

Seeking knowledge unto Qum: The education of Indonesian Shi'i ustadhhs

Much attention has been paid to Malay-Indonesian students studying at Al-Azhar in Cairo, which has become an important centre of Islamic learning for Sunnis throughout the world. Indonesia's minority Shi'i, meanwhile, have flocked to the so-called *hawza 'ilmiyya* (colleges of Islamic learning) of Qum, Iran.

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Since the Iranian revolution of 1978-1979, Indonesia's Shi'i minority has grown. An increasing number of Indonesian students pursue their Islamic studies in the *hawza 'ilmiyya* of Qum, the most prominent centre of Shi'i Islamic education in the world. A Qum education enhances the reputations of Indonesian Shi'i *ustadhhs* (religious teachers) within their Shi'i community. They play an important role in *da'wa* (Islamic propagation), educational and cultural activities.

Increase of Indonesian students in Qum

It is unclear exactly when Indonesian students began to pursue Islamic education in Qum, but it is known that some did so several years before the Iranian revolution. Ali Ridho Al-Habsyi, son of Muhammad Al-Habsyi and grandson of Habib Ali Kwitang of Jakarta, studied in Qum in 1974. Six graduates of the Pesantren Al-Khairat of Palu, Central Sulawesi, followed over the next two years. In September 1976, Umar Shahab, an Arab descendant from Palembang, South Sumatra, and today a famous Shi'i *ustadh*, came to Qum and, he says, studied alongside seven other Indonesian students (Umar Shahab, *interview* 9/1/2003). In his fieldwork in 1975, Fischer also noted the presence of Indonesian students in Qum; among foreign students, including those from Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Lebanon, Tanzania, Turkey, Nigeria and Kashmir, Indonesians numbered the fewest. (Fischer 1980: 78).

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, interaction between its government and Indonesian Shi'i ulama has intensified. The victory of ayatollahs inspired Indonesian intellectuals and ulama to study the ideological foundation of the Iranian revolution: Shi'ism. At the same time, an 'export of revolution' occurred, as Iranian leaders and ulama aimed to spread Shi'ism in Indonesia and to attract Indonesian students to study Shi'ism in Iran. In 1982 the Iranian government sent its repre-

sentatives Ayatollah Ibrahim Amini, Ayatollah Masduqi, and Hujjat al-Islam Mahmudi to Indonesia. Among their activities was a visit to YAPI (*Yayasan Pesantren Islam*, the Foundation of Islamic Education) of Bangil, East Java, where they met with its leader, Husein Al-Habsyi (1921-1994), who became the most important confidant of Iranian leaders and ulama in Indonesia. At the time, Husein Al-Habsyi was probably one of the most prominent Shi'i ulama in Indonesia and played a major role in the development of Islamic *da'wa* and education. As a result of the meeting, Qum's *hawza 'ilmiyya* agreed to accept ten Indonesian students selected by Husein Al-Habsyi. From then on till his death in 1994, Husein Al-Habsyi was responsible for selecting candidates for study at *hawza 'ilmiyya* in Qum and other cities in Iran. Many were graduates of YAPI and other educational institutions and most have become important Shi'i *ustadhhs* in Indonesia.

Thus the number of Indonesian students studying in Qum has increased significantly. By 1990, fifty Indonesian students had reportedly completed their studies or were still studying in Qum. Ten years later the number of Qum graduates in Indonesia was more than a hundred. In 2001, fifty Indonesian students were selected to continue their studies in Qum (Ali 2002: 201-204), and in 2004, I was informed, ninety more students were selected.

In addition to the growing interest of Indonesian students to study in Iran, the Iranian government, through its International Center for Islamic Studies (*Markaze Jahani-e Ulume Islami*: ICIS), has stepped up efforts to attract international students. Since 1994 ICIS has been under the supervision of the office of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution headed by the Grand Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i, who also appointed its director.

The educational system of hawza 'ilmiyya

There are two educational systems at the *hawza 'ilmiyya* in Qum: the traditional system, which is the most famous and

influential, and the modern system. The traditional system's curriculum includes both transmitted and intellectual religious sciences. Each subject has its own standard texts (Nasr 1987: 165-182), which are studied in *halaqat* (study circles) under an ayatollah's supervision. The educational programme is composed of three levels: *muqaddamat* (preliminary), *sutuh* (external) and *dars al-kharaj* (graduation class) or *bahth al-kharaj* (graduation research) (Momen 1985). The three levels have to be completed by every *mujtahid*, a religious scholar who has achieved the level of competence necessary to make religious decisions based on reason from the principal sources of Islam. When a student receives the *ijaza* (license) that makes him a *mujtahid*, the honorific title ayatollah (*ayat Allah*, 'sign of God') is usually bestowed upon him. An ayatollah recognised as a *marja' al-taqlid*, meaning an authoritative source in matters of Islamic law, usually receives the title *ayatollah al-'uzma* (grand ayatollah). The common title of an aspiring *mujtahid* is *hujjat al-Islam* (proof of Islam). The structure of Shi'i ulama is pyramidal; those of the highest level, the grand ayatollah, are the fewest in number. The traditional system of education is extremely important in Shi'i society, given the major role of *marja' al-taqlid* throughout history.

