

A TRADITION OF TOLERANCE IN INDONESIA OFFERS HOPE

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WITH THE LARGEST MUSLIM POPULATION IN THE WORLD, INDONESIA HAS THE POTENTIAL TO HELP DEFINE ISLAM AS MODERATE AND PROGRESSIVE.

BY KYAI HAJI ABDURRAHMAN WAHID AND
C. HOLLAND TAYLOR

he world's total Muslim population exceeds 1.3 billion people, of whom approximately 300 million live in Arabic-speaking countries, which are at the heart of the radical Islamist movement. Islam's center of gravity, however, lies not in Mecca or Cairo, but much farther east. Nearly twice as many Muslims live in Indonesia, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh as in the entire Arab world. Thus the "struggle for the soul of Islam" must inevitably be fought and won not only in the Arab heartland, but on its periphery as well — a fact which offers a unique, little-known opportunity for those wishing to promote moderate and progressive interpretations of Islam. Non-Arab Muslim populations have the power to help define Islam, and to discredit Wahhabism as a heretical fringe movement financed by oil-rich extremists.

Western scholars, journalists and diplomats have long

admired Indonesia for having the most liberal and tolerant version of Islam practiced anywhere on earth. However, this tradition of tolerance has come under threat in recent years as radical groups have expanded their influence. The country has endured terrorist bombings, the forced closure or burning of many churches, and a prolonged religious war in its eastern provinces from 1999 to 2002 that took the lives of thousands, Christians and Muslims alike.

Without minimizing the enormous human suffering caused by such events, and their devastating impact on Indonesia's economy, extremist ideology represents a far greater threat than bombs to the country's traditions of pluralism and tolerance. These are embodied in its constitution and state ideology of *pancasila*, which guarantee freedom of worship and reject the notion of a so-called "Islamic state."

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Tradition of Tolerance

Situated on Islam's eastern periphery, Indonesia's long and venerable tradition of religious tolerance is not the result of accident, but rather of precise historic circumstances that offer valuable lessons for us in the struggle against religious extremism and terror today.

The 16th century was a time of great upheaval and bloodshed on the Indonesian island of Java, as newly

Muslim city-states along its northern coast destroyed local Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms and extended their power to the interior. Flush with victory, militant adherents of the new religion — many of Arab or Chinese descent — sought to eradicate the island's ancient cultural heritage, using religion to justify their quest for economic and political power. Opposing them were indigenous Javanese — led by Islamic saints and political figures such as Sunan Kalijogo — who sought continuity and a common ground between religions, based on the precepts of tolerance and mysticism.

For nearly a hundred years, the opposing forces contended for the soul of Java — and, ultimately, for that of Islam — in a war whose decisive engagements occurred not only on the field of battle, but in the hearts and minds of countless individuals scattered across the lush, tropical landscape. It was a conflict between extremists and Sufi (mystically inclined) Muslims. In the end, the Sufis' profound spiritual ideology — popularized among the masses by storytellers and musicians — played a role even more vital than that of economics or pure military force in defeating religious extremism in Java.

As a result, a new dynasty arose, founded on the principle of “the throne for the people,” which established religious tolerance as the rule of law and guaranteed freedom of conscience to all Javanese — long before similar ideas took root in the West. Its founder was a Javanese Sufi Muslim and disciple of Sunan Kalijogo named Senopati ing Alogo. The basis of his victory was the popular appeal of Senopati's message of freedom, justice and profound inner spirituality, in contrast to the fanaticism and tyranny of his opponents.

This rich historical and cultural tradition became the inspiration for the LibForAll Foundation, which the authors established in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the 2002 Bali bombing to help foster international peace and security. Its mission is to encourage the growth of peaceful, tolerant and free societies — built upon a foundation of civil and economic liberty and the rule of law — in order to reduce religious extremism and discredit the use of terror worldwide. Our goal is to help ensure the global triumph of a pluralistic and tolerant understanding of Islam, at peace with itself and the modern world.

LibForAll plans and executes its programs in cooperation with like-minded Muslim leaders in the fields of religion, education, popular culture, government, business and the media, and is systematically building a global

counter-extremism network that unites top Muslim opinion leaders in each of these fields. The name we gave this network, Rahmatan lil Alamin, is inspired by the Quran's vision of Islam as a blessing (rahmat) for all creation (alamin).

The Battle for Hearts and Minds

Since General I Mangku Pastika led an elite team of police who cracked the first Bali bombing case and brought the perpetrators to justice, the Indonesian police have aggressively pursued terrorist members of Jemaah Islamiyah, while maintaining respect for human rights and the rule of law. Often described as the “Southeast Asian affiliate of al-Qaida,” JI's ability to launch terrorist attacks appears to have been severely degraded. However, the ideology of religious hatred that inspired Imam Samudra, Amrozi and other Bali bombers to commit, and actually revel in, their crimes continues to spread unabated.

