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Islam and Western Debates on Human Rights

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Abstract

Eventhough there are overlapping and intersection in defining the concept of Human Rights, Islam and Western have serious debates on it. The debates started from the different sources of human rights. Islam put the revelation as the foundation of its rule and Western mostly depend on the individual freedom. In term of its implementation, Western critizes Islam as the ideology as well as actor behind the violation of human rights. In its point of views, Islam distinguishes the rights of the people based on the concepts of Islamic state, gender inequality, and various kinds of inhumane *shariah* law. On the other hand, Islam argues that Islam has more complete and advance concept of human rights than the Western since Western does not concern on the social rights of people. Even if the concept is analyzed based on the Islamic values and history, it would be clear that Islam promote human rights seriously. For some of controversial issues in Islamic *shariah* such as *qishos*, amputation and inheritance, Islam assures that they have many benefits for the common rights of the people.

Meskipun terjadi interseksi dan tumpang tindih dalam mendefinisikan konsep Hak Asasi Manusia, Islam dan Barat memiliki perdebatan serius dalam isu tersebut. Hal ini dimulai dari perbedaan sumber yang digunakan dalam memahami HAM. Islam menempatkan wahyu sebagai dasar bagi setiap aturannya sementara Barat banyak tergantung dengan kebebasan individu. Dalam hal implementasinya, Barat mengritik Islam sebagai ideologi sekaligus aktor di balik berbagai pelanggaran HAM. Menurutnya Islam telah memisahkan hak manusia berdasarkan konsep negara Islam, ketidaksetaraan gender dan berbagai hukum syariah yang tidak manusiawi. Pada sisi lain, Islam berpendapat bahwa Islam mempunyai konsep HAM yang lebih lengkap dan maju dibandingkan Barat, dimana Barat tidak perhatian terhadap berbagai hak sosial masyarakat. Bahkan jika konsep HAM dalam Islam dianalisa berdasarkan nilai dan sejarahnya, maka akan terlihat jelas bahwa Islam sangat mendukung HAM. Adapun berkaitan dengan beberapa isu yang kontroversial dalam hukum Islam seperti qishos, potong tangan, masalah warisan dan sejenisnya, Islam meyakinkan bahwa semua itu mempunyai manfaat yang banyak bagi hak masyarakat secara kolektif.

Keywords: Islam; Western; *shariah*; individual rights; social rights

Introduction

Debates of Islam and Western perspective on human rights are unavoidable. Both have different notions on human rights. Islam puts the revelation as the foundation to understand human rights, on the other side the Western claims that human rights mostly is a product of individual freedom. By such different perspective, in term of its implementation, Islam argues that the Western has violated social rights, and the Western claims that Islam does not respect individual rights.

Basically, there are a lot of similar concepts of human rights in Islam and Western perspective. Amien Rais have stated this notion when he said that there are overlapping and intersection between the concept of human rights in Islam and Western perspective. However, the Western perspective has dominated global definition about human rights and accused Islamic values as not compatible with human rights. Immanuel Kant who believed that the universalism of human rights could only be implemented under liberal perspective supports this argument.

Therefore, misunderstanding towards Islam about human rights emerged within the Western societies. Inspite the comment of Islam as a non-contextual religion, no tolerance for differences and rejects democracy, Islam is often associated with the violation of human rights as well. They said that Islam has taught violation to human rights with the concept of jihad, *qishos*, Islamic state and etcetera. This opinion was raised by Ann Elizabeth Mayer who wrote in his book, Islam and Human Rights, that the principles of human rights came from Europe, precisely during the enlightenment period.²

Pollis and Schwab gave another notion who argued that human rights historically have its root only from the Western Europe and North America.³ Thus; there is no relation between human rights and Islam. Most of Western scholars argued that the British and French thinkers were the scholars who brought human rights as an essential element in political thoughts.

Based on the introduction above, this paper would like to answer the question "How did the debate between Islam and Western perspectives on understanding human rights occur?" To answer this question, this paper will be started with the discussion of Western criticism to Islam on the issue of human rights. Then I will explain the position of Islam about human rights based on the historical and Islamic values perspective. After getting both points of views, this paper will analyze the strongest arguments from both perspectives.

Western Criticism to Islam on the Issue of Human Rights

Western academic life is colored with scientific evidence to conclude their analysis. Western scholars used to believe the phenomena based on reality that sometimes neglects the position of values. For instance, in understanding Islam, they tend to see Muslim's life in reality, without considering that not all Muslims—neither all other religions followers—are pious and religious.