The modern madrasa system is a transformation of the classical system, adopting the modern system of education in terms of gradation, curriculum, classroom learning and rules. Non-traditional madrasas 'are set up to serve needs not supplied by the traditional system' (Fischer 1980: 81). The curriculum consists of religious and secular sciences presented through a slightly simplified version of traditional study courses. Unlike the traditional system, this modern madrasa system is not intended to train students to become *mujtahids*, but rather to become Islamic scholars and missionaries. This innovative type of education has provided an alternative for students who, for whatever reason, cannot follow the traditional system in the *hawza 'ilmiyya*. International students, including

Indonesians, are provided with this modern type of programme.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has made educational innovations in Qum's *hawza 'ilmiyya* through the above-mentioned ICIS, which coordinates programmes for foreign students, assigns students to madrasas, and monitors their needs within the framework of disseminating Islamic knowledge and teachings globally. ICIS has organised innovative programmes based on the modern madrasa system for international students. The Madrasa Imam Khomeini, for example, offers programmes based on grade systems that include undergraduate and graduate levels equivalent to the tertiary education of the modern educational system. Such innovation takes Qum's *hawza 'ilmiyya* a step close to becoming a leading international centre of Islamic learning.

Every year an ICIS representative conducts a selection process at such Islamic institutions as the Islamic Cultural Center of Jakarta and the Muthahhari Foundation in Bandung. In addition to academic achievement, Arabic is requisite, as it is an international language for Islamic learning and the language of instruction at certain madrasas in Qum. At the same time, upon their arrival in Iran, students are also required to follow a six-month training programme in Persian, the language of instruction at most Qum's Islamic educational institutions.

Educational institutions attended by Indonesian students

Both educational systems have been attended by Indonesian students. The first group of Indonesian students were enrolled at Dar al-Tabligh al-Islami, a modern Shi'i institution founded in 1965 by Ayatollah Muhammad Kazim Shar'i'atmadari (1904-1987). As an institution of Islamic learning, Dar al-Tabligh was known for its foreign students and for arranging their visas and residence permits. It organised a five-year programme with a credit system (Fischer 1980: 84) and a curriculum that included both religious knowledge and secular sciences such as psychology, philosophy, sociology, mathematics and English. The language of instruction was Arabic. Thus, its educational system was modern; it did not follow the traditional system of learning even though it was strongly entrenched in the traditional *hawza* system (Umar Shahab, *interview* 9/1/2003).

After the dissolution of Dar al-Tabligh in 1981, owing to its leader's opposition to the concept of *wilayat al-faqih* ('mandate of the jurist') implemented by Khomeini, Madrasa Hujjatiyya began to provide the same programme for foreign students. Since 1982 nearly all

Indonesian students who have come to Iran attended Madrasa Hujjatiyya, including the presently prominent Shi'i *ustadh* Husein Shahab, who was transferred to this madrasa after he had studied for two years at the Dar al-Tabligh. Unlike Dar al-Tabligh, the Madrasa Hujjatiyya follows the traditional system of education generally used in the *hawza 'ilmiyya*. The majority of Indonesian students who become Shi'i *ustadhhs* only completed the preliminary level.

Recently, along with the educational reform in Qum, a large number of Indonesian students have registered at the Madrasa Imam Khomeini, which provides a modern system of education in which they can pursue undergraduate or graduate programmes and choose a specialisation.

Early Qum alumni, such as Umar Shahab and Husein Shahab, have become very prominent Shi'i figures and have contributed to the development of Islamic *da'wa*, education and culture in Indonesia. Given ongoing educational innovations in Qum and Indonesians' growing interest in them, Qum alumni might very well influence the future development of Islamic discourse in Indonesia. <

Notes

- 1 Habib Ali Al-Habsyi (1870-1968) known as Ali Kwitang was the founder of the famous Majlis Ta'lim (meeting place of education and *da'wa*) of Kwitang located in Jakarta. He was regarded as *Wali* (friend of God) and his grave became a pilgrimage site for the people of Jakarta. After its founder died, the Majlis Ta'lim was led by his son Muhammad (1911-1993) who was close to the then President Suharto and GOLKAR political circles. Today it is under the leadership of Muhammad's son, Abdurrahman, Ali Ridho's brother. Ali Ridho's sister, Farida Al-Habsyi is a famous Shi'i figure who runs some Islamic foundations in Jakarta, including Al-Batul.

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