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Why Indonesia Matters

By Hannah Beech

The Vespa Girls used to be an institution at the University of Indonesia (UI). Back in the 1970s, these daughters of elite families would take breaks from their studies at Indonesia's best university by cruising on Italian two-wheelers, their miniskirts grazing their upper thighs. Sometimes, certain Vespa Girls wore no underwear. Today's UI, still the state-run breeding ground for the nation's future leaders, is a very different place. Half the female student body striding across the campus near Jakarta wear the jilbab, a Muslim scarf that covers the head and neck. Student politics is dominated by the Campus Propagation Institute, an Islamic group that offers religious mentoring and encourages students to adhere to Shari'a, or Islamic law. Female faculty in the Department of Medicine, irrespective of their religion, are barred from wearing short skirts, while those in Humanities must eschew tight pants and low necklines. "This university is supposed to be secular, but it has become an Islamic zone," says Gadis Arivia, a UI lecturer in philosophy. "It's no different from the rest of the country."

Indonesia is undergoing a spiritual revolution. Since the 1998 fall of strongman Suharto, who during his 32-year rule suppressed not only political freedom but any faith that could challenge his authority, the country has re-embraced its religiosity. In 2004, Indonesia held its first-ever direct presidential election, shattering the notion that Islam and democracy are incompatible. Yet that same open system of politics has encouraged a flowering of conservative religious thought and allowed the rise of homegrown terrorists, threatening the country's reputation as a model of moderate Islam.

Indonesia matters. The battle for its soul is taking place within a wider war in the Islamic world pitting progressive Muslims, who believe their faith can coexist with modernity and liberal Western influences, against fundamentalists, who want the religion to return to its more austere Arab roots. What happens in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, could presage the direction other Islamic societies take. Over the past four years, dozens of regencies—provincial subdivisions—across Indonesia have used the more permissive political climate to implement Shari'a-based bylaws that include bans on alcohol and prohibitions on women going out alone at night. In 2003, only seven districts had such faith-based initiatives in place. Today, 53, more than 10% of all Indonesian regencies, are living life under some form of Islamic-inspired law. More places are expected to implement similar initiatives this year. "I don't want to

contemplate the possibility of Indonesia becoming a Shari'a-based state, but I'm worried that it could happen," says Yenny Wahid, director of the moderate Muslim Wahid Institute in Jakarta. "Even though I believe the majority of people in Indonesia don't buy the idea of an Islamic state, the extremist groups have convinced people that to be a good Muslim, you must support an Islamic state."

That message is being broadcast from thousands of new mosques and Islamic schools, or pesantren, now proliferating across the 17,000-island archipelago. Many are funded by Middle Eastern groups that see Indonesia as fertile ground for spiritual purification. Clerics at these religious institutions preach the Salafi strain of Islam, which advocates a return to the religion as practiced in the era of the Prophet Muhammad. (Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia's strict form of the faith, is considered an offshoot of Salafi Islam.) By contrast, most Indonesians, like other Southeast Asian Muslims, had for centuries practiced a far less orthodox faith, incorporating the Hindu, Buddhist and animist traditions that had flourished before Islam arrived in the archipelago in the 12th century. Some 88% of Indonesia's 245 million citizens are Muslim, and the vast majority of those would label themselves as moderate. Indeed, the country was founded in 1945 as a secular state protecting the rights of the nation's non-Muslims, now 30 million strong. But as Indonesia's wealth gap widens—roughly 40 million citizens now live below the poverty line—conservative mosques have attracted worshippers, in part, by promising to alleviate economic hardship and eradicate immorality. "They preach that Islam and Shari'a are an elixir," says Azyumardi Azra, a prominent Muslim scholar and director of the graduate school at Jakarta's State Islamic University. "The state's social institutions have not fixed problems like drugs, prostitution, gambling and corruption. So people think maybe the mosques can solve things that the government has not."