This method somehow causes misperception in observing the reality. If Islam is defined like how particular Muslims behave, the existence of real Islamic values will be obscure. This is also the reason behind Western's views arguing that Islam rejects the respect towards human rights. Their arguments to claim such notions are:

First, In Islam there is a concept of Islamic state (darul Islam) and not the State of Islam (darul kuffar/darul harb). This concept is actually not new in Islam because the syariah law had been implemented in long history of Islam since the era of Prophet Muhammad PBUH. Then, in the20th century, this concept became so famous through the doctrine of Sayyid Qutb. He declared that there is only one place on earth that can be called the House of Islam (darul Islam). The characteristic of this place is the implementation of syariah and God's law. So that, the other parts of the world where syariah is not implemented is called as the House of War (darul harb).⁴

For Western people, this is as part of Islamic movement efforts to establish pax Islamism. It is right that majority of Muslim in this current time only concerns on the implementation of Islamic state, but slowly it will support to the establishment of pax Islamism (*khalifah*). By this concept, Western argued that Islam is not universal. Although in Islam it is stated that Muslims would guarantee protection toward non-Muslims within the Islamic state—in terms of welfare, security, and freedom as citizens—but the Western rejected this idea by arguing that it is not right, as Muslim would not give opportunity for non-Muslims to lead the country.

In addition, we also have to discuss the historical fact that during the Prophet era, the responsibilities of non-Muslims in Muslim countries were very simple. In the case of tax, for example, the payable taxes for non-Muslims were not more expensive than the Muslims' *zakat*. Only few facts which proved that the payable tax for non-Muslims in this era was more expensive that the value for *zakat*.

Second, Islam claims to be the best religion and falsifies previous religions. For Western people, what Islam said related to this statement shows that Islam want to eliminate other religions. It means that Islam does not appreciate freedom. It means, Islam is not the religion that truly respects the concept of human rights.

Third, Islam views human beings as dichotomous. For example, Islam has the concepts of Muslim and non-Muslims, men and women, and free-people and slaves.⁵ They said that Islam rejects the equality of human being. Therefore, this perspective harms the concept of human rights.

Forth, Islamic law is considered as not educative and inhumane. It means that the Western sees Islam as an uncivilized religion. For example, in Islam there are concepts of *qishos*, death penalty and amputations. In Western perspective, none of those concepts is compatible with the principle of humanity. Unfortunately, they said that only liberal Muslims who want to do the religious reform.⁶

Basically there are still a lot of other reasons regarding Western criticism toward Islam on human rights, but the realities show that they are not really consistent on their point of views. It can be seen through some violence defying human rights that had been conducted by the Westerns, but they did not bring these cases upfront like human rights issues. For instance, the issue of American invasion to Iraq and Afghanistan that caused many victims has not been recognized as violation toward human rights. The same thing also happened to Israel that has killed huge number of Palestinian people, of which no Western media complained. However, different responses were given the Islamic world whenever there are incidents related to human rights issues, even when it recorded less number of victims. This condition caused the view that human rights issues have already become one political tool of powerful Western countries.

Is Human Rights Compatible With Islam?

Based on the criticism of Western towards Islam on human rights above, this part will analyze whether Islam is compatible or not compatible with human rights. The analysis will be done in term of its values and historical perspectives. It is important to be done because mostly the Western criticizes current issues and some values of Islam that they understood.

By using these two methods in figuring the existence of human rights in Islam, we will easily understand the arguments of some Muslim thinkers who said that Islam is compatible to human rights. In Islam, human right is not only related to individual rights, but also social rights. In other words, Islam manages the rights of people in term of their relations with their family, parents, children, neighbors, leader, and etcetera. For Islam, all those elements of life have their own rights and the human being needs to fulfill it. The Prophet Muhammad said that we need to fulfill the rights of our body and family.

Moreover, in term of individual rights, Islam believes that each person's rights should be protected. They have rights to have houses and other facilities, as well as rights of freedom of expression and opinion. Simply, the supreme law, the Koran and Sunnah, should guide all rights in Islam.

