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Confrontation Between Global and Local Civilizations: Nuclear Power Plants and Local Protests

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It is in the 18th century that science - the pre-eminent example of the analytic management of knowledge - began its refashioning of the world. During the 18th century capitalism was demonstrated to be a rational and liberal system of economic life, religious superstition came under furious attack, the divine right of kings was shown to be a mere illusion, the idea of continuous progress took hold, and the necessity of universal literacy through education became apparent.¹

Introduction

In the middle of the 19th century, more than 100 years after “the idea of continuous progress” took hold in much of the West, Japan, whose orientation had hitherto been feudal and agrarian, was thrust into a phase of rapid development through the *Meiji Restoration*. In the relatively short period of time since then, Japan achieved an unprecedented level of technological progress and is currently regarded as one of the most modern and industrialized capitalist economies in the world.

Concurrently, the rest of the world appears to be heading in the same direction, one characterized by technological progress, materialistic accumulation and even further industrialization, and one aimed at bringing “convenience” to our lives. Even socialist and communist countries, such as China and Vietnam, are no strangers to this trend. World Expo 2010 in Shanghai, whose stated purpose was to create “harmonious urban life styles,”² exemplified this prevailing global norm.

“Convenience” means, at least in modern terms, the shortening of time required for communication, transportation, and production. Bringing about this convenience inherently requires technological progress and industrialization. It might be hard for someone who lives in Tokyo, New York, or London today to imagine that about a

¹ N. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 1986, New York, p.52.

² Expo 2010 Shanghai official website, <http://en.expo2010.cn/a/20081119/000001.htm>

century ago in Tokyo, at the dawn of Japanese modernization, many deemed it unethical to charge a higher fare for an express train than for a local train. Those passengers complained that it was simply ridiculous to have to pay more for a journey taking a shorter time. At that time, value was attached to the enjoyment of a leisurely train ride rather than to the expedited arrival at the destination.

In addition, a dominating concept in contemporary societies is that of powerful capitalism that puts too much emphasis on one's productivity as a laborer. E. Brunner points out that excessive appreciation of material wealth, including money, could create a danger for society:

Money becomes the primary means of domination over others. ... Man wants to be wealthy at the cost of others, and he wants to be wealthy in order to replace social responsibility by domination.³

Christianity, a foundation of Western civilization, tends to encourage this orientation towards material wealth. Bruner continues that "in the teaching of the prophets, of Jesus, and of the apostles material goods and property are regarded as natural consequences of man's being a creature."⁴

Southeast Asian workers employed overseas offer a portrait, possibly, of being victimized by a money-oriented society.⁵ These workers send back income they earn to their home countries, with many sincerely believing that they contribute to the national economy through these additions to foreign currency reserves. In this connection, it would be helpful to remind ourselves that urbanization in Southeast Asian countries often forces local residents to cross national borders in order to survive the increasingly harsh material realities of city life.

Industrialization has resulted in several predicaments that include destruction of the environment and exploitation of the have-nots by the haves.⁶ It should be noted that

³ E. Brunner, *Christianity and Civilisation*, 2009, Cambridge, p.246.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁵ For example, it is said that 10% of the total population of Filipinos, nine to eleven million, now work overseas. See Ishaan Tharoor, "The Next Aquino", *Time* April 26, 2010.

⁶ J. Thottam explains the situation in India: "By widening the pool of people eligible for good subsidies, that shift will impact the nation's coffers. It also delivers a reality check to

the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century (which spontaneously created exploitation) originated in Europe, where Western values were dominant.⁷ This historical period had, according to Braudel, sown the seeds for the development of four important technologies, that is, steam, electricity, the internal combustion engine, and eventually nuclear energy.⁸

Humans living in the current era are faced with the consequence of the nuclear-capable phase of this revolution, which, we must remember, has the potential to devastate the earth, as we recall Chernobyl, Three Mile Island, and other nuclear-related incidents.⁹ Despite the threats of global devastation, society requires enormous sources of energy to sustain “the convenient life,” a requirement that is showing no sign of abating.

Unstoppable Trend?

People in many parts of the world today seem to be applying this modern maxim to their lives. Japan, for example, has experienced extraordinary social change and realized a so-called “economic miracle” after World War II.¹⁰ This remarkable materialistic success has coincided with the emergence of a highly developed, technologically-oriented society in post-war Japan, which also necessitated a considerable amount of energy to sustain it. Japan is now at the fourth phase of

those Indians, and foreigners, mesmerized by the country’s economic growth and global profile. Some 400 million Indian poor have long known better.” *Time Magazine*, May 3, 2010.

⁷ For example, Braudel states that: “One of Europe’s key responsibilities was that of bringing about the Industrial Revolution which spread, and is still spreading, throughout the world. This formidable technological advance was Europe’s own achievement, and one that was relatively recent in the history of civilisations...” F. Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*, 1993, New York, p. 373.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 374.

⁹ The worst nuclear accident was in 1986 in Chernobyl, which is close to Kiev, Ukraine. It resulted in thirty-one casualties and widespread radioactive contamination in the whole of Europe. In 1979, there was a melt-down at the nuclear reactor in Three-Mile Island in Pennsylvania, and that incident caused radioactive contamination in the area. See *A Dictionary of World History*, 2000, Oxford.

