

Interview with Ahmad Syafii Maarif



In 2008, the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Peace and International Understanding, which is commonly regarded as an Asian version of the Nobel Peace Prize, went to an Indonesian Muslim intellectual, Prof. Dr. Ahmad Syafii Maarif. Dr. Syafii Maarif was a president of Muhammadiyah, the second largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, and is the founder of the Maarif Institute for Culture and Humanity. Being an author of numerous books and articles, he is a leading voice among the Muslim intelligentsia and a prominent advocate of interreligious dialogue in the country.

ACR: First of all, congratulations on the Magsaysay Award for Peace and International Understanding! How do you feel about it? What was your reaction to the news?

Syafii Maarif: Thank you so much! Of course, I'm very happy about it, but am also afraid whether I can consistently live up to the intrinsic value of the Award throughout the future.

ACR: It is surprising to learn that you in your youth were not as progressive as you are now. As a young member of Muhammadiyah, you were a zealous supporter of a radical Islamic party, Masyumi, and its charismatic leader, Mohammad Natsir. How would you characterize yourself at that stage? What was your ideal back then?

Syafii Maarif: I must say that Masyumi was not a radical Islamic party, though it fought hard for putting Islam as the philosophical foundation of the Indonesian state, which was fully guaranteed by the then Indonesian constitution. This party was well-known for its consistency in defending the values of democratic political principles at all cost. Before I left Indonesia for studying Islam at the University of Chicago under Professor Fazlur Rahman, I was one of the advocates of the idea of an Islamic state. The reason for that was very simple: I had no enough knowledge to comprehend the issue of Islamic state which was actually far more complex than what I had imagined before. Moreover, I came to realize that the idea of an Islamic state was completely historically fabricated. There is no authentic *shar'i* basis for that claim [of Islamic state].

ACR: After the suppression of Masyumi under Sukarno and the coming of the New Order regime of Suharto, you left to the United States, as you have just mentioned, to study Islam and politics in late 70's. There, under the influence of Prof. Rahman, you changed your position and ceased to support the idea of Islamic state. When you returned to Indonesia in 80's,

how did your ex-comrades treat you? Was it a difficult time for you?

Syafii Maarif: Many of them accused me as a secular person, and even some of them categorized me as a Muslim traitor, but I didn't care as long as I was not threatened physically.

ACR: Now you have become a strong supporter of Pancasila [the five founding principles of the state of Indonesia, which in terms of religion promotes harmony among religions for the sake of the nation's unity]. But why do you think that *shari'a* need not be implemented? Is Pancasila an alternative to a *shari'a*-sanctioned society? Is it another model for the Islamic modernity?

Syafii Maarif: What I want to see to be implemented is the moral principles of the *shari'a* as are enshrined in the realms of justice, human brotherhood, democracy, tolerance, and pluralism. Under Pancasila, Muslims have enough space and opportunity to achieve such objectives. Islam can accept the concept of modernity under the control of the prophetic transcendental values.

ACR: You assumed the presidency of Muhammadiyah in 1998 and held the post until 2005. These were turbulent years for the country after the collapse of the Suharto regime. What were your concerns during your term? What did you seek to achieve and how did it come about?

Syafii Maarif: For the first few months of my chairmanship of Muhammadiyah, I was deeply shocked by the uncertain political situation in Indonesia. But gradually, by learning from others, my self-confidence was soon recovered and sustained until the end of my term in 2005. What I concerned most during that critical era was how to save the nation from bankruptcy, morally and economically. Through active and dynamic interfaith dialogues and cooperation, my self-confidence to lead Muhammadiyah grew stronger than before. Perhaps the contribution made by the religious leaders at that time was not so great, but at the moral level, I'm sure, we had done something meaningful for the nation.

ACR: While you were still the president of Muhammadiyah, you have established the Maarif Institute for Culture and Humanity. What was the aim?

Syafii Maarif: The Maarif Institute has a golden goal for the future of Indonesia. This institute seeks Indonesia that is free from any religious zealotry; it is committed to envision the future of the nation where democratic and pluralistic values are honored and respected by all citizens regardless of their historical and religious background. Indonesia is the home for all, though the Muslims are the majority of the population.

ACR: Why did you not go into politics as your predecessor Amien Rais did?

Syafii Maarif: At my old age, power politics is no longer my interest or concern. But I have always been critical about the nation's situation and raised voice through my writings, speeches, and actions.

ACR: As you observe, how is the current situation of the Muslim-Christian relations in Indonesia?

Syafii Maarif: The climate of the Muslim-Christian relations in Indonesia has become more conducive and fruitful as the time passes. Of course, there have been some misunderstandings between the two at the grass-roots level, but in general, the interfaith cooperation has shown its very positive and constructive leanings.

ACR: Finally, what is the future prospect of the Muslim-Christian relations in Indonesia?

Syafii Maarif: I can assure you the future shape of Muslim-Christian relations will be full of the spirit of human brotherhood under the philosophy of Pancasila!