The Concept of Human Rights in the Perspective of Islam

Human rights is the basic rights which given by God, even before men exist. In Islam, because human is the caliph of God, then their rights have to be governed by God through revelation. While in the Arabic language, the rights derived from the plural word of *haqq*, which is *huquq*, defined as the creation of facts, truth, justice, and equality. Some scholars such as Imam Shalabi said that *haqq* means something in accordance with the truth.⁷

In Islam, human rights is based on respect (*karamah*), freedom (*hurruriyah*), humanism (*insaniah*), equality (*musawah*), usefulness (*insaniah*), accountability (*mas'uliah*), cooperation (*ta'awun*), and fairness (*adalah*).⁸ It is also related to legal issues. In this case, Islamic law is related to the law that is derived from revelation (Quran and Hadith) and *fiqh* (meaningful understanding and interpretation of the revelation). Of course, the meaning of *fiqh* will be very closely related to the using of human reasoning.

Justification of the using of human reasoning is available in the *hadith* of Muadz bin Jabal, when he would be sent to Yemen. The Prophet Muhammad asked him on how to decide issues that are not found in the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. Then he answered with *ijtihad* (use of reasoning), then the Prophet Muhammad agreed. *Ijtihad* in this case includes consensus and *qiyas*. 9

The issue is how big the position of reasoning is. This is why the study of religion practices should be categorized into two, which are worship and *mua'amalah*. Worship is a relationship between human being with God, and this law is unchangeable. The reasoning must absolutely accept it. While in terms of relations among human being (*mu'amalah*), there is a freedom to use reasoning as long as it does not contradict to the Islamic principles.¹⁰

In understanding such notions of human rights in Islam, Even if we would like to understand the position of human rights in Islam, it will be more complicated since almost all aspects of life are discussed in Islam. Nevertheless, to make it simple, human rights in Islam is basically divided into two, namely private/personal rights and public rights. The difference between the two is the emphasis of both for what such rights exist, the dominant private interests or the public.

Personal rights is the rights which are more dominant with respect to the individual, such as the rights to life, rights to security, rights to be respected,

rights to equality, rights to brotherhood, rights to justice, rights to choose and etcetera. The explanation of each right can be discussed as following:

a. Rights of Life

In Islam, it is forbidden to kill human being, though only one person without any just reason. Islam argued that killing one man is actually similar to killing all humankind. But if you protect the life of a man, it is similar to protecting the lives of all people. Al Qur'an also said that you do not kill people who are not allowed to be killed, except you are commanded (by God to do it).

b. Rights of Security

Security in this case is not only for the Muslims, but also for non-Muslim who do not attack or are not in war with Muslims (*kafir dzimmi*). Prophet Muhammad said that if you hurt them (*kafir dzimmi*) it is similar to hurt me.

c. Rights to be Respected

In this case, Islam commands its followers to respect the human being. Because when someone respects another, the other will respect he/she. Even in Islam, if someone saw a died person is brought to the burial, and then he/she should stand when he/she is sitting as a form of respect.

d. Rights of Equality

There are many examples about this equality. Prophet Muhammad said that nothing is better or higher (among you) the Arabs or not Arabs, but the best is who do the best in their faith. All human beings are essentially the caliph of God on this earth.

e. Rights of Brotherhood

This rights means that Islam arranges the brotherhood not only based on blood relationship, but also because of religion. In the perspective of Islam, all Muslims are brothers.

f. Rights of Justice

A leader must lead in fairness and justice. This justice is not only to the human being, but also to the animal. In the history of the collection of hadith, someone who ever cheated a chicken cannot be accepted as the hadith messenger. This justice in Islam as mentioned in the Quran that your hearing and your brain will be held accountable.

Therefore, in judging a human problem, one should act fairly. Clearly, Abu A'la Al Maududi said that justice is not only for the people of one nation, one tribe, nation or race, but rather justice for the entire Muslim community and to all human beings on earth.¹²

g. Rights to Choose

Islam gives freedom to people to choose their work, recreation, marriage, even in defining religion. For example the word of God, please go to the corners of the earth and see how God's creations are. In other surah, it is also explained that there is no compulsion in religion.

Meanwhile, the public's right is respect of the individuals to the interests of public affairs, such as:

a. Rights to Worship

In this case, Islam understands that whole life of human being is to worship Allah. This is the real meaning of the pillars of Islam. By understanding that life means worshipping God, every Muslim will be in the right way.

b. Rights of State to Give Punishment

For example, *qishos* (do similar replies/punishment as the first action). In *qishas*, the practice includes killing people who has killed other people, cutting hands for thieves, and etcetera. The purpose of this law is to minimize the number of crimes that happened in the society.

c. Rights to Participate in Solving Public Affairs

In this case, the life of Muslims is not only for his/her own self. The most important thing of life is when someone can do something beneficial for others, such as jihad to keep the existence of truth, religion and state, zakat to solve poverty, and so on.