¹⁰ E.O. Reischauer, *The Japanese*, 1997, Tokyo, p.115.

industrial revolution, *i.e.*, the age of nuclear energy. Western civilization seems to have failed to offer any principled means of decelerating its reliance on nuclear energy vis-à-vis Christianity. As Brunner explains:

Technology in itself is no problem for the Christian man. As long as technology is subordinate to human will, and human will is obedient to the divine will, 'technique' is neutral, and as a means of goodwill is itself good. From the Christian point of view, there is no reason to condemn the machine and to return to the spinning-wheel. Even the use of atomic energy is not in itself harmful or bad.¹¹

Some Southeast Asian countries that implemented a "Look East" (*i.e.*, towards Japan) policy have also achieved remarkable technological as well as materialistic progress in the last 30 years. Ethnically and religiously diverse Indonesia is one example. Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia with a population of approximately 10 million, boasts of densely-arranged skyscrapers and numerous modern shopping malls. Needless to say, these modern buildings are equipped with the latest technology and are all air-conditioned. Some sarcastically say that air-conditioned malls in Jakarta are tantamount to parks in the West where people enjoy walking around with cool breezes.

The lifestyle of the people and the architecture in the capital are very much like those in the West and Japan. In each case, machines dominate the lives of people. It is true that "convenience" has been actualized in the country where "inconvenience" was once ubiquitous.

Major streets in Jakarta are illuminated with ornamental lights, and quite a few modern housing and apartment complexes (with air-conditioning for each room) have emerged on the outskirts of Jakarta, and these consume a truly a large amount of electricity. No wonder that Indonesia is now plunged into a so-called "energy crisis." However, Jakartans seem to pay little attention to this nationwide problem. The author once asked a young factory worker when riding a local bus if he thought city illumination was a waste of electricity while Indonesia is short supply of electricity. His answer rather surprised the author; he stated that he could not care less as he did not pay for it.

¹¹ E. Brunner, *op.cit.*, p. 173.

It is also a common practice in Indonesia that people turn on lamps outside and inside the house when it is dark, especially for security reasons, although this may seem excessive. As many Japanese people do during summer days, Indonesians also keep air-conditioning running throughout the night. Indonesians (at least urban Jakartans) are now used to the modern urban lifestyle of the Japanese and other Western people. Some even call this trend "civilization."

Automated machinery and various kinds of electronic gadgets, such as the computer, ticket gates, mobile phones, portable music players, and satellite TV, and so on, have established a permanent presence in our lives. Urbanization includes reclaiming land to expand industrial as well as residential areas and deforestation in order to build the necessary infrastructure required for a modern and convenient life. In this regard, automation has surpassed the tradition of doing things by hand. In turn, automation has reduced the frequency of direct, face-to-face communication between people. Living in a society such as this, people tend to be self-engrossed rather than concerned with the needs of others; there are few opportunities to learn about the situation outside their own world or to discern the feelings of others.

It seems that people's enthusiasm for creating a more convenient and comfortable means of life is alive and well. Although many use globalization as a concept of uniting this world, overall solidarity amongst people has by no means been realized today. Are we going to continue to conquer or deform nature in order to bring about a more urban and convenient life? Are we going to realize that all of us are fellow humans living on this earth? Are there any civilizational concepts that can possibly be offered as alternatives to counter the present trend?

To maintain and develop this modern civilized society, Indonesian authorities are now considering the construction of local nuclear power plants. One of the planned sites is in a village called Balong, a suburb of the small town of Jepara in central Java. Residents of the village are vigorously opposed to the government's plan to build this symbol of the new industrial revolution and firmly reject the imposition of the urban lifestyle upon them.

The main question addressed here is what truly drives local residents of Balong to participate in the anti-nuclear plant movement. Among the factors considered is the role in the movement played by Islam, the majority religion in Indonesia and in the local area. Also considered is the relevance of long-standing Javanese cultural values to this movement. It is our hope that answers to these questions would generate some concepts capable of challenging the status-quo in our society.

The Local Situation in Jepara

The Indonesian island of Java, the most densely populated of the Indonesian archipelago, is famous for its rich culture and centuries-old civilization. Culturally, Java is a result of the blending of Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic civilizations, a process that has created the so-called "Indonesian Islam" practiced by these rather nominal Muslims.¹² In addition, animistic local tradition forms a core element in Javanese civilization, with many people believing in the existence of supernatural spirits in nature.

Geographically, Java is home to numerous volcanoes and thus frequently the epicenter of earthquakes.¹³ Proposals to develop nuclear technology in Indonesia are by no means recent. The first president of the Republic, Sukarno, established the country's first research reactor in the west Java town of Bandung in 1964. By the 1980s, during the time of the dictatorial regime of Suharto, there was already an anti-nuclear technology movement in Indonesia.¹⁴

In 1991, developed countries, including the U.S., Canada, Japan, France, and Germany, expressed their intention to participate in a feasibility study considering construction of nuclear power stations in Indonesia. Five years later, the Japanese company that won the bid revealed plans for 12 reactors on the Muria peninsula north of central Java by 2015.¹⁵ Volcanic Mount Muria is situated in the centre of the

¹² C. Geertz observes that: "Although it spread—peacefully for the most part—through almost all of Indonesia in a space of three hundred years and completely dominated Java except for a few pagan pockets by the end of the sixteenth century, Indonesian Islam, cut off from its centers of orthodoxy at Mecca and Cairo, vegetated, another meandering tropical growth on an already overcrowded religious landscape." C. Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, Chicago, 1976, p.125.