With millions of rural Indonesians pouring into the cities, this Salafi message has trickled into urban society, chipping away at Indonesia's multiethnic heritage. At many public schools in Jakarta, female students and teachers are strongly encouraged to wear the jilbab on Fridays—and face stigmatization if they don't. In 2005, the nation's top religious body, the Indonesia Ulema Council, issued a fatwa stating that "religious teachings influenced by pluralism, liberalism and secularism are against Islam." Equally worrisome, some of Indonesia's homegrown terrorists, whose bombing campaign has claimed hundreds of lives since 2002, profess their violence is justified by Salafi teachings—even if most conservative clerics disagree. "If we don't promote a smiling Islam, then we will be seen overseas as a hotbed of radicalism and terrorism," says Syafi'i Anwar, executive director of the International Center for Islam and Pluralism in Jakarta. "We must protect the portrait of Indonesia as a bastion of moderate Islam."

Indonesia's path to a more puritanical form of piety cannot be separated from the global trend toward conservatism that has swept Islam since the 1979 Iranian revolution, which brought Ayatullah Khomeini to power. The movement has only accelerated since Sept. 11, 2001, with the Internet bringing together Muslims worldwide in condemnation of Western actions in the Middle East. "With the hegemony of the West, we have so many problems," says Muhamad Ikhwan, director of Wahdah Islamiyah, which runs a 1,000-student Islamic academy in the eastern city of Makassar, where many girls wear chadors that cover everything but their eyes. "The world was safe when it was run by Islamic civilizations, so we want to bring Islam back to its former glory."

Unlike Iran or Saudi Arabia, however, the Republic of Indonesia is governed by a constitution that guarantees a separation of mosque and state. Those secular underpinnings, say some legal experts, call into question the very constitutionality of the Shari'a bylaws. But the administration of Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has sidestepped this debate. Vice President Jusuf Kalla calls the faith-based regulations “normal” in a Muslim-majority state, insisting: “It is not Shari'a law but laws influenced by Shari'a.” Yudhoyono himself has avoided any public comment on the bylaws’ legality. “The President will do nothing on this because he is scared of offending the Islamic movement,” says former Indonesian President and moderate Muslim cleric Abdurrahman Wahid. “If the silent majority isn’t speaking out against the Shari'a-ization of Indonesia, then why should he risk his political career for them?” Even presidential adviser Agus Widjojo frets about the official silence: “The government can’t just have a policy of no action on Islam. This policy only emboldens the extremists.”

Supporters of Shari'a argue that the central government’s attitude simply reflects public sentiment. A 2006 poll by the Indonesia Survey Institute found that 58% of Indonesians believed adulterers should be stoned, as is mandated by Islamic law, up from 39% five years before. “There’s a new feeling in Indonesia that people have been burned by secularism, that it’s not working,” says Zulkieflimansyah, a former UI student president and a legislator from Indonesia’s biggest Islamic political party, the Justice and Welfare Party. “Islam can give them hope, and our mission is to educate Muslims about the real Islam.”

But what exactly constitutes true Islam in Indonesia? Is it a mystical tradition based on centuries of syncretic practice or an Arab-inspired move toward the religion’s 7th century roots? How this debate plays out will dictate just what kind of a Muslim democracy the world’s fourth most populous nation aims to be. “I believe we must strengthen the moderate paradigm and say that our Islam stands for tolerance, dynamism and freedom of expression,” says Zuhairi Misrawi, a researcher with the Indonesian Society for Pesantren and Community Development in Jakarta. “But is that what the majority of Indonesian people want? It’s becoming harder to tell.”

The road to Bulukumba, a rice-growing hamlet in eastern Indonesia’s Sulawesi province, is rutted and worn. But just past the district line stands an ornate, three-meter-high marble edifice festooned with Arabic calligraphy. “Religious Crash Program,” announces the massive signboard, before detailing the four Shari'a bylaws Bulukumba has implemented since 2002: no alcohol; mandatory wearing of Islamic attire; required payment of Islamic alms; and Koranic proficiency for students and prospective married couples. As some of the first places to pass such bylaws in Indonesia, Bulukumba and five other regencies in southern Sulawesi have served as an inspiration for scores of other localities across Indonesia. Azwar Hasan, the secretary-general of the Preparatory Committee for the Application of Islamic Laws (KPPSI), which helped devise the southern Sulawesi bylaws, enumerates the positive effects of the faith-based regulations. “Crime has decreased, the economy has been strengthened and women are more pure,” he says. “The criminal code in Indonesia does not work because it is not dictated by God. Shari'a fixes that problem because it is a perfect system that is God’s will.”

