

Amina Rasul: Radicalisation of Muslims in the Philippines

The radicalisation of Muslims in southeast Asia is the response to a whole series of Western influences stretching from colonialisation in the past to globalisation today. It was and still is the West's dominance that has caused Muslims worldwide to feel weak. This sense of weakness is reflected in Islamism, i.e. the frustration over the failure of modernisation in the Arab countries and the fact that people there are forced to remain on the margins of an unattainable world of commerce, a frustration which finds its expression in religion. The country that symbolises this world is America and, thus, anti-Americanism is the key emotional element of the religious revolt.

But who are the radicals? Radicals or extremist groups in the southeast Asian region are not necessarily terrorists. Their representatives are emotionally, culturally and intellectually attached to the Arab countries which they consider the source of inspiration for all Muslims. The West, on the other hand, is regarded as the source of everything that is evil, un-Islamic, and hostile to Islam.

In the Philippines, the radical temper of many Muslims has by now led to insurgencies and terrorist acts. This kind of rebellion, which has its roots in past anti-Spanish and anti-American movements, is as much a reform movement as it is the expression of the Muslims' desire to overcome their marginal political and economic position. Today's radical movements are the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) led by Nur Misuari, whose objective is to establish a Bangsamoro Republic of Mindanao, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a spin-off of the MNLF, founded by Hashim Salamat, which aims at establishing its own Islamic state on Mindanao, and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) founded by Abdurajak Janjalani in 1989, which cultivates an extreme interpretation of Islam and is regarded as a terrorist group even by the country's Muslims.

But what are the causes of this internal conflict? In the southern Philippines, the Muslims' grudge against the central government certainly is a factor. In the country as a whole, however, a number of factors led to the radicalisation of the Muslim population. First of all, there is the frustration over the unresolved Bangsamoro problem which continues because of the unjust treatment of the Moros although the government and the MNLF signed a peace agreement in 1996. Another reason is the discrimination against Muslims and the constant preference of Christians, which might encourage radicalisation even further. According to a survey carried out in 2006, one in three Filipinos has a negative opinion of Muslims. Another survey revealed even more alarming results. A UN study shows that 55 percent of Filipinos think that Muslims are prone to 'run amok', that 47 percent think Muslims are terrorists or extremists, that 44 percent believe that Muslims harbour hatred toward non-Muslims, and that most Christians do not even want to live next door to Muslims. A third reason is the circumstance that Philippine Muslims are themselves subject to forces that affect Islam worldwide, such as fundamentalism or the fear of modernisation.

The term 'radical' comprises a broad range of behaviour patterns, with the position on core questions, such as the establishment of an Islamic state, the role of women, and freedom of religion playing a special role. In southeast Asia, the foundations for radicalisation had already been laid, but it was nourished by other factors, including the worldwide renaissance of the Salafi and Wahhabi interpretations of Islam, i.e. an Islam which rejects modernity and seeks to return to an imaginary past. Another factor is the influx of money and ideologies from the Middle East. A third factor is the war in Afghanistan, which was fought by militant Muslims from all over the world and which, next to its function as a training camp for today's terrorists,

constituted the framework for the development of transnational networks. Finally, a fourth factor is southeast Asia's special role as the starting point of radical ideologies. Although the initiators are a minority, they are quite capable of efficient networking.

Like the entire southeast Asian region, the Philippines are facing the acute danger of the radicalisation of Muslim communities that feel marginalised and ignored in their concerns. The question here is how to neutralise violent extremism.

Partnerships with Muslim communities are of particular importance, as they are the most likely instrument for starving out extremism. In their fight against Islamic radicalism, it is now for the governments to choose partners that are suitable for a dialogue. Furthermore, it would be sensible to promote legal systems and economic developments that are of tangible benefit to the population. The Islamic educational system should not be limited to religion and Arabic classes but also provide for teaching other skills, all the more so as many Madrasahs have been demonised as 'terror-producing centres'. The idea that democracy and Islam are incompatible must be confronted. In religion, the diverse historical and cultural framework conditions of the Muslim societies in the region should be taken into account. Moreover, it would be important to assist women in their need for more self-determination in a way that does not challenge their Muslim identity.

The fight for democracy must be fought by Muslim and non-Muslim majorities and minorities. Not only in the Philippines but throughout the entire world, politics should aim at supporting progress-oriented people and the moderate but silent majority in wooing the Muslims. Southeast Asia is the only region in the Muslim world with a dense structure of moderate Muslim facilities. Especially those might help to deprive radicalism of its support and get a hearing for moderate messages.