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The Last King of Java

Indonesia's former president offers a model of Muslim tolerance.

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JAKARTA, Indonesia—Suppose for a moment that the single most influential religious leader in the Muslim world openly says “I am for Israel.” Suppose he believes not only in democracy but in the liberalism of America’s founding fathers. Suppose that, unlike so many self-described moderate Muslims who say one thing in English and another in their native language, his message never alters. Suppose this, and you might feel as if you’ve descended into Neocon Neverland.

In fact, you have arrived in Jakarta and are sitting in the small office of an almost totally blind man of 66 named Abdurrahman Wahid. A former president of Indonesia, he is the spiritual leader of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), an Islamic organization of some 40 million members. Indonesians know him universally as Gus Dur, a title of affection and respect for this descendant of Javanese kings. In the U.S. and Europe he is barely spoken of at all—which is both odd and unfortunate, seeing as he is easily the most important ally the West has in the ideological struggle against Islamic radicalism.

Conversation begins with some old memories. In the early 1960s, Mr. Wahid, whose paternal grandfather founded the NU in 1926 and whose father was Indonesia’s first minister of religious affairs, won a scholarship to Al-Azhar University in Cairo, which for 1,000 years had been Sunni Islam’s premier institution of higher learning. Mr. Wahid hated it.

“These old sheikhs only let me study Islam’s traditional *surras* in the old way, which was rote memorization,” he recalls, speaking in the excellent English he learned as a young man listening to the BBC and Voice of America. “Before long I was fed up. So I spent my time reading books from the USIS [United States Information Service], the Egyptian National Library, and at the cinema. I used to watch three, four movies a day.”

As Mr. Wahid saw it, the basic problem with Al-Azhar was that the state interfered in its affairs and demanded intellectual conformity—a lesson he carries with him to the present day. In 1966 he left Cairo for Baghdad University, where he encountered much the same thing: “The teaching [suffered from] conventionalism. You were not allowed to go your own way.”

Here Mr. Wahid digresses into Islamic history. “In the second century of Islam, the Imam al-Shafi’i began remodeling the religion,” he says. “He put into place the mechanism of understanding everything through law [Shariah]. Now people can’t talk about that anymore. We cannot attack al-Shafi’i.”

The point is crucial to Mr. Wahid’s understanding of Islam as being something broader, deeper and better than the tradition-bound view of life imposed by traditional schools of Islamic law (all the more striking because Mr. Wahid is himself a leading theologian of the Shafi’i school). It is equally crucial to Mr. Wahid’s politics, not to mention his relaxed approach to social issues.



“The globalization of ethics is always frightening to people, particularly Islamic radicals,” he says in reference to a question about the so-called *pornoaksi* legislation. For the past three years Indonesian politics have been roiled by an Islamist attempt to label anything they deem sexually arousing to be a form of “porno-action.” Mr. Wahid sees this as an assault on *pancasila*, Indonesia’s secularist state philosophy from the time of its founding. He also sees it as an assault on common sense. “Young people like to kiss each other,” he says, throwing his hands in the air. “Why not? Just because old people don’t do it doesn’t mean it’s wrong.”

Mr. Wahid is equally relaxed about some of the controversies that have recently erupted between Muslims and the West. Pope Benedict’s Regensburg speech from last September was “a good speech, though as usual he pointed to the wrong times and the wrong cases.” As for the furor over the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad, he asks “why should we be angry?” And he dismisses Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, the al-Jazeera preacher who helped incite the cartoon riots, as an “angry, conventional” thinker.

What really concerns Mr. Wahid is what he sees as the increasingly degraded state of the Muslim mind. That problem is becoming especially acute at Indonesian universities and in the *pesantren*—the religious boarding schools that graduate hundreds of thousands of students every year. “We are experiencing the shallowing of religion,” he says, bemoaning the fact that the boarding schools persist in teaching “conventional”—that word again—Islam.

