

# Liberty in the Muslim World

Friday, 19 February 2016

- Chair: Wan Saiful Wan Jan, CEO, Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), Malaysia
- Farouk Musa, Islamic Renaissance Front, Malaysia
- Ali Salman, Prime, Pakistan
- Muhammad Ikhsan, Suara Kebebasan

This session featured discussions about the Islamic faith and its relationship with the principles of liberty. Dr Farouk began by quoting Namik Kemal, “man is naturally obliged to benefit from the divine gift of freedom. State authority should be limited” and noted that many countries with a Muslim majority are authoritarian and lack respect for individual freedom.

He noted that the “22 member countries of the Arab League today have a lower GDP than that of Belgium and Holland and produce fewer scientific publications than Israel alone” and theorised as to how and why the Muslim world changed, from being the most advanced culture a few centuries ago to its current decrepit state.

He argued that extremism, fundamentalism and economic backwardness of the Muslim world at present are the results of a historical evolution - one in which Islam has strayed from its original message of peace and justice.

Dr Farouk said that this regression started almost a millennium ago by the rise of the Asharie sect in the 10th century – which taught that human reason was the enemy of Islam and adherents must practice absolute submission to will of Allah. Dr Farouk noted that many of the current ills in the Muslim world can be traced to this deformed theology and the dysfunctional culture that emerged from it.

Dr Farouk argued that many Muslims are still collectively chained to their past. In order to break free, Muslims could look at alternative interpretations of the Mu'tazilites; who formulated a theory that may enable Muslims to become committed to modernism, peace and harmony.

Muhammad Ihksan spoke next about his experience of living in the world's largest Muslim country – Indonesia. He noted that Indonesia has a robust civil society, but is experiencing serious challenges such as rising religious intolerance and radicalism. There has also been a gradual move towards the enactment and implementation of Sharia law at the local level – where 7 out of 33 provinces and 51 out of 510 districts adopted at least one sharia regulation from 1999-2009. Mr Ikhsan concluded the session by stating that he is a cautious optimist and commented on the emerging role of social media - as a tool to promote religious moderation and counter radical extremism in Indonesia.

Ali Salman from Prime Institute said that in the past, Pakistan was an Islamic state where individuals often experienced state sponsored persecution. He noted that “political Islam has failed, but society has moved on”. He argued that Islamisation is now largely symbolic that the leading political parties in Pakistan are now inclusive, moderate and centrist. In terms of liberty for the average Pakistani, he noted that there is little state censorship, the media and flow of information is diverse and thriving and that women wear traditional headscarves in large numbers as a result of exercising their individual choice. He also said that the Pakistani democracy has been largely resilient and peaceful in recent years and that the country is now in the post Islamist era.