Muslim Youth in Southeast Asia:
The Struggle of Identity in the Era of Digital Capitalism

With more than 60% of the population under 40 years old, the ASEAN region is a highly attractive market for foreign direct investment, as the Minister of International Trade and Industry of Malaysia – Dato' Sri Mustapa Mohamed in 'the First ASEAN Young Entrepreneurs Forum' last January 2015, underlined that ASEAN is a 'youthful market' because its countries have a very large youth population.

His statement is not an empty talk, for Muslim countries of Southeast Asia have a tremendous potential in the number of their young people. In Malaysia, the youth population is at 43 percent of the total population or 13 million people. While in Indonesia - the largest Muslim country – it is at 158 million people or 66.5 percent of the total population (2010 statistics). Furthermore, Indonesia is predicted to experience a demographic bonus which will peak in 2020-2030. It means that this country will have a population composition with a large productive age up to 70 percent.

With the total population being approximately 628 million, of which about 40 percent is youth generations who are digital-familiar, of course this incredible potential of ASEAN is considered as a very lucrative market by the capitalist economists. Moreover, today's youth generation is titled as the millennial generation because these young people were born and grew up in a digital world - which makes them a huge market potential for online trading, especially after the implementation of the AEC (ASEAN Economic Community) last December 2015.

Digitalization of Free Market

Through the AEC, Eastern Capitalism (China and Japan) along with Western Capitalism (America and Europe) are competing to control the economy of ASEAN and targeting the youths as market. They are keen to take advantage of all facilities and seize market opportunities. One of their strategies is performing digitization through information technology which is now getting popular known as the digital economy - a new way to penetrate the online market by passing the state borders.

Statistics showed that the number of internet users in Southeast Asia reaches 252 million, with 232 million[1] being social media users. This number necessitates that massive free trade transactions not only being carried out directly but also online through social media. Social media –that previously only functioned as a virtual communications arena - has become the arena of buying and selling of various needs of both goods and services. Therefore, it is no wonder e-commerce transactions via internet applications have been increasingly more excellent today. The question is who are the main costumers? None other than the youth, because they are the most technology literate group, as well as having the highest access to the rapid flow of information in the internet.

Several high-level meetings before and after the launch of the AEC show a strong indication of the rivalry of power of Western and Eastern capitalism in performing digitalization of free market in ASEAN. The most prominent example is the meeting of the ASEAN-US Summit in February 2016 in California where leaders of the Muslim countries of ASEAN met with three CEOs of digital economy giants in the US with Obama, i.e. Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, IBM CEO Ginni Rometty, and CISCO CEO Chuck Robbins. This meeting was promoting the importance of the digital economy partnerships with Muslim countries.[2] While on the other side, Eastern Capitalism especially China has also aggressively wiped

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[1]based on research of We Are Social Singapore on November 2015 https://www.techinasia.com/talk/digital-southeast-asia-q4-2015
[2]Tech giants tell ASEAN leaders to embrace AI technology
http://www.nst.com.my/news/2016/02/127813/tech-giants-tell-asean-leaders-embrace-ai-technology

out the infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia. In the interval of last year's Asian-African Conference, China agreed to invest in building 24 ports and 15 airports, as well as constructing 1,000 km of road, 8,700 km railroad, and power plants with a capacity of 35,000 megawatts (MW).

As a result of digitalization free market, more than 160 million Muslim youth in Southeast Asia have been surrounded by the power of Western and Eastern Capitalism. These capitalist powers seem in rivalry but in fact they complement each other in the hegemony of free market. They have been doing so that the ASEAN region would increasingly have both online and physical infrastructure connectivity thus they will be able to win the hearts, minds, and alignments of Muslim youth in the region.

Digital Secularization of the Youth

"Every 60 seconds, almost 700,000 search queries are conducted on Google, 695,000 status updates carried on Facebook, 98,000 tweets created on Twitter, 1,500 new blog entries posted, 600+ videos posted on YouTube, and other astounding statistics." - Go-Globe.com

Information flows very heavily in this internet-based era. So many things we can see, read, and hear on the Internet. Statistics of information availability is very surprising, that every day we receive huge information flow yet unfortunately most of which are not necessarily beneficial and relevant to our needs. This flow is like a high intensity of echoing noise that will sweep away the hearts and minds of Muslim youth. Eventually, it can paralyze "the nerve to think and act" by keeping them busy with just clicking the *like* and *share* buttons, or writing empty short comments in response to an issue. However in truth, the potential of the young generation is much larger than that.