But Mr. Wahid's critique is not just of formal Islamic education. He also attacks the West's philosophy of positivism, which, he says, "relies too much on the idea of conquering knowledge and mastering scientific principles alone." This purely empirical and essentially soulless view of things, broadly adopted by Indonesia's secular state universities, gives its students a bleak choice: "Either they follow the process or they are outside the process."

As a result, Western-style education in Indonesia has come to represent not just secularism but the negation of religion, to which too many students have responded by embracing fundamentalism. At the University of Indonesia, for example, an estimated three in four students are members or sympathizers of the "Prosperous Justice Party," or PKS, an ultra-radical Islamic party.



This raises the subject of religion and politics. "For us, an Islamic party is not a thing to follow," he says, adding that "religion and morality is tied to person, not a party." To illustrate the point, he observes that religious parties in the Muslim world have more often been the handmaids of dictatorship than democracy. "Whenever governments tried to enforce their institutions they use 'Islamic' people as potential allies." The Front for the Defense of Islam (FPI), a radical vigilante group that uses violent means to suppress "un-Islamic" behavior, was, he observes, originally a creature of the Indonesian military.

So why did Mr. Wahid, as a religious leader, make the choice to go into politics himself? He demurs at the suggestion of choice. "I am against politics, so to speak. In 1984 I tried hard to convince people that the NU should not be in politics." He was overruled by others in the organization, and eventually he founded the Party of National Awakening, or PKB. Yet the party, he insists, is "based on non-Islamic principles," a fact he illustrates by pointing to a nearby aide who is an Indonesian Protestant. "We have to go for plurality, for tolerance."

He also believes that the "only solution" to the challenge of Islamic radicalization in Indonesia is more democracy. But what about the example of Hamas, which came to power through democratic means, and of other groups like Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood that would probably do the same if given the chance? Mr. Wahid's answer is to distinguish between what he calls "full democratization" and the "hollow imitation of democracy" that he sees taking place in Indonesia as well as among Arabs in Palestine and Iraq.

"The problem is not personalities, it is institutions," he says. "For the past 250 years the Americans have had not just Jefferson's concept of the rights of the individual but also Alexander Hamilton's belief in a strong state." In order to function properly, democracy requires competent government that can effectively uphold the rule of law. It also requires a broadly understood concept of self-rule, which is missing in too much of the developing world: "Here, ordinary citizens expect the government to do everything for them."

He therefore takes a fairly dim view of Iraq's democratic prospects. "Iraqis understood that Saddam had caused them trouble," and were grateful to be rid of him, he says. "But as for the U.S. concept of democracy, they don't understand it at all." The problem, he adds, goes double in the rest of the Arab world, where, he says, the prevailing view is that being a democracy is an expression of weakness, while being a dictatorship is a sign of strength.

What's needed, in other words, is for countries like Indonesia and Iraq to find a way to combine effective government with a powerful respect for the rights of the citizen. But how one goes about doing that is itself a deeper problem, a problem of culture. "How do we follow the West without [becoming] Westerners? How do you do that? I don't know."



In fact, Mr. Wahid has begun to develop an answer through two organizations he chairs, the Wahid Institute, run by his daughter Yenny, and LibForAll, an Indonesia- and U.S.-based nonprofit run by American C. Holland Taylor, which works to discredit Islamism's ideology of hatred. "It's up to LibForAll to introduce both sides to Muslims; to show that common principles are also the principles of Islam," Mr. Wahid says. "Hundreds of thousands of Muslim youth learn in countries where there is technological modernity. We need to [nurture] the emergence of a new kind of people who think in terms of being modern but still relate to the past."

In fact, that perfectly describes Mr. Wahid, who is keenly aware of his own roots in both Islamic and Javanese traditions. Among his ancestors are the last Hindu-Buddhist king of the Javanese Majapahit dynasty, and Sunan Kalijogo, a Sufi mystic who married Islamic and local traditions and, according to lore, defeated Islamic extremism in the 16th century. Can Mr. Wahid, heir to this venerable tradition, accomplish the same feat? "Right now, the fundamentalists think they're winning," he once told a friend. "But they're going to wake up one day and realize we beat them."

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