Historical Perspective

Western argumentation regarding human rights in Islam did not represent the real and complete history of Islam. Even some of the historical events were not history of Islam because they show stories of people who did not abide Islamic values. Sometimes, Western people point of view are based on the condition of Islamic countries that have been influenced a lot by Western perspectives.

When Prophet Muhammad died, the revelation was no longer conveyed. For some issues which have not been understood, the scholars will do ijtihad. In the process of simplification, Islam is divided into several areas such as Aqeedah, syariah, worship, and mu'amalah. Due to the enlargement of Muslim regions, there were some influences from previous civilizations in Islamic method of thinking. The development also recorded emergence of new groups

under the name of Islamic modernization. Most of them were influenced by Western method of thinking.

For example, in Ottoman Turkey, westernization is shown in the concept of taxation that is influenced by Western way of thinking. In this practice, tax is the obligation of all segments of society, regardless of them being Muslim or non-Muslims. Western said that it is important for the principle of equality. ¹³ Of course the scholars who understand *salafiyyin* method were against this practice. In their perspective, Muslims should pay *zakat* and only non-Muslims should pay tax. The other thing that Turkey has done was changing the system of the caliphate to a republic system. Turkey then proclaimed itself as a country that respects the values of freedom as contained in the French revolution, which includes equality, freedom of thought and expression as well as Turkey's religion to society. ¹⁴

In contrast with Turkey, in Egypt, M. Abduh (1849 - 1905) said that Islam actually already owns what is in the Western principles. Through media of Al-Mannar, he worked to show Islamic principles up in the modern life. He brought Islamic values as something prominent in various aspects of people's life. For instance, in education, he promoted Islamic education to be implemented in national education. He did believe that culture and civilization are not only the hegemony of the Western.¹⁵

Those debates within Islam in facing modernization have been aroused since the 20th century. Consequently, the influence of Western perspective to Islamic notions is quite significant. Still, Muslim scholars have the principles that under massive Westernization, Islam will never change its system of worshipping and traditional understanding related to the religion principles. On the issue of human rights, Islam will keep on being consistent on the appearance of *shariah* within the concept of rights.

Moreover, human rights that are based on the pure historical background of Islam were born in an uncivilized society. In its development, many badui people converted to Islam. In that era, the culture of ashobiyah (fanaticism/exaggeration of the group) was very strong. Every group claimed that their group was the best. When Islam came, it offered a new concept of equality among Muslim. There is no one higher than the other and the difference is only in term of piety (taqwa). With this concept, the people including badui felt be respected more by Islam. It assures us that Islam is compatible with human rights.

Which One Gives More Respect to Human Rights?

Both Western and Islamic perspectives on human rights have been explained above. Although there are a lot of Western criticisms on the position

of Islam regarding the human rights, Islamic scholars - on the other hand - also criticize Western perspective on human rights. For example, Abu A'la Al Maududi criticized the concept of human rights from Western perspective. In his opinion, the Western is too arrogant in facing Islamic world, including also on the issue of human rights. He said the Western tends to claim that everything good is coming from them and claimed that the world is a blessing due to their existence.¹⁶

Here, we understand that there is a competition among different cultures and ideologies in defining human rights. The liberalist puts individual rights in the higher position to the social rights. On the other hand, the socialist group argues that social rights is more important that individual rights. In between the two ideologies, Islam recognizes individual rights, but it should respect the existence of social rights. By such condition, we also realize that the term of human rights does not exist in a vacuum room. Thus, the impact of cultural, social and political background will be very important.

That is why the discussion of human rights still lingers until now. It means that there is still possibility that the definition of human rights will shift from Western perspective to the other one. At least there might be assimilation of concepts from various ideologies and point of views. The history of the emergence of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 was an example of this collaboration between the liberalist and socialist groups.

Islam may also become one of the possible ideologies to give much influence towards human rights. Some efforts to reach "the Islamization" of human rights have been started. For instance, it could be seen through the seminar on human rights in Islam which was conducted in Kuwait 1980. At that time, they agreed to state that Islam have recognized and protected human rights since fourteen centuries ago. It means that human rights in Islam are much older than the Western. Western concept of human rights was just introduced in the seventeenth centuries.