Even more terrifying, the flood of information due to agenda pursued by the West has **eliminated the position of Islamic *thaqafah* (culture) as the 'noble and important information' for the youth generation** and has replaced it with the Western culture and secular values. At the same time, it has also **aligned the position of beneficial knowledge with cheap gossip, product commercial advertisements, and worthless lifestyle information**.

This is the flow of digital secularization which is sheltered under the umbrella of digital economy and has found a greater place when AEC was implemented in Southeast Asia. This flow has even been facilitated by Muslim rulers who commit themselves to the spread of Western values through digital media. As showed by the President of Indonesia Jokowi's visit to Silicon Valley in February 2016. He praised the important role of Twitter in digital democracy, as what he said to Twitter CEO, *"I welcome the role of Twitter as one of the important world media platform that is spreading various positive values for the society such as democratic values and good governance"*. While in the office of Facebook, Jokowi invited the Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, to support the program *Empowering Leaders of Peace through Digital Platform* initiated by him.[3]

In addition, there is a flow with more extreme danger: promotion of freedom values such as LGBT by the digital giants. Obviously, freedom values carry a destructive impact on the young generation of Muslims because they will lead generations of humankind to the brink of extinction, spread diseases, and cause human depopulation. The promotion of such destructive lifestyles has been continually backed by the power of information flow and digital economy generated by Facebook, Google, Instagram, Apple, Microsoft, and rows of other capitalist corporations.

The digital spread of secular values has become more massive since AEC implemented, and this concern is also feared by Zulkifli Hasan –the chairman of the Assembly in Indonesia— who stated to

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[3]Indonesia Serius Kembangkan Ekonomi Digital http://ksp.go.id/indonesia-serius-kembangkan-ekonomi-digital/

the media in February 2016 that the implementation of AEC would bring a very broad impact for Indonesia. It is not only in the economic sector, but also in the political, social, and cultural sectors. *"Therefore, the Indonesian people should be very careful against the possibility of the entry of values from the outside, which will also invade Indonesia, simultaneously with the independent economic factors into Indonesia,"* he said.

This concern is reasonable because today **the flow of digital secularization has been symbiotic with free trade regime** and both are economic-growth-obsessive that will treat Muslim youth as not more than just economic engines producing money, but also paralyze their nerves from thinking and their ideals, as well as shoving them away from their Deen. This symbiosis is also combined with the intensive de-radicalization programs that focus on children and young Muslims, added with the secularization of education curriculum and schools, and regulation of madrassahs, as well as an existence of liberal culture worshipping Western culture at the same time eroding Islamic values. Crisis of identity and faith ultimately are developed among many young Muslims, making them enchanted with the Western lifestyle and liberal system so that they shape their thoughts, tendencies, aspirations, and loyalty upon it.

Muslim Youth and Literacy of Ideology

Challenges of digital secularization cause crisis of identity and faith in millions of young Muslims in the Islamic world, including Southeast Asia, should be responded to from the most fundamental aspect, which is how to develop a strong identity within Muslim youth. We know that the West has always wanted to seize the alignment of Muslim youth. Even if they fail, at least they have crippled the idealism of the young people so that they are wasting their time and their youth by consuming many damaging things.

Therefore, intensive "digital da'wah" efforts should be conducted targeting the youth to develop Islamic identity in order to re-direct their greatest attention only to Islam and the Muslim Ummah. Da'wah in this era of information requires a powerful viewpoint and information literacy. Information literacy based on Islamic ideology will equip young people to digest the flow of information and assess many events through the lens of Islam's Aqeedah. Point the Muslim youth to focus on consumption of important and noble information, firstly is the Islamic *thaqafah*, secondly is the beneficial knowledge, and also the facts of problems faced by the Muslim Ummah. This digital da'wah should also be targeted to develop the thinking and attitudes of young Muslims with Islam thus forming a strong and unique personality of Muslim.

Politics of media in Islam will be in line with the da'wah of Islam, and advances in technology will be utilized to the maximum level of da'wah purposes. This is a specific characteristic of the Islamic ideology that will not allow the economic power of corporations to take advantage of technology for the sake of merely creating a market meanwhile ignoring the realization of a healthy society and young generation with strong personality and integrity. Politics of media in Islam will adopt specific information strategies to explain Islam with a strong exposure and instilling a deep impression. Therefore it will be able to move human minds to turn their views towards Islam as well as to study and think about the substances of Islam. This strategy will build a strong political awareness in Muslim youth so they are able to understand the politics constellation actually happening to them, their environment, and Muslim Ummah through the power of Islamic identity.

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