In Bulukumba’s Padang village, divine mandate goes beyond the four bylaws. Over the past year, village chief Andi Rukman Abdul Jabbar, whose office door bears a sign barring women without headscarves from entering, has taken it upon himself to implement caning as punishment for adultery, gambling and drinking. (Similar penalties exist in the Sumatran province of Aceh, population 4 million, where legislators are now considering hand amputation in cases of theft.)

So far, three people have been caned in Padang, while another was kicked out of the village for stealing. “In 2005, we used to have an incidence of theft almost every day, but not anymore,” says Abdul Jabbar. Now, village elders are considering barring wedding singers from wearing skimpy clothing and dancing suggestively—a common occurrence at Indonesia’s marriage ceremonies. “People can dance with their fingers instead,” suggests village cleric Leleng, wiggling his index fingers in demonstration. His wife Wayuni says only 5% of girls wore headscarves in high school when she was growing up. Now it’s mandatory, and many women wear the covering even in the privacy of their own homes. “Some people say we should just follow our Indonesian traditions, where women wore revealing clothing,” says KPPSI’s Hasan. “But many of our traditions are not on the true path of Islam. We must correct that.” As for southern Sulawesi’s non-Muslim minority, who are required to wear headscarves if they want to enter civil service, Hasan says, “It’s just like any uniform, where you wear a shirt of a specific color. There’s no problem.”

The spread of Shari'a laws has come not by diktat from Jakarta but from the grassroots. A series of reforms implemented since 2001 has made Indonesia’s regions more autonomous, giving local leaders unprecedented power in what, under Suharto, had been a deeply centralized nation. The bottom-up emergence of the faith-based laws lends legitimacy to those who say they represent a Muslim majority that was never well served by the capital’s secularized—and often corrupt—political elite. “People in Jakarta may not understand this, but Shari'a is the aspiration of the people, because it makes everyone, even government leaders, accountable,” says Muchsin Noor, a cleric who runs a pesantren in West Java’s Cianjur regency, where Shari'a bylaws were officially implemented last year. But it is precisely the scattered nature of the bylaws’ propagation that has made a concerted defense by moderate Muslims so difficult. “Because this conservatism is creeping in at the local level, people didn’t anticipate how far these Shari'a bylaws would get,” says Ery Seda, a sociology lecturer at the University of Indonesia. “Now, suddenly a neighboring town or even your own suburb of Jakarta has these bylaws, and you don’t know how it happened. But speaking out could get you labeled as a bad Muslim who doesn’t believe in Shari'a.”

Local leaders who have implemented the bylaws—a process that does not require public participation—are hardly restricted to members of Indonesia’s Islamic political parties. Although these parties only captured 20% of the vote in the 2004 general election, Indonesia’s secularized, nationalist parties are careful not to alienate what is believed to be an increasingly influential Islamic vote. The regent of Cianjur comes from a nationalist party, as does the mayor of Tangerang, a Jakarta suburb where women out alone after sunset have been arrested as prostitutes even though they were just commuting home from work. So, too, the mayor of Padang city in western Sumatra, who credited mandatory head-to-ankle attire for female students with a reduction in mosquito-borne dengue fever. “If you have people from non-Islamic parties pushing for Shari'a, then it doesn’t matter how popular the Islamic parties are,” says Hamid Basyaib, program director of the moderate Muslim Freedom Institute in Jakarta. “The radicals have already won.”