Moreover, there was also the effort to declare the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Right in 1981 by the Islamic Council of Europe that was sponsored by Saudi Arabia. With the same mission to Kuwait seminar, this declaration stated that fourteen hundred years ago, Islam gave an ideal code of human rights to humanity.

Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) also conducted the same action. The Muslim scholars want to bring the concept of *shariah* to Western concept of human rights. Absolutely this kind of intention caused the Western to blame Muslim since there are many terms in human rights are defined differently. In understanding the concept of equality for example, Islam does not recognize that all things should be similar. Furthermore, there are many other issues that were discussed such as the issue of marriage with people from different

religion, the issue of nationality, brotherhood, and etcetera. The most important one is that the meeting that was well known as Cairo Declaration in 1990 agreed for the universality of Islam as a well-balanced civilization.¹⁷

By those different efforts in showing the support of Islam to human rights, it is also important to clarify Western criticism towards Islam on human rights issues. If the Western argues that there are many human rights violations were supported by Islam, there are some scientific explanations of why Islam supported some of those actions or principles, which were criticized by the Western. Thus, it will be easier to compare which one gives more respect towards human rights. In this case, in spite of the concept of the revelation, Islam will be seen based on how Prophet Muhammad became the leader in Medina.

First, the Western should not generalize sociological facts as Islam itself. Because, in reality not in all Western countries, including in America is free from discrimination. The authors of the west, for example, often explained that Sudan issue is an example of Islam discrimination to other faiths. This should not happen because Sudan is not a representative of Islam.

Second, the issue of Islam claiming as the best religion is not supposed to be considered very serious because every religion claims the same thing. Therefore, when Islam claims to be the best religion, it is reasonable if a Muslim delivers it. That is not to say Islam considers other religions must be abolished. If so, Islam would not have a concept about relationships with other faiths. Moreover, it is clear in Islam, that there are few verses and hadith, which stated that there is no compulsion in religion, your religion for you and for me my religion. Prophet Muhammad also said do not hurt people (non-Muslim) who do not fight Islam because it is tantamount to hurt me. It is clearly visible in the history of how the Prophet had an agreement to live in harmony with other faiths.

Third, about the concept of Muslims and non-Muslims, as the arguments above, this concept also will be used in other religions. If there is no distinguished identity, the religious orders will not be possibly done. As for men, women, freemen and slaves, in the case in God's view of Islam they are not different one another, but based on the level of their faith before God. Unlike the case with social issues, it was already proven how dangerous it is especially for children's education, moral nation, and the family unit if a woman has no more roles in the household. God has already distinguished men and women instinctively and physically different. A woman for example, serves to give birth to children and breastfeed the babies, it is impossible for a man to do such kind of roles. The question is, if men and women serve different roles in their life, is it even possible to force them to have the same roles? If yes, then it is a rejection of naturalism.

In the case of slavery, for example, in the public system in this era, either in Western society or in other society, it is impossible that an employee will act the role of a manager. What Islam wants to explain is that someone must act in accordance with the position and capabilities of him/her self.

Forth, Islam is considered as and inhumane religion due to its concept of doing qishos, capital punishment, or the cutting off hands for thefts. This opinion is not right because Islam attempts to give the "wary effect" to the society in order to prevent such similar crimes to happen in the future within the community. In reality, when there is no such rather clear and strong punishment such as in the current time, crime rate increases significantly.

Moreover, for Muslim human rights issues are only a tool of Western to colonize Islamic world. The Western has abundantly exploited the Islamic regions. Therefore, the concept of human rights or the criticism of Western world toward the implementation of human rights in Islamic world is problematic. ¹⁸ What they are doing is not more than a force to universalize the concept of liberal human rights all over the world, including to the Islamic world. ¹⁹ In other words, there is no universality expect to lose the local values of particular region or religion.

Conclusion

Based on the explanation above, we can conclude that Islam is a religion that respects human rights very much, in terms of not only individual rights, but also social rights. Sometimes, when Islam put the social rights as priority above individual rights, the Western criticizes Islam as false religion that has no concept of human rights.

Nevertheless, if we try to analyze clearly, there will be reason that the life of human being is not only based on the life of one person, because everybody will have different interests compared to the others. Common interests of people should be respected first. However, it does not mean that individual rights cannot exist. Even, this is the way to protect the rights of individual.

Therefore, through this concept - which respects both individual and social rights - Islam shows that its human rights concept is much more complete and advanced compared to the Western concept of human rights.

Endnotes

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