Irshad Manji:

Irshad Manji was not surprised when she heard the bad news two weeks ago. Manji, who is currently director of the Moral Courage Project at New York University in the US, had just landed in Indonesia to promote her newest book, Allah, Liberty, and Love. One bad news was that the bookstores in Indonesia had cancelled their agreement to distribute her book. The other bad news was that the discussion scheduled to be held at the Muhammadiyah headquarters was cancelled and instead, would be moved to the Maarif Institute. "I heard it from Twitter," she said, following her talk at the Maarif Institute.

In fact, on her second visit to Indonesia, Canadian Manji had expected to be rejected by the religious authorities or even the government. Four years ago, Irshad came to promote her book, The Trouble with Islam Today: A Wake-Up Call for Honesty and Change and was indeed criticized soundly by militant Muslim groups. She even got terror and assassination threats.

All this, however, never fazed Manji, who is of Indian-Egyptian background, born in Uganda. She has become ever more popular, including in Indonesia. In her Facebook, Indonesians are her fourth largest number of followers. "The last time I checked, they comprised almost 35 percent," said Manji.

Because of her popularity, Manji, 44, has been greeted with protests and demonstrations in Indonesia. Tempo reporter, Purwani Diyah Prabandari interviewed Manji, two weeks ago, amid her busy schedule.

Your newest book was rejected by many. Were you surprised?

When I came here for the first time, many Indonesians liked my book. But at that time, the government or religious leaders didn't know much about my work. They didn't take me seriously. This time, the religious leaders and the government somehow feels threatened by my presence.

If you knew you were going to be opposed, why did you come?

In Facebook, I posted graphics showing the increase of the number of people in Indonesia who opposed the presence of Irshad Manji. I replied back, "I fly to Jakarta today, pray for me and have patience." Many Indonesians sent their responses, mostly very supportive: go forward, continue the struggle, and so on.

Is such support not enough?

It's not enough for people to merely give awards to agents of change. It's easy to say, "What can I do? I have nothing." We cannot be like that. Every choice we make is a movement

towards change. So, my (newest) book, Allah, Liberty, and Love what I can do to bring change.

So you were ready for rejection?

Mahatma Gandhi once said about change, "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win." So, I expect that this second book will be rejected more than the first one.

If we apply the Gandhi scenario, which phase are you in right now?

At the confrontation or battle phase. They no longer laugh at me, they just say nothing. But I will not confront them with violence. Tonight I will appear at the Salihara Community complex. Maybe I will be turned away, but I will go there to have a discussion on my book. I will not run. And that's the way it will be in Solo and Yogyakarta.

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At 5 pm, Irshad Manji headed towards the Salihara Community complex in south Jakarta to launch her book. Although there was word that some groups may be demonstrating against the program, the discussion was on track. Two hours later, however, when Manji was addressing the audience, the chief of the Pasar Minggu Police precinct, Comm. Adri DesasPuryanto interrupted the program and told the audience they had 10 minutes to break up and cancel the program. Otherwise, he said, the police would (and could not provide protection). Indeed, the crowd outside was becoming unruly. At about 8 pm, the fence of the Salihara complex was close to being overrun. They shouted, 'Allahu Akbar' as well as "Break it Up!" The discussion had to be stopped.

In the end, you called off the discussion at Salihara?

At the time, I thought of remaining on stage. When the organizers decided to break for a while, I said, "Come on…if we break now, the program will end." We offered a compromise by allowing the Police to interrupt and speak. But then I saw someone carrying a baby. At that very moment, I couldn't allow anything to happen to that baby in Saliharan. So I agreed to move to the auditorium, where we had the book signing and photo session.

But even that part was abandoned.

When I headed towards the second floor, the situation had become dangerous. The windows on that floor were vibrating because of all the stomping and movement on the floor below. Through the (short circuit) video, I told the audience I would not go, if they decided to stay. But then, the organizers informed me the Police wanted to question me. My lawyer suggested I leave Salihara. I agreed on the condition that I be allowed to address the activists below. The Police agreed. I spoke for three minutes. But after one minute, the FPI crowd started coming closer while shouting. The Police circled us as I completed my statement, and forced me to leave. I drove away in a police car while the crowds beat at the car windows.

Have you gone through anything like this?

Yes, four months ago, at a community center in Amsterdam to launch this same book. About 20 people forced their way in and unfurled a black flag, screaming, "You are kafir," and demanded that I be executed, and that they would break my neck.

Were you afraid?

I was not. The best thing was that none of the guests ran away. In fact, they formed a circle to protect me. After the police came and arrested some of the protesters, we resumed the program as if nothing happened. We refused to give in to those protestors. Later, the Police found a machine gun on one of they people they arrested.