The era of reform ushered in by Suharto's fall in 1998 has not only inspired a strong democratic movement, a free press and calls for an end to corruption, but also provided an opportunity for extremist Muslim groups to openly pursue their agenda in a decentralized public sphere that is no longer subject to repressive control by an authoritarian government. Violent and nonviolent groups alike, ranging from the Front for the Defense of Islam, Majelis Mujahaddin Indonesia, Laskar Jihad and Komite Persiapan Penegakan Syariat Islam, to Hizb ut-Tahrir and Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (the Justice and Prosperity Party), have mobilized to transform Indonesia into an Islamic state ruled by their interpretation of Shariah. They have even sought to enter the political arena, cloaked in the mantle of Islam and accusing their opponents of being heretical Muslims, infidels or worse.

Two of the most active radical movements in Indonesia today are Hizb ut-Tahrir — which seeks to establish a global caliphate — and the Justice and Prosperity Party (known as PKS), an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. In August 2007, Hizb ut-Tahrir demonstrated its rising strength by organizing an “International Caliphate Conference,” at which nearly 100,000 Indonesians packed Jakarta's Bung Karno Stadium to cheer calls for the establishment of Shariah and a global caliphate.

The PKS started from ground zero in 1998, but in August 2007 it won 40 percent of the vote for Jakarta's governorship, while Indonesia's other major political parties combined were scarcely able to assemble the majori-

ty necessary to prevent this extremist political party from ruling the nation's capital. A top PKS figure currently serves as head of the Indonesian legislature, and the party also controls two key ministries in the national government — including the Department of Agriculture, with thousands of field offices scattered throughout every district of Indonesia — enabling it to spread its tentacles nationwide.

Key to the success of the PKS, Hizb ut-Tahrir and other extremist groups has been their enormous organizing power, backed by financial resources. The PKS, in particular, has been adept at utilizing Islamic education circles (*tarbiyah*) to infiltrate mosques, campuses, workplaces, the bureaucracy and even mass organizations such as the Muhammadiyah, the world's second-largest Muslim organization, with 30 million members. Both the PKS and HT operate at a grassroots level, expanding their networks — and mobilizing new cadres — mosque by mosque, campus by campus, and even neighborhood by neighborhood, in the case of PKS. They have substituted a highly politicized and radical understanding of Islam for Indonesian society's traditionally tolerant and pluralistic worldview.

Fortunately, the largest Muslim organization in the world — the Nahdlatul Ulama, with 40 million members — has been more difficult for extremist groups to penetrate, due to its traditional, Sufi orientation. Yet even it is facing the steady infiltration of its mosques and institutions, some of which are being turned into extremist outposts and used to distance local populations from the NU itself.

The PKS, Hizb ut-Tahrir and other radical groups view the Muhammadiyah and NU as key targets, because these two mass organizations have long been pillars of support for Indonesia's constitution, embracing *pancasila* and rejecting calls for an Islamic state. Established in 1912, the Muhammadiyah is a modernist Muslim organization whose membership is concentrated primarily in urban areas. The Nahdlatul Ulama, in contrast, has its roots in the Indonesian countryside, and represents traditional and Sufi Islam. Should either group fall into the hands of extremists, Indonesia's future as a moderate state — home to the world's largest Muslim population

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and democracy — would be in severe jeopardy.

The Moderates Fight Back

This is not a distant or idle threat. PKS and Hizb ut-Tahrir cadres dominated public forums at the July 2005 Muhammadiyah Congress held in Malang, East Java, where they joined with opportunists in persuading Muhammadiyah members to “purify” the organization's Central Board of “liberal and pluralistic” influences. The extremists' confidence and overreach were such that during the following 18 months, Dr. Abdul Munir Mul Khan (the group's vice secretary from 2000 to 2005) and key allies felt compelled to mobilize the new Muhammadiyah Central Board to decisively reject the PKS. They issued a formal decree calling for elimination of such outside influences for the sake of the organization's survival.

Key points of the decree include the following:

- All Muhammadiyah branches, institutions and charitable businesses must free themselves from outside influences (i.e., *Tarbiyah*/Muslim Brotherhood and the PKS);
- Muhammadiyah members and leaders are forbidden to use the organization's institutions, facilities or resources to conduct non-Muhammadiyah programs or activities, especially those with a political agenda acting in the guise of religion;
- Members are forbidden to involve the organization in politics or use its symbols for political purposes;
- All media outlets owned by Muhammadiyah are ordered to promote its principles and values only; and
- Leaders at every level of the organization are instructed to clean up their ranks, adopt policies and institute programs that will strengthen and consolidate the organization in accordance with its fundamental principles and mission, including opposition to the establishment of Indonesia as an Islamic state.

Such positive developments should not elicit a sense of complacency, however. It is one thing to issue a decree, and another to ensure its implementation throughout an organization as large, diverse and open as the Muhammadiyah has become, with nearly 10,000 schools, 187 colleges and universities, and 250 hospitals spread throughout Indonesia. While a number of district- and province-

level leaders have sought to implement the decree, many others fear that its implementation would cause a decisive break in the Muhammadiyah — splitting the world's second-largest Muslim organization into competing camps. Meanwhile, radicals continue to work full time to assume complete control of the board of the Muhammadiyah in 2010, bolstered by the fact that Hizb ut-Tahrir and the PKS continue to grow in strength and numbers.

