

LibForAll Foundation Promotes Tolerance in Indonesia, Other Muslim Nations

By Mike O'Sullivan
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Former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid and Southeast Asian pop star Ahmad Dhani have joined forces in an organization called LibForAll, which promotes religious tolerance. Mike O'Sullivan reports that the foundation, co-founded by American Holland Taylor, is building a network of moderate Muslims to counteract extremism.



LibForAll Foundation

Indonesia, where more than 85 percent of the population is Muslim, has been the scene of horrible violence carried out by religious extremists, including the 2002 bombing in Bali that claimed the lives of more than 200 people.

But there is a countervailing movement that promotes tolerance. Indonesian pop star Ahmad Dhani, lead singer for the group Dewa, conveys that message in two albums. One, called *Laskar Cinta*, or *Warriors of Love*, is a play on *Laskar*

Jihad, or *Warriors of Jihad*, the name of an extremist group behind the killings of thousands of Christians in the Maluku Islands and Sulawesi.

Singer Dhani is a member of the board of the LibForAll Foundation, a name based on the phrase "liberty for all." The organization was co-founded by former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid and C. Holland Taylor, an American businessman who was fascinated with the culture of Java, Indonesia's most populous island. Taylor is familiar with the Islamic world. He has spent time in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan since his days as a student. Since retiring from the telecommunications business in the 1990s, he has spent much of his time in Indonesia, studying Javanese culture and promoting what he sees as its tradition of tolerance. He says Javanese Muslims rejected political Islam 400 years ago.

"And when they succeeded in defeating that extremism, they allowed all Javanese freedom of religion," said Taylor. "They could be Hindu, they could be Buddhist, they could be animist, they could be Muslim, they could mix them all together. The only thing they could not do is use force to compel others to worship the way they thought that they should."

He says the influx of petro-dollars from wealthy oil-producing countries such as Saudi Arabia has led to a rise in extremism, especially in the cities.

"Radical Islam is primarily an urban phenomenon rather than a rural phenomenon because it spreads most easily among Muslim populations who have been cut off from their roots in the countryside, who have moved to cities," he said. "In Europe and America, it is often second and third generation children of immigrants who, instead of growing up in a village in Morocco or Algeria, they are now living in Europe. The local mosque was built by Saudi Arabia. The imam is paid by Saudi Arabia."

The LibForAll Foundation held a conference in Bali last year to reject assertions made at an Iranian-sponsored meeting that the Jewish Holocaust never happened. The Bali conference was convened by former President Wahid and featured witnesses to the Holocaust, a Holocaust survivor, and victims of terrorism.

Wahid served as Indonesia's first democratically elected president from 1999 to 2001.

Like many Javanese, he follows a mystical strain of Islam known as Sufism. He is former chairman of an

organization called Nahdlatul Ulama, which claims 40-million members. It opposes violence and intolerant interpretations of Islam.

Indian-born Ravi Krishnamurthy is vice president of the LibForAll Foundation. The Silicon Valley entrepreneur is a Hindu, but he says the foundation's work of promoting moderate Islam concerns people of all faiths.

"Because what happens, many times, we have people say it is a Muslim issue, Muslims must deal with it," said Ravi Krishnamurthy. "Of course, there is a theological component which needs a trained scholar or cleric from the Muslim world. But then there is a financial, there is an operational, logistical component, which requires people of goodwill of every faith and nation to come together and address this problem."

Holland and Krishnamurthy say extremist groups are rich in funds and have the organizational skills to spread their influence.

The foundation hopes to tip the balance toward a message of tolerance. It briefs policy makers in the United States and Europe and works with other organizations that promote tolerance, including the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, a Jewish institution that cosponsored the Bali Holocaust conference.

The foundation is also producing a video project that features moderate Muslim leaders from various parts of the world explaining their faith. It plans to distribute the programs to Islamic schools and make the series available for broadcast.

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