

Bookshelf / By C. Holland Taylor

Terrorist acts perpetrated in the name of Islam have dominated news headlines for years, yet Western readers are often left wondering what motivates such radicalism, and how it spreads. Few nations are more strategically vital to the struggle

My Friend the Fanatic

By Sadanand Dhume

(Text Publishing, 271 pp., A\$34.95)

for the “soul” of Islam than Indonesia. Home of the world’s largest Muslim population and democracy, Indonesia’s ancient traditions of pluralism and tolerance are under siege by a well-organized and heavily financed extremist movement.

The current radical trends in Indonesia are inextricably linked to Islam’s 700-year history in the East Indies. Sunni Islam arrived peacefully in what is now Indonesia, brought by Arab, Indian and Chinese merchants active in the fabled spice trade. Once they acquired sufficient economic power, such merchants established Islamic city-states that rebelled against, and ultimately destroyed, the pre-existing Hindu-Buddhist kingdom of Majapahit. It was only

the subsequent military and political triumph of indigenous Javanese in 1586—following a bloody, century-long struggle—that preserved the region’s pluralistic and tolerant traditions, in the form of a deeply spiritual understanding of Islam that did not conflict with pre-existing faiths.

In “My Friend the Fanatic,” journalist Sadanand Dhume guides the reader deftly through the whirlpool these currents have created. Descriptions of a young, charismatic author titillating avant-garde audiences in the nation’s capital—with her sexually provocative short stories and performance art—alternate with on-the-scene reportage of Muslim radicals’ success at mobilizing grassroots support throughout the vast archipelago. Mr. Dhume took an unusual trek through Indonesia’s lush, tropical landscape with Herry Nurdi, the “fanatic” of the book’s title and editor of Sabili, a mass-circulation extremist magazine whose explicit goal is to undo radical Islam’s history of failure in Indonesia and assure its final triumph.

By some counts at least, Mr. Nurdi and his ilk are winning. In recent years, extremists have taken advantage of regional autonomy to impose Shariah-based regulations in nearly 70 of Indonesia’s 364 local regencies. These laws, among other things, compel women and girls to wear so-called “Muslim” clothing that reveals only the face, hands and feet, even if they are Christian; require students, civil servants and even couples applying for marriage to demonstrate an ability to read the Quran; and effectively restrict women from going out at night without a male relative.

Mr. Dhume’s description of the extremists’ rise will be dispiriting to those who view democracy as an antidote to radicalism. Indeed, one of the most striking facts he reports is the extent to which those leading the charge to institutionalize radi-

calism in Indonesia today are directly linked to post-independence rebellions and failed extremist movements from the past. Whereas their ideological forebears (and literally, in many cases, their fathers or grandfathers) were crushed by Indonesian nationalists committed to upholding Indonesia’s secular constitution and pluralist state ideology, the new generation of radicals use democracy, and the symbols of Islam to erode and ultimately destroy Indonesia’s heritage of religious pluralism and tolerance. This phenomenon is

rendered possible and dramatically accelerated by the tendency of opportunistic politicians and political parties—often corrupt and lacking in Islamic legitimacy—to engage in a “chase to the lowest common denominator” of Islam, in a cynical attempt to prove their Muslim bona fides.

Unfortunately, the current government in Jakarta—led by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono—has done little to retard the rapidly metastasizing phenomenon of political Islam.

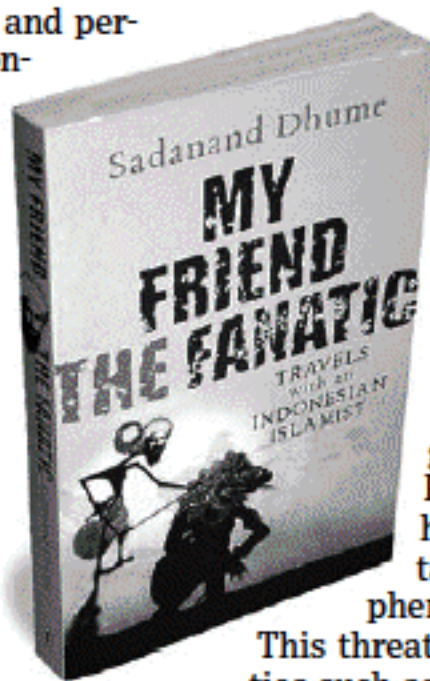
This threatens not only religious minorities such as the Muslim Ahmadiyah sect and Christians, but also the safety and security of the Indonesian nation-state itself. Just this month, in fact, religious extremists beat a group of moderates marching for religious freedom on the grounds of the national monument, in full view of on-looking police and the nearby state palace.

While Mr. Dhume argues convincingly about the radicals’ current strength and momentum, he is strangely silent about their most vocal and effective opponents, who represent the world’s best hope for a truly democratic and tolerant Islam. Virtually absent from Mr. Dhume’s book are the valiant efforts of Indonesian Muslim leaders to stem the Arab petrodollar-funded tide of radical Islam, and thereby uphold the secular foundations of the Indonesian nation-state. Former President Abdurrahman Wahid, a member of the LibForAll

Foundation which I head, has vigorously opposed the Islamist agenda and succeeded at blocking many of their initiatives. So, too, have other key leaders of the Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, the world’s biggest Muslims organizations, which are based in Indonesia and boast 70 million followers.

Islam’s future—as a religion of peace and tolerance, or of hatred, violence and supremacy—may well hinge upon Indonesia’s destiny, as Middle East financial backers and their indigenous allies well know. Mr. Dhume is pessimistic, sensing that the “totalitarian cast” of the extremist movement will “grind what remained of a once proud culture to a hollow imitation of Arabness.” Yet while the situation is undoubtedly grave, it is far from hopeless. Indonesia boasts a moderate public and self-confident Muslim leaders who do not conflate Islam with arrogance, extremism, supremacy or violence. Mr. Dhume’s book shows that the battle is raging, but its conclusion is far from preordained.

Mr. Taylor is the chairman & CEO of the LibForAll Foundation, a nonprofit that works to reduce religious extremism worldwide and discredit the use of terrorism.



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