

Farish: Look to Indonesia

How Islam is taught makes a difference

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KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia and the rest of the Muslim world have much to learn from Indonesia's progressive approach in Islamic education, said political scientist Dr Farish Ahmad-Noor.

Indonesia had a big number of moderate scholars that even if a few radical groups emerged, the mainstream groups would quickly silence them, said Farish, an Institute of Strategic and International Studies consultant.

During the Suharto era, the Muslims expanded on cultural Islam rather than dogmatic politics-based Islam, he said. After that, it was taught in a scientific way.

In comparison, Islam in Malaysia is politicised and there is no independent space for it to be in the public domain, he said when interviewed at the ISIS International Affairs forum on "Jihad revisited? Shifting dynamics of radical movements in Indonesia" yesterday.

While banning militant groups worked, he said he was concerned that if there was no deep understanding of religion at the public level, the state would continue to be the "big brother."

"What if one day the state is replaced by a fanatic prime minister? There will be no mode of civil defence underneath. This is where Indonesia is different from us.

"The rejection of terrorism in Indonesia did

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DR FARISH AHMAD-NOOR

not come from the state but from the people. They didn't want to see mosques or churches or Bali or Jakarta bombed," he said.

Farish said Malaysia, in the 1920s, was more open, with people discussing the applicability of syariah law in the modern world and the role of Islam in politics.

Syed Sheikh Al-hadi, for instance, wrote *Hikayat Faridah Hanum*, the first modern Malay literature about women's rights.

Farish, a visiting professor at the Sunan Kalijaga Islamic University in Jogjakarta, said he is often asked: "Why is the interpretation of Islam so narrow in Malaysia when historically and culturally we (Malaysia and Indonesia) are similar?"