¹³ In 2006, a large-scale earthquake hit an ancient town of Yogyakarta, and it is said that more than three thousand people lost their lives. Some post-earthquake research has been conducted by Nagoya University, Japan. For more information about the earthquake in Yogyakarta, see <http://www.seis.nagoya-u.ac.jp/INFO/jogja/jogja.html>

¹⁴ George Junus Aditjondro, Selamat Tinggal, Gandeng Presto, Selamat Datang, Bayi-bayi Radio-Actif!, unpublished paper presented at the seminar organised by a local branch of Nahdlatul Ulama in Jepara on 1 September, 2007.

¹⁵ Y. Hidayati, *Nuclear Power Development Plan in Indonesia*, unpublished paper, presented at Sophia University, Tokyo on July 6, 2007.

peninsula, with Jepara, population 1,200,000, being the closest town. While rubber plantations are the major industry, local residents also depend on agriculture and fishery in this area.

Situated about 35 kilometres north of Jepara, a small village called Balong is close to the one of the proposed reactor sites known as Ujung Lemah Abang. Residents of this village, who heavily depend on agriculture and fishery and who have maintained their modest and simple lifestyle for generations, reacted furiously towards the planned nuclear development in their locality.

Early in September of 2007, anti-nuclear sentiments peaked when religious leaders, the minister of technology, and academics all gathered in Jepara to discuss the construction of the proposed nuclear power plant. The people of Balong, determined to show their disagreement and indignation towards the authorities, reportedly marched overnight en masse, carrying torches, down to Jepara. The contingent numbered 3,000 of the 5,000 villagers who reside in Balong.

The groups opposing the nuclear power plant in Jepara united under an umbrella group called *Koalisi Rakyat Tolak PLTN* (KRATON) or People's Coalition Opposing the Nuclear Power Plant. This association organizes demonstrations and anti-nuclear activities in both Jepara and Balong. There are three major components making up KRATON: university students who are affiliated with NGOs inside and outside the country; Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)¹⁶ who are residents of Jepara; and *Persatuan Masyarakat Balong* (PMB) or Union of Balong People, whose members are entirely natives of Balong.

These three social groups work together to halt government's plans, showing solidarity and functioning as a united force to maintain the momentum of the movement. However, despite having in common opposition to the nuclear power plant, their reasoning on nuclear development is far from uniform. Leftist university students affiliated with NGOs steadfastly cling to the socialist and communist ideology and manifest a critical attitude toward all authorities. Their motivation for the movement is to correct wrongdoing by the government. While most of these

¹⁶ Nahdlatul Ulama (Renaissance of Ulama) is the largest Islamic organisation in Indonesia and was founded in 1926 with thirty million members. This organisation represents traditionalist Muslims who maintain tolerance towards "difference and plurality of people's socio-cultural background". *Nahdlatul Ulama*, Jakarta, p.4.

students are from outside the village, they are well accepted by the locals; after all, they share the same goal in preventing construction of the plant.¹⁷ In the following sections, we will observe the orientation of other two groups, that is, NU members and natives of Balong.

The Role of Islam in the Protest Movement

Java. On September 1 and 2, 2007, the local chapter of NU in Jepara organized a forum on the government's plans to construct a nuclear power plant in the area of Balong village. NU invited the then State Minister of Research and Technology Kusmayanto Kadiman; the former president of the Republic of Indonesia, and an influential Muslim cleric, Abdurrahman Wahid; and experts on nuclear technology.

On September 2, Muslim scholars known as *ulama*, who were mainly from Java, after extensive deliberations issued a decision, or *fatwa*, exercising religious jurisprudence, or *fiqh*. Part of it reads:

The development of the Muria nuclear power plant is forbidden in Islamic law (*haram*), because, while the Muria nuclear power plant project has within it both positive and negative aspects, the disadvantages predominate.¹⁸

The issuing of this *fatwa* was a remarkable event as it was the "first time, anywhere in the world, that a mass organization from within the mainstream of Islam spoke authoritatively on the question of nuclear power."¹⁹ Although this religious decision forbidding the construction of a nuclear power plant has the potential to justify the whole anti-nuclear movement in Jepara, it would be wrong to conclude that the *fatwa* denotes a definitive Islamic stance on the nuclear issue.

¹⁷ For example, one of the student leaders (who is from Yogyakarta) has stayed at the home of one of the villagers in Balong for several years.