Was that when you decided to hire a bodyguard?

At one time I did use a bodyguard. But then I thought, those Muslim youths will look at me and think: the only way I can speak out freely is to get a 24-hour bodyguard. So, I stopped it. But everywhere I go, if there is evidence of a threat, we work together with the Police. But sometimes, the Police cannot do much. It's all right. We do what we can. The rest is up to God.

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Although the discussions at the Syarif Hidayatullah Islamic State University at Ciputat, south Jakarta and at the Alliance for Independent Journalists went smoothly, threats and feelings of fear had spread widely. Five days after the Salihara incident, the rector of Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta cancelled Irshad Manji's discussion on her book. In fact, a similar program at the Institute for Islamic and Social Studies there was greeted by hundreds of demonstrators claiming to come from the Indonesian Mujahidin Council. They shouted, "Irshad Manji, do not destroy our religion" and "Do not insult our religion with your gay and lesbian campaign." Manji, sitting at the hall, never lost her cool. She was protected by the people who came to hear her speak. She ignored the rocks thrown at her.

Which brings us to the sharpest criticism aimed at you, and that is about homosexuality.

As a matter of fact, the rights of gay and lesbian have been easier to achieve than women's rights. This is because there is a fear among the pluralistic public that they will be branded homophobic Sadly, they are not worried about being called sexist, about paying women's salaries lower than men's for the same work. But I won't speak too much about this.

Then, what about the title of your book, Allah, Liberty and Love? Does this have anything to do with sexual orientation?

The three can go side by side. I was once saddened by a commentary about this issue. At a television program, I had said that the response to the clergyman who wanted to burn the Qu'ran should be: "Allah loves you, so do I." The moderator laughed at my statement and said that Muslims did not have feelings of love or caring. Later, I received many emails that said, "Do you know Irshad, that I have never heard the word Allah and love in the same sentence." That is truly tragic, but it is true.

But don't Muslims believe that Islam is a blessing to all?

Many are still confused about that concept. When I was in Bosnia, a university female student wearing a jilbab asked me, "I just need to know one thing, are you afraid of God?" Fear is understood to be much more important than blessing. Why aren't relations between God and humans measured by love?

What is the explanation?

Anyone who practices Islam would be in a moral crisis if the holy Qu'ran was misused to apply injustice on women, faith, minorities, gay and lesbians, children and so forth.

Is Indonesia in a moral crisis?

The fact is that today there is a movement to ban Ahamdiyah. And there are rules controlling women's clothing in a number of provinces. On the other hand, many moderate Indonesian Muslims refuse to have any conflict with the extremists. That's what Martin Luther King, Jr. calls negative peace. Sure, there is no conflict, but injustice happens, nevertheless. Progress can never be achieved without conflict.

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On Thursday last week, Irshad Manji left Yogyakarta to fly to Kuala Lumpur. The ban on and the protests at some of her discussion programs in Indonesia has not bothered her. From a young age, she has become accustomed to such tension.

When did you actually start to speak openly about religion?

Ever since I was small. I was once expelled from a madrasah because I asked too many questions.

You are also reported to be in conflict with your family, including your mother?

It has been very constructive for my life. When I was small, I often asked grown-ups questions that made them uncomfortable. Sometimes, my mother would say: "What is frustrating you?"

Are you frustrated?

There are too many rules at the mosque and at home which makes us small and become robots. Mother always told me, "Make sure your nose is clean, keep your head bowed, don't make a noise, then hope and pray that your life is pleasant." I think all that dwarfs us. And what is really frustrating is that it reduces God too. Why should God Almighty create small beings who are always afraid? That made me think: God did not create tiny beings. He actually rewarded us by giving us our freedom, a brain and a conscience.

You still believe in the Qu'ran, yet you seem to regard it as contradictory?

The Qu'ran is indeed contradictory. I didn't say it was perfect. But in my view, the reason for its imperfection is precisely what should make us think. Every generation needs opinions to ensure harmony in the world by using the principles of the Qu'ran, which is limitless.

With such conviction, do you still see yourself as a Muslim?

Yes I am a Muslim, a follower of Islam, whose main belief is that there is but one God. La Ilaha Illallah.

Irshad Manji
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Degree in History of Ideas, University of British Columbia (1990)
Hon.Ph.D, University of Puget Sound, Canada (2008)

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Feminist for the 21st Century, Ms Magazine
Global Vision Prize, Immigration Equality
Muslim Leader of Tomorrow, American Society for Muslim Advancement

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