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GLOBAL VIEW

The Exorcist

By BRET STEPHENS

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SENDANG AYU, Indonesia—In the fall of 2005, Abdul Munir Mulkhan returned to his childhood village to exorcise a demon.

Belief in the spirit world persists in this corner of southern Sumatra, as it does throughout most of Indonesia. In this case, however, the demon took human form as an itinerant Islamic preacher named Mun Faasil. He had appeared as if from nowhere the year before and had promptly set about “purifying” the villagers’ religious practices. For instance, he objected to sacrificing water buffalo (a local practice) instead of sheep (an Arab one) for the annual feast of Eid ul-Adha. He also disapproved of the villagers’ custom of giving couples an envelope of cash on their wedding day, on the grounds that there was no Quranic basis for it.

What happened next is a portrait-in-miniature of the assault being waged against traditional Indonesian Islam by its totalitarian variant. “Mun Faasil’s speeches created a crisis of faith,” recalls a village elder. “One group started implying that the others were not true believers.” Things got worse when the preacher began extolling the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), a radical Islamist party modeled on Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, while attacking the Muhammadiyah, the century-old, 30 million-strong, apolitical Islamic social movement to which most of the villagers belong. Soon PKS cadres started arriving in the village.

It was at this point that some of the villagers called on Mr. Mulkhan, 60, to offer a “clarification” on the true teachings of Islam. They were fortunate in their native son. A leading scholar of Islamic theology and history, Mr. Mulkhan had only recently stepped down as vice secretary of the Muhammadiyah and continues to wield influence as a reformer within the organization. It did not take much to persuade his old neighbors that good Muslims do not use narrow theological pretexts to condemn fellow Muslims as infidels. Mun Faasil and his cadres were told to go.





**Abdul Munir
Mulkhan**

For Mr. Mulkhan, however, what happened in Sendang Ayu was not the end of the matter but only the beginning. If the PKS could reach a remote rural community of 150 people, he reasoned, where had they not penetrated? The problem was compounded by the PKS's use of clandestine cells to infiltrate the Muhammadiyah's institutions—hospitals, universities, schools, mosques, charities, student associations—and recruit new members. “We had a situation where people in positions of trust were suddenly revealing themselves as PKS,” he says. “If we had allowed this to continue they would have consolidated their position with a purge of their opponents.”

The rise of the PKS nationally is itself a thing to marvel at. Barely eight years old, it won just 7% of the vote in the 2004 elections and has made itself conspicuous with its support of radical cleric Abu Bakir Bashir. Yet it has already managed to seize key institutions of prestige and patronage throughout Indonesia, including the speakership of the national Parliament, the ministry of agriculture and key municipal posts. As with Hamas in the Palestine Authority, it has burnished a reputation for incorruptibility.

But the Muhammadiyah, with its immense network of social services, is the organization the PKS must first seize if—in the spirit of Antonio Gramsci's “long march through the institutions”—it is to achieve its longer-term political objectives. As a takeover target, it also helps the PKS that the Muhammadiyah has espoused a relatively strict form of Islam, making its members all the more susceptible to *tarbiyeh*, the form of Islamic indoctrination practiced by the Muslim Brotherhood and adopted by the PKS.

Ahmed Sujino, a teacher at a Muhammadiyah boarding school in the Sumatran city of Metro, is a case in point. “There is nothing wrong with tarbiyeh,” he says, making little effort to disguise his PKS sympathies. Despite the Muhammadiyah's longstanding support for a secular state, Mr. Sujino believes Shariah must become the law of the land and that those who persistently refuse to observe it, including non-Muslims, should be reminded of what's expected of them “in a physical way.” He also has invited Salafist preachers from Jakarta to “make themselves at home and teach the students.”

It is against this backdrop—compounded by the appointment of two PKS sympathizers to the Muhammadiyah's 13-member Central Board—that Mr. Mulkhan and a handful of allies have decided to fight back. As vice secretary of the Muhammadiyah, he had already revoked its longstanding practice of requiring new members to abandon local Islamic traditions that were at variance with organizational dogma. At his behest, too, the Muhammadiyah had issued an official finding that Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism were theologically legitimate faiths, worthy of the organization's respect. “This wasn't just about my personal beliefs but

about the organization's future," he explains. "We needed to stop fighting everyone and start getting along with everyone."



Now Mr. Mulkhan is in the midst of carrying out his most ambitious reform. Later this month, a Muhammadiyah congress is set to implement a decree he helped engineer banning the PKS from its activities. The ostensible motive is to distance the Muhammadiyah from parties of any kind whose "primary goal is the acquisition of political power for themselves."

The larger issue, however, concerns Islam's identity and reputation in Indonesia, both of which, he believes, the PKS and its fellow travelers are bringing into global disrepute. Whether the Muhammadiyah and its millions of members will stand as a bulwark against it will rest in no small part on the outcome of the congress—and on whether people like Mr. Mulkhan will be able to maintain the support and resources they need to keep the organization out of the radicals' grip.

"What is the Muhammadiyah for?" Mr. Mulkhan asks. "My answer is that the Muhammadiyah is not just for the Muhammadiyah and Islam is not just for the Muslims. There are many teachings in Islam that are very beautiful but they are being covered over by this black-and-white way of thinking. For instance, there is a hadith [teaching] that says that smiling at other people is a form of charity. I want to create an Islam that will make people smile."

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