¹⁸ *Alim Ulama Putusan: PLTN Muria Hukumnya: Haram*, unpublished paper obtained by the author. English translation is available at the website: <http://www.globalcollab.org/Nautilus/australia/reframing/aust-ind-nuclear/ind-np/muria>

¹⁹ R. Turner, *Nuclear fatwa: Islamic jurisprudence and the Muria nuclear site*, available at <http://www.globalcollab.org/Nautilus/australia/apsnet/policy-forum/2007/nuclear-fatwa-islamic-jurisprudence-and-the-muria-nuclear-power-station-proposal/>

In the *fatwa*, the ulamas clearly state that “this decision is effective only in the context of the plan for the Muria nuclear power station project under development at Ujung Lemah Abang, Balong, Jepara”.²⁰

In this regard, the same ulamas who declared the prohibition of the construction of the nuclear power plant in that region could rescind their *fatwa* should conditions change in the future. This relativism is unavoidable in Islam as the religion lacks a central authority to clarify the essence of its teachings. As explained elsewhere in the *fatwa*, what needs to be considered in any important decision in Islam is the balance between advantage (*maslahah*) and disadvantage (*fafsadah*). This principle is applied, for instance, to the prohibition of alcohol consumption and gambling. The Koran states:

They ask you about drinking and gambling. Say: “There is great harm in both, although they have some benefit for men; but their harm is greater than their benefit.”²¹

Some ulamas who participated in the discussion (*bahtsul masa' il*) and signed the *fatwa* of September 2, 2007 have explained their stance. K.H. Kholilurrahman, who chaired the meeting, pointed out that there are three disadvantages to the project: the construction site is too close a residential area; environmental concerns [earthquake?] still exist; and the government has failed to offer a firm guarantee to the population.²² He, therefore, agreed with issuing the *fatwa* prohibiting the construction of a nuclear power plant. Should all concerns mentioned be adequately addressed, he would be in favour of the plan of the construction of a nuclear power station. In fact, he even suggested that the plant be built on the island, Karimun, Java, which is separated by a six-hour boat ride from Jepara.²³

Another religious leader and educator, who heads a traditional Islamic boarding school in Jepara, identified a disadvantage in the project in that Jepara and Indonesia in general terms lack highly-skilled workers who are able to handle advanced

²⁰ Alim Ulama Putusan: PLTN Muria Hukumnya: Haram, unpublished paper.

²¹ Al Quran, al-Baqarah-219, (translation: *The Koran*, London, 1995)

²² Interview conducted by the author in Jepara, 11 February, 2010.

²³ Interview conducted by the author in Jepara, 11 February, 2010.

technology, such as that needed in a nuclear power station. He clearly explained that Islam has no in-principle opposition to nuclear power unless significant disadvantages in the condition and circumstance of utilizing it could be identified.²⁴

The basis for rejecting the construction of the nuclear power plant also lies in the attitude of government towards education and social welfare for the local people. For example, a leader of an Islamic boarding school in Jepara, Hasan Bashri, who also supported the *fatwa* of September 2007, complained that the government paid little attention to the quality of education in the region. He also added that should the government take care of the people “properly,” the construction of the nuclear plant could be accepted.²⁵

As Islam does not inherently forbid the use of nuclear energy, there is a possibility that the *fatwa* issued in September 2007 in Jepara, an old *fatwa* (*quol qodin*), could be superseded by a new *fatwa* (*quol jaded*) in the future.

Iran. The policies of the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran epitomizes Shiite Islam’s stance on nuclear energy. Former president Khatami, known to be a moderate Muslim, expressed his government’s intention of developing nuclear energy by saying that: “we’ve made our choice: yes, to peaceful nuclear technology; no, to atomic weapons.”²⁶ Subsequently, in April 2006, the Iranian president, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, publicly declared Iran’s intention to be a nuclear power in the world. He stated:

The nuclear fuel cycle at the laboratory level has been completed, and uranium with the desired enrichment for nuclear power plants was achieved...Iran has joined the nuclear countries of the world.²⁷

These two leaders showed no hesitation about developing nuclear power, saying that it is a strategy to meet domestic demand for electricity that reserves oil for export

²⁴ Ahmad Mawardi, Interview conducted by the author in Jepara, 13 February, 2010.

²⁵ Interview conducted by the author in Jepara, 11 February, 2010.

²⁶ A.J. Venter, *Iran’s Nuclear Option*, 2005, London, p.286.

²⁷ Text is available at: http://www.aber.ac.uk/interpol/en/research/DDMI/docs/Iran_nuclear_chrono.pdf

purposes.²⁸ The government has attempted to justify their nuclear program through use of the media.²⁹ In addition, they denounce the inconsistency of Western countries, contrasting their earlier cooperation to develop nuclear energy with their objections today, ignoring the fact that Iran's government is very different from what it was before the Islamic Revolution.

In a letter sent to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in March 2010, they complain that in a breach of contracts with Western countries drawn up before the Iranian Revolution in 1980, the United States of America, Germany and France have not fulfilled their obligation to provide uranium fuel to Iran.³⁰ This implies that the West and the Islamic Republic of Iran once shared the same tenets in relation to nuclear power development, at least before the 1980s. Although the Iranian Supreme Religious Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, issued a *fatwa* that prohibited "the production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons," his protestations have been found to be disingenuous, if not altogether incredible.³¹ From the beginnings of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the religious leadership has demonstrated more concern for nationalism than for theology when there is a conflict between the two. In the case of nuclear power, the issue of weighing benefits against harms is not even given voice.

