

The Boston Globe

Defeating Islamist Extremism

By Jeff Jacoby | January 22, 2006

"I HAVE been called 'Chrislam' because I am so close to Christians," Abdurrahman Wahid is saying. "When I was criticized by a certain Muslim preacher for not being harsh enough against the 'kaffir' [infidels] -- for being too close to Jews and Christians -- I told him to read the Koran again. Because when the Koran speaks of 'infidels,' it means idolaters," not monotheists.

Wahid, the former president of Indonesia, is speaking to me by phone from his office in Jakarta. With him is C. Holland Taylor, an American entrepreneur who fell in love with Indonesian culture en route to making a fortune in the telecom industry. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Taylor created the LibForAll Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fighting Islamist extremism by promoting a culture of liberty and tolerance in the Muslim world; Wahid is the foundation's patron and senior adviser.

With 200 million residents, Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim nation, and Wahid -- popularly known as Gus Dur -- was not only its first democratically elected president but the longtime chairman of its largest Muslim organization, the 35 million-member Nadhlatul Ulama. A revered religious scholar who studied in Cairo and Baghdad, Wahid is a longtime champion of a moderate, progressive, and nonpolitical Islam. As a result, he has frequently clashed with militant fundamentalists whose growing influence, fueled by Arab/Wahhabi oil money, is undermining Indonesia's traditional religious pluralism.

Last year, Wahid spearheaded the opposition to a series of 11 reactionary fatwas, or religious decrees, issued by a high-ranking council of Indonesian Muslim clerics. The fatwas condemned any Islamic teaching based on liberalism and secularism, banned interfaith prayers not led by a Muslim, and even prohibited the answering of "amen" to a non-Muslim prayer. Wahid and LibForAll promptly organized a group of religious leaders into an "Alliance Toward a Civil Society," which denounced the fatwas as unworthy of decent Muslims and improper under Indonesia's constitution.

"Gus Dur went on TV and radio to insist that the fatwas had no legitimacy and called on Muslims to ignore them," Taylor says. "Because of his genuine scholarship, his criticism carried great weight. This is a model of how to defeat radical Islam worldwide."

Wahid and Taylor are convinced that the impact of Islamist fanaticism can best be blunted by promoting leading Muslims who endorse moderation, pluralism, and democracy. One member of the LibForAll board is rock star Ahmad Dhani of the band Dewa. Some of Dhani's hits have been aimed at undercutting Islamic militants. For example, one album is called "Laskar Cinta"

("Warriors of Love") -- a play on the name of a terrorist group, Laskar Jihad ("Warriors of Jihad"). By harnessing his music and popular following to the cause of peace and interfaith tolerance, Dhani aims to inoculate young Indonesian Muslims against the extremism and violence of the Islamists.

While all of LibForAll's work to date has been in Indonesia, Wahid and Taylor hope to begin operating in other Muslim nations soon. On the drawing board now: a project to translate "Laskar Cinta" into Arabic and then arrange for an Egyptian pop star to perform and record it at a concert in Cairo. Wahid intends to meet with Egyptian clerics and opinion leaders, to press his view that Islam requires openness toward other religions and that Islamist terrorists and their supporters must be resisted and discredited.

Taylor argues that because of Indonesia's long tradition of pluralism, and because of Wahid's great following, Indonesia is the ideal base from which to launch an intellectual and cultural assault against the jihadists' ideology. The "essence" of Islam, he and Wahid maintain, is summed up in the words of the Koran (Sura 109:6): "For you, your religion; for me, my religion." But whether such a message will resonate in the Arab world remains to be seen. After all, jihadists quote the Koran too, and the verses they cite are as intolerant and supremacist as Wahid's is pacific and humane.

But there is no doubting Wahid's commitment to interfaith harmony. He tells Indonesian Muslims that they can learn from Christianity and Christian life, and has dispatched armed members of Nadhlatul Ulama to protect Christian churches from Islamist violence. Not long ago, one of Wahid's Muslim adherents was killed when he discovered a bomb in a church and used his body to shield the Christian worshipers from its blast. That stunning act of selflessness is a powerful reminder that Muslims no less than non-Muslims have a great deal riding on the defeat of the Islamofascists, and that we will not win the war against radical Islam without Muslim allies like Wahid.

© Copyright 2006 Globe Newspaper Company.