Those who have the most to lose are the millions of Indonesians who are either non-Muslim or belong to heterodox Islamic sects. In 2005, the nation’s ruling clerics prohibited interfaith marriage and prayer. The Indonesia Ulema Council also renewed an edict deeming heretical the Islamic sect Ahmadiyah, which claims up to 500,000 members. In the past year, several

Ahmadiyah mosques have been forcibly closed or destroyed by mobs, as have dozens of Christian house churches. Separately, a Muslim cleric in East Java was jailed for preaching in Indonesian, as opposed to the normal Arabic. In West Java, three women are serving three-year prison terms for running Christian kindergarten classes also attended by Muslim children. “Sometimes we have to defend the community’s morality by force,” says Sobri Lubis, spokesman for the Islamic Defenders Front (claimed membership: 5 million), which has carried out thuggish antivice raids on Jakarta nightclubs and whose spiritual leader Habib Rizieq said last November that assassinating U.S. President George W. Bush was religiously permissible. “If a soldier kills his enemy,” says Lubis, “would you call that violence?”

Such radical language is prompting a reaction. A growing group of moderate Indonesians is fighting back against the move toward puritanical interpretations of Islam’s role in society. Many have formed NGOs that funnel cash to liberal mosques or distribute pamphlets calling on Indonesians to defend their more inclusive spiritual traditions. Researcher Misrawi, whose religious credentials are burnished by study at Cairo’s famed Islamic Al-Azhar University, says his organization coordinates with 5,000 moderate pesantren, many of which are located in traditionally conservative regions like southern Sulawesi or West Java. The moderates admit they face a rhetorical disadvantage in their spiritual battle. “Salafi Islam is attractive because it says that if you are not rewarded in this lifetime, you will be rewarded in the next,” says Jakarta scholar Anwar, who as a student leader around the time of the Iranian revolution considered himself radical, then later gravitated toward a more moderate faith. “It’s hard to compete against that ideology. Being moderate is more subtle and complex. It’s harder to sell.”

There are some signs, moreover, that the drift toward radicalism is, at last, prompting action by the nation’s central institutions. Last year, the Indonesian parliament quietly shelved a controversial antipornography bill that could have criminalized public kissing and forms of traditional dance. And in December, after a popular Muslim cleric announced that he had joined a growing trend of flouting national law by taking a second wife, President Yudhoyono spoke out against polygamy—even though the Koran permits it in certain circumstances. The President surely knows the risks of radicalism. Foreign direct investment fell 46% year-on-year between January and November 2006, with one visiting European Parliament legislator blaming the rash of Shari’a bylaws for turning investors off. The specter of violence, too, acts to dampen foreign interest in Indonesia. The indigenous terror group Jemaah Islamiah—an organization linked to al-Qaeda that is blamed for hundreds of bombing deaths in Bali and Jakarta since 2002—doesn’t have broad appeal among Indonesians, and its infrastructure has been battered by a number of recent arrests. But in January, clashes between police and alleged jihadis in the central Sulawesi city of Poso resulted in 16 deaths.

In a response of sorts to the growing radicalism, Yudhoyono has recently paid lip service to Pancasila, the secularized state ideology promoted during the Suharto era. But if Indonesia is to shore up its international reputation, more will be needed than recycling an old ideology tainted by its association with a former dictator. In the absence of more vigorous mobilization by moderates, the rising conservative tide in Indonesian Islam looks unlikely to wane soon. Indonesians who return from study overseas—and those who don’t leave home—are just a mouse click away from Salafi scholars anywhere else. “The Internet has helped encourage a uniformity of opinion in the Islamic world,” says Sidney Jones, Southeast Asia project director

for the International Crisis Group. “Some of the loudest voices online are Salafi scholars in the Middle East.”

The newfound piety of University of Indonesia student Lintang Anisa, however, came not from Saudi Arabia but from closer to home. In high school, Anisa lived what she calls a “hedonist” lifestyle, never praying five times a day as is required by Islam. But after enrolling at UI, where she took part in student-organized Koranic study, the 19-year-old English major began wearing a headscarf. “It was God’s will that I could study at UI,” she says, “so wearing the jilbab is an expression of gratitude for God’s blessings.” When Anisa and her classmates finish their studies, they will not be donning miniskirts for a cruise around campus. Instead, like millions of other Indonesians also heeding a new call to conservatism, they will bow their heads in prayer.

With reporting by Zamira Loebis/Bulukumba and Jason Tedjasukmana/Jakarta