Thus, it is clear that Islam *as a religion* holds no definite position on the nuclear issue, and that regional conditions and circumstances are vital elements in determining the course of Islam. Historic rivalry between Islam and the West, mainly between Islam and Christianity, also should be taken into account when we regard Islam's standpoint on the nuclear issue. Western civilization is unquestionably dominant in the world today, being equipped with modern and advanced technology. Islam, which has fallen seriously behind the west in technology and modern

²⁸ M.J. Zarif, "Tackling the Iran-U.S. Crisis: The need for a paradigm shift", in *Journal of International Affairs* Spring/Summer 2007, Volume 60, Number 2.

²⁹ S. Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, 2006, Washington D.C., p.17,

³⁰ To review the root cause of Iran's confidence deficit vis-à-vis some Western countries on assurances of nuclear fuel supply, please see this document, available at: <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Infocircs/2010/infocirc785.pdf>

³¹ R. Turner, *op.cit.*, See also <http://www.fas.org/sgp/news/secretcy/2005/08/081105.html#1>

development, is eager to compete with the West in pursuing “progress.” M. Watt explains the position of Islam vis-à-vis the West:

While what is now being spoken of as the Islamic resurgence or revival is mainly to be seen among conservatives, all Muslims have had to respond in one way or another to the total impact of the West Some Muslims today regard the European impact on the Islamic world as beginning with the Crusades.³²

The choice of Islam in Indonesia is to employ whatever means are beneficial for the lives of Muslims, and nuclear energy could be categorized as a positive element in the process of modernizing their society with a more comfortable and convenient lifestyle. The definition of “beneficial” is contingent upon social, economic, and political circumstances, and even personal feelings. In Jepara’s case, mainstream Muslims in the region considered the nuclear power plant as detrimental to their welfare, while Iranian political leaders believe that nuclear development in their country will bring prestige in their dealings with the rest of the world.

By applying the same broad principle, a number of ulamas actually advocated the construction of nuclear power station in Jepara. In fact, there were three ulamas out of 75 who were against the issuing of the *fatwa* of September 2007. Muhsin Ali, who inspected the condition of nuclear power plants both in Korea and in Japan at the invitation of their governments prior to the September forum,³³ was convinced that nuclear power is safe and beneficial for the local people.

While conceding that safety concerns remain, he explained by analogy that the airplane and ship also have the potential be involved in disasters. Everything being in the hands of Allah, Ali’s own view is that whatever happens is fate (*nasib*) that Muslims should accept.³⁴ Nafiuddin, another cleric who joined the delegation to Korea and Japan, believes that the *fatwa* prohibiting the construction of the nuclear power plant is not in accordance with the welfare of the local people. He confidently

³² M. Watt, *Islamic Fundamentalism and Modernity*, 1989, London, p.44.

³³ This delegation consists of twelve people, who are representative from various fields: ulamas from Jepara, a Christian leader, a member of parliament, a youth group etc., and this two-week long trip was taken in July 2007.

³⁴ Interview conducted by the author in Jepara, 9 February, 2010.

declared that he follows one of the principles of Islam, namely, *Tasorruful Imam Ala Roiyyah Manutun bil Masalaha* (government's policies should be based on people's welfare or benefit).³⁵

Divergence on the issue of a nuclear power station within the Islamic community in Jepara clearly suggests that Islam itself does not lend conceptual support to the prohibition of nuclear development nor to the creation of nuclear weapons. Islam, in this regard, is parallel to the prevailing global trend, which is dominated by Western civilization.

Secular Local Opposition to the Jepara Nuclear Power Plant Project

A leader of the NU Jepara chapter, Nuruddin Amin, is popular as a vigorous anti-nuclear campaigner. He was deeply involved in drafting the *fatwa* of Jepara and also admitted that the religious decision still remains conditional. However, Amin's personal view on nuclear energy distinguishes him from other Muslim leaders in that he unconditionally rejects the use of nuclear power.³⁶ As a leader of an Islamic organization and committee member of the forum of September 2007, he still adheres to the text of the *fatwa*, which stipulates that the decision is confined within the circumstances in Jepara and thus has potential to be revised. Out of consideration for the diversity of positions, he refrains from expressing his personal views in public. Amin is some ways a pivotal figure bridging different elements within KRATON.

On the invitation of NGOs, Amin visited Japan and Korea to make a plea to the respective governments to halt their export of nuclear technology to Indonesia.³⁷ He became aware of the possibility of radioactive leakage after learning of such a situation in the Hamaoka nuclear power plant in Japan, which he visited in person.³⁸ Amin and some residents of Hamaoka managed to exchange views and share their

³⁵ Interview conducted by the author in Jepara 16 February, 2010.

³⁶ Interview conducted by the author in Jepara 15 February, 2010.

³⁷ He visited both Korea and Japan in July 2007 and attended seminars on nuclear development in Tokyo and Osaka.