The Muhammadiyah decree may serve as an inspiration and help point the way forward for those who seek to promote a pluralistic and tolerant understanding of Islam. The decree clearly demonstrates that radical attempts to engage in a successful “long march” through the institutions of society are not guaranteed success — especially if opposed by courageous and influential members of that society, willing to defend the moral and spiritual values that lie at the heart of every religion, including Islam.

The past year has witnessed similar developments in the Nahdlatul Ulama, which issued decrees stating that there is no theological requirement for Muslims to estab-

lish a caliphate or reject democracy (a direct rebuttal of Hizb ut-Tahrir); condemning the spread of extremist foreign ideology; and instructing members “to safeguard their heritage, so that the NU’s own houses of worship are not turned against it and used to attack the NU and the Republic [of Indonesia].”

A Broader Struggle

Of course, the struggle between radical and moderate Islam that we see playing out in Indonesia today is only part of a much broader, global struggle for the soul of Islam, which pits well-organized and heavily financed radicals against moderate Muslims, who have few sources of encouragement and support.

Few political movements have ever had the ideological vitality, or virulence, to filter across national borders, recruit millions of new adherents and subvert the loyalties of a nation’s citizens. Communism was dangerous precisely because it had such power, augmented by the financial support of a resource-rich nation (the Soviet Union)

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hijacked by that same ideology. The appeal of Islamism to potential adherents is every bit as great today as was that of Marxist theory in the last century. Its slogan, "Islam is the solution," promises a similar utopian future — if not in this world, then certainly the next. And, as communist revolutionaries in the past depended on the USSR, the Islamist movement relies heavily upon the enormous financial and ideological support provided from oil-rich Saudi Arabia and its neighboring states — or, in the case of Shiite Islamism, by Iran.

In considering the scope of religious extremism in the Islamic world, it appears that perhaps 10 to 15 percent of the world's Muslims currently share the militant Islamist views that underlie Osama bin Laden's radical vision — which translates into 130 million to 200 million people worldwide. Yet, with the exception of the Pakistani al-Mawdudi, most leading ideologues of Islamic fundamentalism are Arab writers and, to this day, most radical Muslim leaders in countries as diverse as Tanzania and Indonesia are of Arab descent. Wahhabi proselytizers are

feverishly seeking to graft their intolerant version of Islam onto local, native cultures throughout the Muslim world. The results can be seen from Indonesia to Pakistan and Nigeria, where local Muslims — radicalized by Wahhabi money and influence — commit the most brutal acts, slaughtering thousands in the name of religion, including local Christians, Western tourists and even fellow Muslims who do not share their radical views.

It is imperative that we reverse the dynamics of this vicious cycle of radicalization, and instead create a virtuous cycle of counter-extremism throughout the Muslim world. The Rahmatan lil Alamin Network enables the LibForAll Foundation to conduct programs that reach far beyond Indonesia. For example, in February 2007 — when Western media and governments were condemning Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Holocaust-denial conference in Tehran and bemoaning the lack of a similar response in the Muslim world — LibForAll quickly organized an historic religious summit in Bali, where participants rejected the evils of Holocaust denial and



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affirmed religious tolerance as “a blessing for all creation.” Executed in partnership with the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the summit showcased Indonesia’s ability to play a unique and constructive role in promoting tolerance between religions, and discrediting the ideology of hatred.

Another example of LibForAll’s unique approach has been its work with Muslim rock star Ahmad Dhani, who has generated years of saturation media coverage for anti-extremism messages. He has released two best-selling albums and numerous songs that have risen to the top of the charts in Indonesia and on MTV Asia, including a “Musical Fatwa” against religious hatred and terrorism. LibForAll is now aiming to replicate this success worldwide with pop stars in every significant cultural, linguistic and commercial music market in the Islamic world.

The many and diverse Indonesian leaders associated with the foundation are not content to help stem the tide of radical Islam at home, as evidenced by the land-

mark visit to Israel and Palestine in December 2007 by a LibForAll peace delegation. Prominent NU and Muhammadiyah clerics established links with moderates there to promote mutual understanding and respect as the basis for a lasting peace.

In the words of renowned Muslim cleric Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri, “It’s not possible to extinguish fire with fire. It takes water.” We cannot extinguish hatred by resorting to hatred. Rather, it requires the courage and humility to approach “the other” in a spirit of divine love and compassion.

With its traditions of religious pluralism and tolerance, Indonesia and its civil society are ideally positioned to serve as mediators, helping to remove the poison of religious hatred that has long afflicted the Middle East. By integrating its rich spiritual traditions with the best of modern practices, Indonesian Islam can serve as a model for Islamic civilization worldwide and help inspire a similar renaissance of Islamic spirituality and tolerance in other parts of our troubled world. ■



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