



Former telecom executive battling extremism in Indonesia

TIM WHITMIRE | Associated Press | September 4, 2005

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. - C. Holland Taylor's mind seems to move faster than he can speak about the Libforall Foundation, the personal foreign policy initiative the former telecom executive founded to combat Islamic extremism in Indonesia.

"We engage with individuals through ideas. We implode radical Islam through ideas," Taylor said, describing his desire to link moderate Muslim leaders in Indonesia in a network of "lighthouses within the Islamic world" that will promote tolerance and freedom of thought and worship.

A decade ago, Taylor was the head of USA Global Link, a telecommunications company that during the Wild West days of 1990s deregulation was a leader in the business of "callback" - selling cheap American dial tones to foreign callers. He was also a libertarian activist and a longtime practitioner of transcendental meditation.

But Taylor, 49, left USA Global Link in 1998 and has spent much of the time since living in and studying Indonesia, the archipelago of 210 million people that stretches across the Indian Ocean between southeast Asia and Australia.

He was on Indonesia's main island of Java on Sept. 11, 2001; the attacks that day helped convince Taylor that the world's most populous Muslim nation is a crucial front in the fight against Islamic extremism.

So far, all the work done by Libforall (a contraction of the phrase "liberty for all") from its headquarters in the North Carolina tobacco town of Winston-Salem has been in Indonesia. But Taylor hopes to soon expand his work to other Muslim nations like Egypt and this fall will begin raising money for the effort. So far, he has spent \$250,000 of his own money.

About 80 percent of Indonesians are Muslim. And, while a rash of terror attacks points to some inroads by religious radicals in recent years, most Muslims there practice a broadly tolerant faith strongly tinged with remnants of Hindu and animist rituals, which predate Islam in the archipelago.

Taylor wants Libforall to quietly boost the profiles of moderate and liberal Islamic leaders who are committed to pluralistic, democratic values, including Indonesian pop star Ahmad Dhani and former President Abdurrahman Wahid, also known as Gus Dur.

At a June news conference and ceremony, Wahid and Taylor presented the "Libforall Award" to members of Dhani's band Dewa, citing their "outstanding contribution to world peace, by communicating the values of spiritual love, freedom and tolerance to millions of listeners." The celebrity-driven event was widely covered in the Indonesian media.

In late July, an influential group of conservative clerics issued a series of edicts banning "liberal Islamic thought," as well as pluralism and secularism. The statements, or fatwas, issued by the Indonesian Ulema Council were condemned within days by Wahid and other religious leaders who gathered under the banner "Alliance Toward a Civil Society" - an event a Libforall staffer helped organize.

Other Libforall strategies include funding academics who study and promote moderate Islam and underwriting scholarships for children to attend schools that teach pluralistic values - a counter to the Saudi-funded religious schools that are common in Indonesia.

Whether aid from an idealistic American will help or hinder moderate and liberal Indonesian Muslims is unclear.

Donald Emmerson, director of Stanford University's Institute for International Studies and an expert on Indonesia, said the nation's conflict reflects a larger struggle within Islam.

"I'm frankly torn" about Libforall's involvement, he said. "(Colleagues) of mine would undoubtedly point ... to the risks of what appears to be an American intervention in a very sensitive topic."

Emmerson doesn't share that pessimism: "Liberal or moderate Islam already has a footprint in Indonesia," he said.

Robert Hefner, an Indonesia expert at Boston University, sees activism like Taylor's as a potential antidote to negative views of America held in Indonesia, where many believe U.S. foreign policy does not reflect a commitment to democratic values.

"Individual Americans (like Taylor) can certainly help to correct this," Hefner said in an e-mail interview.

Taylor's passion for religious pluralism is part of his heritage; he is descended from Moravians, German Protestants who came to central North Carolina in the 18th century in search of religious freedom. Taylor grew up in Europe and Asia as his father, an Army lawyer, rotated through assignments.

After graduating from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Taylor was active in conservative causes. He co-authored "The Prosperity Handbook," a 1984 guide designed to explain conservative economic principles to the average American. The publication was bankrolled by Bernard Oliver, founder of Hewlett-Packard's HP Labs.

In the 1990s, Taylor was president and then chief executive officer of USA Global Link, which sold foreign callers inexpensive dial tones the company purchased in bulk from mainline U.S. carriers, allowing callers to bypass their home country's expensive telecom monopolies. His first visit to Indonesia was on business, prior to Indonesian telephone provider PT IndoSat's purchase of a stake in USA Global Link.

Taylor left USA Global Link in 1998, moving to Indonesia the following year to study its traditional culture. He was attracted, he said, by the intermingling of Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic traditions in the mystical Sufi strand of Islam.

Indonesian Sufis often use meditation in an effort to achieve a direct, personal experience of God - an idea that appeals to Taylor.

"Meditation and spirituality are the bedrock of my inner life and serve as my deep connection with Sufi Muslims," he said. Dhani identifies himself as a Sufi, Taylor said, and he believes Wahid enjoys a deep spiritual and philosophical connection to the tradition.

Taylor believes "Javanese Islam ... holds the key to victory in the war on religious terrorism" - a fact he said is also recognized by Saudi Arabian backers of Wahhabism, a "purified" form of Islam rooted in hard-line beliefs and violence against perceived enemies of the religion.

Making Indonesia a base for jihad is "high on the agenda of the Wahhabi," who have spent billions of dollars promoting radical Islamism, Taylor said.

Taylor sees a parallel between his work with USA Global Link and his present work with Libforall.

"What we did then was liberate telecom users around the world with a different model" that took advantage of existing networks, he said. "I want to take what I've learned in my previous exploration ... and apply that to the biggest threat facing global society today."