³⁸ The Hamaoka nuclear power plant is located in Shizuoka and has experienced several radioactive leakages in the past.

experiences.³⁹ Amin's main concern lies in possible environmental damage, such as sea and earth on which local peasants and fishermen heavily depend for their livelihoods.⁴⁰ As a native of Jepara, Central Java, Amin is also critical of the attitude of the political elite and urban dwellers, saying that local people in his region are victimized by the interests of these people.⁴¹ He protests:

They [people who are pro-nuclear plant] think that the PLTN [nuclear power plant] is a symbol of progress, and they are obsessed with modernization.⁴²

Amin's voice has much resonance with local residents in Balong, where one of 12 reactors is supposed to be built. Because a survey has not yet been conducted in Balong, it is difficult to accurately determine the level of support for the nuclear power plant. Yet, the anti-nuclear movement in the region is evidently solid, and local people are determined to continue their struggle, even after the much-respected Muslim leader and former president of the Republic of Indonesia, Abdurrahman Wahid, who vehemently supported the movement, died in December 2009.⁴³

Persatuan Masyarakat Balong (PMB), or Union of Balong People, is one of the core and most potent elements in KRATON. Although most of the members of PMB,

³⁹ One of the residents in Hamaoka, for example, sent a message to Amin and the people in Jepara, saying that people in Hamoka are afraid of much predicted earthquake in the region and are also concerned about the people in Indonesia where earthquakes frequently take place. *Message from Hamaoka*, personal document obtained by the author from Nurddhin Amin.

⁴⁰ He states that: "their (local people's) sources of livelihoods are under threat due to possible eviction from lands and nuclear radiation." This quote is found in *NUCLEAR NO CLEAR*, unpublished document that was presented at the seminar held on 6 July in Tokyo. Obtained by the author.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Interview conducted by the author in Jepara, 10 February, 2010.

⁴³ The author informally interviewed local people, such as students, public transport drivers and food-sellers on the streets in Jepara in February, and almost eighty percent of people disagreed with the plan. Many people admire Abdurrahman Wahid and they were almost in tears when they talked about him. Abdurrahman Wahid once told the people of Jepara that he would move to the planned site and would join anti-nuclear movement if the government proceeded with the construction of the plant.

villagers living in Balong, are Muslims, their stance and rationale towards nuclear development are not identical with those of the ulamas and other Muslim clerics who issued the September 2007 *fatwa*.

The villagers of Balong, located in 35 kilometres north of Jepara, still steadfastly maintain a traditional, rural way of life. The majority of the villagers are engaged in agriculture, and they work at a fishery, a rubber plantation, and at small-scale domestic enterprises. Values and social attitudes inherited from ancestors and generations old are still alive and remain functional in the community. Should we follow the popular categorization of Muslims in Indonesia, these villagers can certainly be designated as *abangan* rather than *santri*.⁴⁴ In other words, the villagers carry a strong sense of being Javanese and follow local wisdom, which one might call the Javanese civilization.

This very attitude seems to be a vital factor in their participation in the anti-nuclear movement. They consciously or unconsciously disdain movements towards development, particularly those based on technological progress and aimed at convenience, comfort, and accumulation of material wealth. It is true that their participation in the anti-nuclear movement is also motivated by indignation towards (and dissatisfaction with) the central government, which they accuse of as being dishonest and manipulative.⁴⁵ At a deeper level, their part in the movement can be explained by something far beyond politics. A vital part of their underlying motivation appears to be their belief in traditional values, which emphasise spirituality, the sense of harmony and the unity with all existences, namely, humans, nature, society, and God.

⁴⁴ Borrowing C. Geertz's description, we could define both of them as follows: "abangan, representing a stress on the animistic aspects of the over-all Javanese syncretism and broadly related to the peasant element in the population; santri, representing a stress on the Islamic aspects of the syncretism and generally related to the trading element"... C. Geertz, *op.cit.*, p.6.

⁴⁵ Setiawan Sumedi, Chairperson of *Persatuan Masyarakat Balong*(PMB), Interview conducted by the author, 15 February, 2010.

The Locals' Reasoning

In the forest of Balong lies the grave of *Seh Siti Jenar*, one of the "saints" believed to have spread Islam in Java. This grave functions as a symbol of PMB's movement. Important Muslim leaders, called *wali*, who are believed to have spread Islam in the past, have also been worshipped by local people.⁴⁶ Although *wali* should, in Islamic principle, be appreciated as blessings of Allah bestowed upon people, they should not be exalted as objects of worship. Yet, it is a common practice for villagers of Balong to go on a pilgrimage to the grave of *Seh Siti Jenar*, where they would often ask for their wishes to be granted. As with the worship of human beings, such practices as making intercessions to the dead are forbidden in Islam.⁴⁷ Villagers in Balong, and probably many other Javanese too, seek "guardians" for their lives whom they perceive as more intimate and closer than Allah. Balong villagers, who depend on agriculture and fishery, need a spiritual object to which their intercessions can be directed, and the grave of *Seh Siti Jenar* is vital in this regard.

