anti-cartoon protesters. In this condemnation, however, there seem to be differences between more urban, modernist, "Puritan Muslims" on the one hand and more traditional, rural-based Muslims on the other hand. This difference is in line with the different sense of humour of these two large parts of Indonesian Islam identified by James Peacock. In the Danish cartoon affair, the more "traditional", rural-based clerics seemed to have reacted much less harshly than their urban colleagues. Some of these clerics from the traditionalist NU movement, such as Gus Dur or Gus Mus, continued to speak out in favour of continuing friendly relations with Denmark and the West. For them, the

affair showed that one of the major problems is the lack of education and wise leadership in the Muslim community.

A third, more intellectual reaction to the Danish cartoon affair is to relate the harsh reactions to the discursive self-perception of the reformist and urban parts of the Islamic world as being losers on a long-established historical scale. The psychological condition described by Annuri Furqon is that of somebody who is already defeated and on the ground and who is now even getting mocked, ridiculed and insulted. Slashing out to the mean insulter even intensifies the general negative perception of oneself. Annuri Furqon describes this binary kind of discursive construction of the Muslim *ummah* as the Self and its Other, the West, as typical for modernist movements in the Islamic world.

From two sides, thus, there seems to be an indication that the reactions to the Danish cartoon affair in Islamic Southeast Asia reflect at least two possibly intertwined aspects:

- a) different cultures of humour in the more traditionalist and the more modernist currents of Islam
- b) different constructions of the Self and the Other (*ummah* versus the West) in the more traditionalist and the more modernist currents of Islam

In the further analysis of these and related aspects, one should also not forget that the patterns of consumption of modern media might also be different between these two main currents.

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