**A Muslim’s Journey in Rotary**

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Rotary is an organisation which often appears to be overtly exclusive. One cannot just register to be a Rotarian. Membership is only possible “by invitation only”. At least that was my impression on early encounters after having been asked to observe a number of weekly meetings at Rotary Clubs around Jakarta. Badges on shirt pocket (easy to read) with call or nicknames (informal), roll calls (attendees list), club attendance, introduction of guests, standing-up, applause, and other unique ways which seemed somewhat foreign to the uninitiated.  It needs noting, the rhythm, format, and protocols are distinctly different from the village meetings, at which I am considered ‘an elder’, at Kampung Cinere (a suburb of Jakarta) where we reside, or even the occasional religious gatherings organised by my wife’s office.  Rotary Club seemed to operate as a fraternity, peculiar and eccentric, originating from America or at least, the west. Curios and somewhat tickled, I paid attention to the mottos that seemed to be central to this community and attempted to make sense of them, then found suitable translations of Service above Self and Fellowship through Service into Bahasa Indonesia.  All noble and idealistic, but are they applicable in reality?

Indeed there were manifestations and some consistencies. By the time I had attended my fifth gathering, I could pin down the essence of a weekly Rotary meeting - *plenty of conversations, intimate fellowship, often discussing projects, its planning and execution.*

Was I interested to join? Hold on

As it happened, the following day I mentioned this invitation to a close friend. He responded by reminding me to be extra cautious, because in the Rotary movement there is a Zionist agenda. That took me by surprise, and immediately sought for answers, amongst others, from my own father. At the time my father (Munawir Sjadzali) was the Minister of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (1983-1993), and before that a career diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for over three decades.  He answered by relating an incident when he was travelling in a delegation headed by the then Foreign Minister Adam Malik (who later became Indonesia’s third Vice President under Suharto) to a conference in Cairo, Egypt. At the check-in desk of the hotel was a brass plaque clearly showing “Rotary Club…. Meets Here Every Wednesday”.  Adam Malik turned to my dad and said “Wir, look at that, even here Rotary doesn’t seem to have any problem…. Why is it that in our country there are so many questions surrounding it…?”  He concluded the story by saying that allegations leveled at Rotary may be groundless.

I also looked at Soedarpo Sastrosatomo – patriot, politician, business tycoon, intellectual, philanthropist, and a die-hard Rotarian for over fifty years. He has held the post of District Governor (D3400), that is the most senior level in Indonesia, and is still considered the Godfather of Rotary in this country.

Would it not be too far-fetched, for a man of his breath of knowledge, experience, passion, sophistication and caliber, to be wrong (about Rotary) all this time? That the organisation which he cherishes so much is actually controlled and driven by sinister forces unknown to many, and carrying out conspirative missions and agendas.  I don’t think so. And with that rationalisation and consideration I accepted the offer to become a member.

With that I became one of nearly 2000 Rotarians in Indonesia, and more that 1.2 million worldwide. Businessmen, executives, lecturers, lawyers, doctors, journalists and from many backgrounds and professions – all seemingly united by a common need – fostering friendship and endeavouring as far as able through their respective expertise, influence, and networks to lend a hand to surrounding communities who were less fortunate.

On one occasion Prof. Dr. Azyumardi Azra (\*\*) described this practice as a manifestation of *Ukuwah Insaniah* (brotherhood amongst Men), that although we may be different, we are still descendants of Adam and Eve. There is also a text in the scriptures which says *ta awa anul albiri wa taqwa,* to help one another in good deeds and pious devotion.

The activities of *lending a hand* ranges from health matters such as establishing clinics, mobile health booths, harelip operations, clean water, and sanitation. Involvement in education may include mobile libraries, refurbishing schools, assisting in school fees. Empowerment takes the form of vocational training, micro-entrepreneur and micro credit. Our Youth Exchange Programme which sends and receives over 50 children to stay and study in many countries for a year may encourage peace and international understanding.

The size and activities of projects may range from something modest like a community mass circumcision to the grander role of Rotary in helping to eliminate the dreaded and crippling Polio disease in Indonesia which had reached almost 15 million dollars in funding or the Blood Bank in Denpasar, Bali. Essentially, through its weekly meetings, every Rotarian pushes to live up to the meaning of Fellowship through Service. Friendship, or silaturahmi (in Arabic) and caring (sedekah) become a Way of Life to be manifested daily, not just on ‘special occasions’ or merely seasonal.

This mode of living is more suitable for many of us who may entertain aspirations or fantasies to be, but are not, professional social workers, or full time members of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In our own realities, besides running a business, pursuing a career, raising a family, all of which lies within the encompassing Islamic word *ibadah* (worship), there is *ibadah* between Man and Allah (habl-um min-allah) and we also still expend time and energy for communal or social *ibadah* (habl-um minal-naas) in pursuit of balance, equilibrium and fulfillment in this life.

I like to think that almost every person on this earth harbours intentions to do good and noble deeds to others; it’s merely a question of getting the right format and situation conducive to empower and unleash this latent force within us.