According to the government's plans, once the nuclear power plant is built, the grave of *Seh Siti Jenar* will be relocated, which will result in the destruction of the grave and disturbance of what is regarded as a sacred resting place. Not only are the villagers infuriated by such as a prospect, they also fear that there will be retribution for such sacrilege.⁴⁸ For these reasons, they feel that they are obliged to safeguard the sanctity of the site. They would usually hold a prayer session in front of the grave before commencing an anti-nuclear demonstration or other action relating to their movement.⁴⁹

Clearly, Balong spirituality is a decisive factor in the villagers' opposition to nuclear development on their land. Urban dwellers in both Indonesia and the West, with full access to modernity, may well denigrate Balong residents, branding them as

⁴⁶ A. Beatty explains that: "The nice Javanese Muslim saints (*wali sanga*) are defined as the world forms or symbols of the nice bodily orifices, the gateways to the inner world and pathways of the senses". A. Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese Religion*, 2004, Cambridge, p.161.

⁴⁷ The practice of asking is called *tawassul*, and it is permissible to practice *tawassul* to Allah and to the one who is still alive.

⁴⁸ This view has been expressed by villagers during interviews conducted by the author.

⁴⁹ Sardi and others, interviews conducted by the author, 10, 12, 15 February, 2010.

backward and superstitious. However, in Balong, the spiritual connection of people with *Seh Siti Jenar* provides a sense of assurance. As the relationship of villagers with the grave of *Seh Siti Jenar* is direct and traditional, their attachment to it is emotional.

For Balong residents, it would be unendurable for their spiritual guardian, one that has been with the community for generations, to be annihilated, through substitution, by a symbol of modernity such as a nuclear power station. It is evident that they do not at all welcome among their community the “better life” so keenly sought in the West.

It should be also remembered that one of the core elements in Javanese society is harmony.⁵⁰ In Javanese philosophy, four existences, that is, human, society, nature, and God should be harmonised with each other.⁵¹ The accord between humans and nature is especially cherished in Javanese culture. Fertility is vital for the Javanese as agriculture is the major livelihood in their society. Java, in fact, is one of the largest rice-producing regions in the world.⁵² The earth and land are both held sacred and regarded as the source of life. Animistic influences in Java, as shown in Balong, are widespread in that most Javanese believe in the existence of spirits or *roh halus* in nature.

To show their high regard for the earth, they perform a ritual called *sedekah bumi* (appreciation to earth). A noted Javanese culture expert, Sobary, explains that *sedekah bumi* is an expression of Javanese mindset that humans are not allowed to disturb other existence, including nature and animals.⁵³ This Javanese practice is rather simple and involves community members gathering and sharing yellow-rice with chicken and distributing fruit, which is symbolic of blessings. Leftover food is usually placed at the corners of the rice-field as offerings.

Dafq, a Balong villager, who rarely joins Friday prayer as a Muslim, explained that the earth for him is so important that he regularly participates in *sedekah bumi*, which

⁵⁰ P.M. Laksono, *Tradition in Javanese Social Structure Kingdom and Countryside*, 1986, Yogyakarta, p.84.

⁵¹ M.Sobary, interview with the author in Jakarta, 18 February, 2010.

⁵² M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia Since c.1200*, 2008, Stanford, pp.17-18.

⁵³ Interview conducted by the author in Jakarta, 18 February, 2010.

is usually held during the tenth month of the Javanese calendar. He added that as their land had been handed down by ancestors, who are buried in the village, it should not be excavated or otherwise disturbed.⁵⁴

For many Balong villagers, the construction of the nuclear power reactor is tantamount to the disturbance of their deity, *roh halus*. Such disturbance is equivalent to the destruction of harmony. Villagers in Balong are aware that their modest and rural lifestyle does not require an excessive usage of electricity and they fail to see the necessity of constructing a nuclear power reactor, which they believe would defile their sacred land. Here, another piece of Javanese wisdom, *sacukupe*, which cautions against excessive greed in humans, also seems to be influencing the psychology of villagers.

They seem to fundamentally question the lifestyle of urban dwellers whom they perceive are excessively and obsessively demanding convenience and comfort. In this regard, the anti-nuclear movement in Balong is not only a political struggle with the government, but also the voicing of a philosophy based on the idea of a modest way of life.

With respect to the maintenance of harmony, there is a concept that forms the basis of community relations called *gotong-royong* or mutual help. This piece of Javanese wisdom contributes to the “development of collective solidarity.”⁵⁵ *Gotong-royong* can be readily observed in Balong. For example, they financed their own construction of asphalt streets in 1996 and the establishment of a junior high school (*madrassa sanawijah*) in the village.⁵⁶ It is also a common practice for villagers to volunteer for building projects or to repair houses for others if necessary. N. Mulder explains Javanese concept of harmony as follows:

Personal desires, ambitions, and passions are thought to endanger harmony, and thus it is thought that ‘to sacrifice for the sake of social harmony will lead

⁵⁴ Interview conducted by the author in Balong, 12 February, 2010.

⁵⁵ P.M. Laksono, *op.cit.*, p. 84.

⁵⁶ Interviews with local residents of Balong, 10, 12, 15 February, 2010.

to the highest rewards': a person should give himself up to the community rather than try to impose his will.⁵⁷

The sense of *gotong-royong* does not apply only to current members of the community, but also to future generations as well. A 64-year-old fisherman, Semadi, stated passionately that he is responsible for preserving a good environment with clean water for his children and grandchildren. He fears that possible radioactive leakage would contaminate the sea.⁵⁸ This view is shared by many other villagers who joined the anti-nuclear movement.

