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Mobilizing Islam's Silent Majority

C. Holland Taylor | February 12, 2007

Although my ancestors have lived in the southeast of the United States for over three centuries, I personally have lived, travelled and worked in Muslim-majority countries for much of my life. At the age of nine, I moved to Iran with my family and was immersed in Persian culture for three years, from 1965-68. The sound of the Muslim call to prayer was thus integral to my childhood, as was the pluralistic, tolerant and spiritual form of Islam practiced by most Iranians.

While attending high school in Germany during the early seventies, I twice journeyed overland through the Middle East and beyond—to Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan—where I further explored Islam's diverse cultural expressions and rich artistic heritage.

During the 1990s, I was the CEO of an international telecommunications firm that sold a strategic stake to the national carrier of Indonesia. This led to my eventual retirement from the telecom industry, my relocation to Java and my study of its history and to the establishment of the LibForAll (“Liberty for All”) Foundation in conjunction with Indonesia's first democratically-elected president, Abdurrahman Wahid.

SITUATED ON Islam's eastern periphery, Indonesia has long been known to have the most liberal, tolerant version of that religion practiced anywhere on earth. But back in the sixteenth century, newly Muslim city-states along its northern coast destroyed local Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms as they extended their power to the island's interior, causing great upheaval.

Flush with victory, fanatical adherents of the new religion—many of Arab or Chinese descent—spread terror as they sought to eradicate the island's ancient cultural heritage. Opposing them were indigenous Javanese—now led by Muslim saints and political figures, such as Sunan Kalijogo—who sought continuity and common ground between religions.

For nearly a hundred years, the opposing forces struggled for the soul of Java—and, ultimately, for that of Indonesian Islam—in a war whose decisive engagements occurred not only on the field of battle, but in the hearts and minds of countless individuals. For in this conflict between religious extremists and Sufi Muslims, the Sufis' profound spiritual ideology—popularized among the masses by saints, storytellers and musicians—played a role even more vital than that of military force in defeating religious extremism in Java. Indeed, my own lifelong appreciation for one of the world's great religious traditions had only been heightened by my exposure to the rich spiritual legacy of Sufism, or mystical Islam, which lies at the heart of most Muslim societies worldwide.

In the end, a new dynasty arose, which established religious tolerance as the rule of law, and guaranteed freedom of conscience to all Javanese—long before similar ideas took firm root in the West. The founder of that dynasty was a Javanese Sufi Muslim named Senopating Alogo, whose victory was based on the popular appeal of his message of freedom, justice and profound inner spirituality.

IN THE wake of 9/11 and a series of terrorist attacks in Indonesia, President Wahid and I established the LibForAll Foundation—inspired by the methods used by President Wahid’s own ancestors to defend Javanese culture from religious extremism five centuries ago.

Within Indonesia, we have formed a network of opinion leaders in the fields of religion, education, popular culture, government, business and the media working to preserve their culture’s enlightened embrace of religious tolerance and diversity in the face of a renewed tide of extremism that is sweeping the entire Muslim world.

We are also busy expanding on LibForAll’s success in Indonesia to export the smiling face of Islam, by linking “moderate” Muslim leaders “in a network of lighthouses within the Muslim world that will promote tolerance and freedom of thought and worship.” As a result, LibForAll’s field of operations has expanded to include South Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, Europe and the United States.

The key to success in this global struggle is encouraging Muslim opinion leaders in all walks of life to join in proclaiming that “the emperor has no clothes” (that is, radical Islam has no theological validity), and thereby mobilize the “great silent majority” of Muslims to reject the extremists’ ideology of hatred and violence.

The analogy of the emperor with no clothes is apt, and key to LibForAll’s strategy. For despite efforts to legitimize their ideology of religious hatred by draping themselves in the “mantle of the Prophet” radical Muslims are in fact the heirs of the Kharijite movement—a violent, heretical sect that murdered the Prophet’s own son-in-law, Ali, for being “insufficiently Muslim.” Our goals were aptly summarized by President Wahid when he wrote: “Muslims themselves can and must propagate an understanding of the ‘right’ Islam, and thereby discredit extremist ideology. Yet to accomplish this task requires the understanding and support of like-minded individuals, organizations and governments throughout the world. Our goal must be to illuminate the hearts and minds of humanity, and offer a compelling alternate vision of Islam as a religion of Divine love and tolerance that banishes the fanatical ideology of hatred to the darkness from which it emerged.”

The writer is chairman & CEO of the LibForAll Foundation, www.libforall.org, an Indonesia and US-based non-profit organization that works to reduce religious extremism and discredit the use of terrorism.