

Ulasan Buku/*Book Review*

Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourse in Cyberspace. By Mohammed el-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis. 2009. New York: Palgrave. 269 pages. Reviewed by Muhamad Faisal Ashaari.

This book is a good contribution to the growing number of scholarly literature on the discourse of Islam in cyberspace. It addresses the issue of increasing Islamic discourse after the advent of the Internet that raises the question “Who speaks for Islam?” (pg. 116). On that perspective, the book examines the potential impact of the computer mediated communication (CMC) on the fragmentation of Islamic authority, the reconfiguration of the “virtual *ummah*” and on the creation of multiple identities and resistances. The significance of this book is the combination of theoretical and practical analyses of the problem. The theoretical part of this book has been developed based on the concept of authority in Islam that is seen from the perspective of the Habermas’ public sphere while the practical part has been surveyed through analyzing the content of most visited Islamic websites: www.Islamonline.net, www.amrkhaled.com and www.Islamway.com. Textual analysis has been used in the analyses that require studying the actual text and interpreting meanings constructed through that text. Data were analyzed from the discussion forums in these websites stretched over a period of six months: from February to July 2008.

The book consists of an introduction and six chapters where the last is the conclusion of the study. The first chapter presents the analyses on the dynamics of the complex relationship between contemporary political and religious authorities in the Muslim world in addition to the exploration of the traditional structure of Islamic authority. The authors argue that the traditional structure of authority of the *Ulama*’ has slowly fragmented; firstly, due to splitting of *Ulama*’ to Sunni and Shiite, secondly, due to the broken relationship between *Ulama*’ and their followers after the former have been used to endorse and legitimize certain rules satisfying the political leaders of their periods. Meanwhile, the authority of *Ulama*’ in contemporary Islamic world has gradually diminished after print technology was introduced to the Islamic world in the second half of the 19th century. The emergence of the massive scale of education based on printing

rather than on memorizing and after *Ulama'* have been controlled by the state by putting them under a department are also causes that have undermined the *Ulama'*s authority.

Chapter Two discusses the position of Islamic authority in cyberspace after the Internet provides an open medium for those who want to speak, to comment and to criticize Islam. The authors argue that this phenomenon in cyberspace can release Islam from the domination of a small group of Muslims called *Ulama'* because it presents increasing ambiguity, anxiety and uncertainty about interpretations of Islam. However, this argument is not supported with any empirical study in the literature because ambiguity, anxiety and uncertainty are perceptions that are differently interpreted by different people. It also depends on the extent of people's reliance on the Internet or authorised figures as the main source of information pertaining to religion. Therefore, diversity of opinions regarding interpretation of *al-Qur'an* and *al-Sunnah* is not a primary problem in Islam because it is found many opinions of *al-fuqaha'* (Islamic jurists) in an issue of *al-fiqh*. The problem is when the unqualified person gives an opinion about Islam but the perception remains unproven.

Chapter Three examines the concept of *Ummah* that seems to be compatible with some attributes of Habermas' public sphere in terms of exhibiting qualities of universality, equality and potentiality of encompassing the consensual aspects among its members. The authors argue that *Ummah* is a unifying system of global Muslim religious community under the banner of Islam, beyond the cultural and regional differences. However, the challenges and the problems of *Ummah* cannot be measured with rational and critical discourses as in the Habermas' public sphere. The authors identify the main challenges of *Ummah* at international public sphere from four perspectives namely: re-Islamization, democratization, dialogue and pluralism. They have come to the conclusion that these challenges have stemmed from incompatibility between modernism and the Islamic resurgence. Nevertheless, the relationship between modernism and Habermas' public sphere as well as the conflict between modernism and the Islamic resurgence has been briefly mentioned as the essence of incompatibility between the *Ummah* and Habermas' public sphere.

The practical part of the study is presented in Chapter Four and Chapter Five. It presents the analyses of three websites

mentioned earlier. Chapter Four sheds the light on “virtual *ummah*” and collective identity while Chapter Five focuses on the divergent identity in the cyberspace.

The construction of “virtual *ummah*” is an imagined community in cyberspace. The authors find the identity of Muslim as the most important “identity-signifier” (pg. 207) that can constitute collective identity in cyberspace as is observed throughout discussions on these sites. They argue, although the construction process of “virtual *ummah*” is growing, it is incompatible with Habermas’ public sphere because it is not based on rational-critical debates and deliberations. This argument is supported with evidence in the websites. Apart from that, they highlight two implications of “virtual *Ummah*” as the new medium for Muslims to engage firstly in online discussions and deliberations which can help in expressing, shaping and negotiating; and secondly in the process of *shura* and *ijtihad*. However, a striking point in Chapter Four is the lack of evidence to prove diminishing Islamic authority as discussed in Chapter One.

The divergence identity has been found throughout discussions in the websites under study. The authors have observed this divergence, including conflict identity, in these websites among different groups of Muslims such as Sunni and Shiite or between Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as different gender discourse and political discourse. They claim that there are two factors that contribute to the divergent identity on the cyberspace. The first is identity label in constituting personal and communal relationships and the second is refutation of identity signifiers. Both are utilised as “divisive strategy” (pg. 207) and “makers of differences” (pg. 207) which diversify identity rather than construct identity.

Chapter Six is the conclusion chapter. The authors wrap up that the Islamic discourse in cyberspace is neither totally compatible with Habermas’ public sphere nor the concept of *ijtihad* and *shura*. It can be either platforms for consensus or sites of contentions because of multiple identities and the diversified backgrounds of participants.

One of the book’s problems is that the fragmentation of Islamic authority; it is not sufficiently analysed in the websites under study. The focus is given more to the Habermas’ public sphere, either rational-critical or not. Finally, even though the book provides interesting data for future studies on the presence of Islam in cyberspace, it does not provide a sufficiently vigorous theoretical

framework on the authority because it misses primary references in Arabic language of prominent Muslim scholars; traditional and contemporary.

This book appears in the series of international political communication consists of ten books published by Palgrave Macmillan. The series offers various comparative focus analyses on topics related to the increasingly changing communication environment that is being shaped by new media and new political realities. Only this book in this series emphasises on the impact of new media on Islam while others, the emphasis is placed on democratization to terrorism, economic development to conflict resolution, and global political dynamics. The series editor is Philip Seib and editorial board members compose of seven scholars namely; Hussein Amin from Egypt, Robin Brown and Robin Mansell from UK, Eytan Gilboa from Israel, Steven Livingstone and Holli Semetco from US, and Ingrid Volkmer from Australia.

Faisal Ashaari
Jabatan Pengajian Dakwah dan Kepimpinan
Fakulti Pengajian Islam
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia
faisal@ukm.my