A case in point, the Aceh Tsunami which happened on the morning of Boxing Day 2004.  A super-sad tragedy of mega proportions. A massive phenomenon of nature, followed by equally huge phenomenon of humanity. Observe the hundreds of tonnes of aid piling up at Banda Aceh airport, thousands at the harbour.

Hasn’t hundreds of millions of dollars and billions of rupiahs been collected and headed for Aceh like a storm which cannot be stopped, cannot be stored, cannot be handled or administered by BAKORTANAS (the State Disaster Agency), due to the inadequacy of systems and procedures, a master-plan or blue-print not in place, lagging miles behind the forceful current of national and international expression of care and concern?

Would it be far off the mark to say that we were in the midst of experiencing nothing short of an Aid Tsunami?

Just what factors were at play here? Humanitarian, cultural, or religious agendas and geo-politicks? Let’s just for a moment put aside negative thinking or suspicions. For me, what was important, during a brief period of time, in a heady mixture of tragedy and beauty, we have together seen, felt and experienced – that We are One!

On a smaller scale, I never cease to admire what fellow Rotarians get up to in villages where they spend weekends distributing books and used computers (Intel 1 and earlier) to an elementary school.  Handing out scholarships and facilitating in setting up Posyandus (mobile integrated health booths). I salute their persistence in organising fund-raising between members and relations and followed by soliciting funds from clubs in other countries (cooperative relations between Rotarians and clubs are easily forged) and eventually seeking matching funds from Rotary International headquartered in Evanston, Chicago.  The initial modest sums, now multiplied to something more substantial can be used to finance hydrocephalus operations on babies in Yogyakarta. This formula is repeated in many clubs and in different projects.

Many Rotarians cannot be classified as conglomerates, millionaires or even society figures. Indeed most are merely ordinary people. But the things they achieve are often extraordinary.  Once, mingling amongst lepers in a colony established and run by a Club in Surabaya, East Java I felt reinforced in my observation that in Rotary many *ordinary people can do extra-ordinary things*. It’s truly magical.

When I recall the tingling sensations and profound transcendental feelings in times like these when I feel united with God, His universe and its beings I become saddened upon hearing whispers that behind all this façade are the workings of the hands of Zionists.

On my journey to Anaheim, California, where 540 incoming Rotary Governors from around the world, including myself, will convene for a week to be trained (or indoctrinated?), I allowed my mind to wander freely in imagination and fantasy. On the night of the sixth day I would be summoned, and escorted quietly into a meeting room, a large one not unlike the venue of a James Bond thriller meeting Dr. No, or Austin Prowers’s encounter with Dr. Evil.

In that dimly lit chamber the gods of Rotary sit in assembly. Here I shall receive my grand mission, reminding me of a John Le Carre novel.  Should I refuse, or even betray a look of doubt, then the legs of my chair will collapse and this incoming Governor will slide down a chute into a pool where four great white sharks awaits their dinner.

That drama never happened, and in a funny sort of way I was rather disappointed. The ‘gods’ were nice people, and to be honest, quite ordinary. Also during the week I happen to be seated near another incoming governor, and we started talking. He was from Tel Aviv, married to a Dutch woman whose grandmother was from Madura, East Java. It was quite a revelation to me that there were more Rotarians in Indonesia than in Israel.

Say what?!

How can ?

So how and where did the allegation of the *grand plan*, or the basis of *conspiracy theories* emanate from? By the end of that week, the answer became clearer in my mind. Not true.

Are there Rotarians who indicate otherwise? In reality it cannot be dismissed that one or two groups may weave or supplement into their Rotary existence Zionist or Masonic agendas. But these must be seen as statistical quotas of minute percentiles of members that exists in any organisation or movement, and if present at all they must be far from *mainstream Rotary,* maybe even deemed *deviant*.

And should through the impact of information liberalisation, borderless communications, internet and websites we discover a group of white supremacists who claim to have developed a blue-print and action plan to resurrect the glory days of the Nazi and the Aryan race on this earth, do we then have to lay suspicions on every blond persons we encounter? As a Muslim, do I accept to be placed in the same category as the Bali Bombers, or groups that have a penchant for kidnapping, hostage taking and be-heading of foreigners in Iraq in the name of religion? I say with emphasis – No Way!

My religion which I cherish should not be an obstacle to expressions and manifestations of fellowship(silaturahmi) and giving(sedekah) in formats different from what we have known to be our customs, traditions, culture or even religions. Indeed they may add value or supplement our potential to achieve and do more.

Therefore if you are an entrepreneur, manager, career woman, metrosexual male, or hold other attributes who happen to meet and are invited by a Rotarian to join in pleasant conversations, talk about projects……then play along, and do take the opportunity to study and learn more.  Conducting your own due diligence, being alert and vigilant is fine, probably even wise. Suspicions and a priory should, however be deferred.  Who knows, maybe, just maybe a door may open and you may be presented with a golden *Opportunity to Serve* and probably also a new *Way of Life.*

Are you game?

(\*)           Pikiran Rakyat Daily (Bandung, West Java). On the occasion of Rotary’s Centennial Year  
(\*\*)         Prof Dr. Azyumardi Azra CBE. Muslim Intellectual and Author.