It is striking that the application of the villagers' reasoning on the nuclear issue is extended far beyond their own locality. Although their movement is, as has been shown above, the result of the intention to preserve local tradition, the villagers of Balong also have a sense of global solidarity and responsibility to fellow humans outside their village.

Worthy of further exploration are statements made by a leader of the movement, Setiawan Sumedi, and other members of PMB, to the effect that they do not support the construction of nuclear power plants anywhere in the world. Such a position is clearly distinguishable from that of the ulama, who signed the *fatwa* of September 2007, while suggesting an alternate site for the plant.

The anti-nuclear movement in Balong, in fact, constitutes not only local resistance but also comprehensive contention against the powerful trend towards modernization generated by Western civilization. It is, therefore, understandable that one of the villagers, Subari, stated that what matters is to maintain their tradition of appreciating the existence of other human beings and nature, and even without *fatwa* their movement will nonetheless continue.⁵⁹

At the same time, there are people who agree with government plans to build a nuclear reactor in Balong. A young local entrepreneur named Bayu, who owns several small-scale firms, believes the construction of a nuclear plant will bring about

⁵⁷ N. Mulder, *Mysticism in Java*, 1998, Amsterdam, pp.61-62.

⁵⁸ Interview with the author in Balong, 10 February, 2010.

⁵⁹ Interview conducted by the author in Balong, 12 February, 2010.

economic growth and increased employment opportunities.⁶⁰ To Bayu, development means progress and increases in material wealth. Should such a view be expressed in the West, it would be supported by the majority. However, this is not the case in Balong.

A 30-year-old engineer, Dafi, articulated a different view:

Of course, money is important. And I want to be rich, but giving something good to next generation is more important.⁶¹

Another young Balong villager, who works as a security guard for an Islamic boarding school, shares Dafi's view. He stated:

To be honest, I am attracted by materialistic values, but my life now is fine and I have enough [money to live]. People in Balong are happy to work in the forest. We cannot exchange our valuable assets intended for future generations for the price of Rp.100,000.⁶²

Wealth accumulation for its own sake is generally disapproved of in Balong. As an illustration, some villagers have been offered scholarships by a government institution. However, many have refused to accept the awards.⁶³ Behind the refusal is again the application of the concept of *sacukupe*, according to which Balong villagers do not seek any more than they actually need.

Conclusion

Science and technology have experienced progress, and together they have brought about greater convenience (healthier and longer lives) for humans. This orientation,

⁶⁰ Interview conducted by the author in Balong, 12 February, 2010.

⁶¹ Interview conducted by the author in Balong, 12 February, 2010.

⁶² Interview conducted by the author in Bangsri, 15 February, 2010.

⁶³ Sardi, interview conducted by the author in Balong, 12 February, 2010. For example, a scholarship to enter Technical School for Nuclear Energy (STTN) in Yogyakarta, and an award of Rp.75,000(\$8)/month cash for one elementary school child, have been offered by the National Nuclear Energy Agency known as BATAN.

which, in Postman's account, originated in the West in the 18th century, is predominant in the world today, and might be called Western civilization, whose major tenet is modernization. As demonstrated above, even non-Western countries, such as Japan and Indonesia, are influenced powerfully by this orientation. It goes without saying that modernization has a positive impact on our society. Modern facilities, for example, have contributed to improving sanitation and health. Technological developments have permitted more expeditious communication among people and more rapid transportation.

However, opponents feel that continuous and endless pursuit of convenience could lead to decadence in society. Countering the workings of nature could create environmental problems. Digital gadgets could weaken the sense of community and promote an increasingly self-centred public mentality. Automated machinery could deprive human beings of the habit of thinking.

The resistance shown by the people of Balong and Jepara towards the construction of a nuclear power plant is by no means the expression of mere anti-government or anti-nuclear sentiment. It reflects a deep-seated and probably unconscious scepticism towards the lifestyle values of contemporary urban dwellers. With their spiritual as well as philosophical basis in Javanese culture, the values of Balong villagers – among them the appreciation of nature, respect for other existences, avoidance of greed – are those typically espoused in local cultures. As these values are precisely the ones given the least emphasis in a transnational civilization such as ours, the voices of villagers in Balong serve as warning sirens for all who live in modernity.

Islam, which is a vital social element in Java, has played an important role in the anti-nuclear movement in Balong and Jepara. Although the *fatwa* forbidding the construction of nuclear reactors on the Muria peninsula is unprecedented and remarkable, the ulama of Java have nonetheless qualified it; there are conditions that, if remedied, would see nuclear development permitted to proceed within the framework of modernization. As Islam, like Christianity, displays no fundamental opposition towards modernization, it seems less capable of challenging the course taken by society. Nonetheless, Islam still has the potential to be a guiding force in the avoidance of degradation as there are some ulama, such as Nurddin Amin of Jepara, who are highly aware of the dangers posed by the unquestioning embrace of modernization.

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