

The New York Times

Islamic Group Gains Power in Indonesia

By PETER GELLING | Los Angeles | Published: October 6, 2008



Opponents of Ahmadiya, a minority Muslim sect, at a protest in August in Jakarta, Indonesia

JAKARTA — In a sign of its growing prominence, Indonesia's Council of Ulemas moved its headquarters from the basement of a major mosque here into an expensive new office tower in the heart of downtown.

The council was established in 1975 as a quasi-governmental body of Muslim scholars by Suharto, the country's leader for three decades, partly as a tool to keep politically minded Islamic organizations in check. But in the decade since the dictator's fall, the group — whose leaders have increasingly espoused a radical form of Islam — has worked to establish itself as an assertive political force.

The group, known as M.U.I., built an impressive network of offices throughout the country, staffed by people who promote the council's view of Islam. It logged its first major political success this summer when the government agreed to severely restrict the activities of a Muslim sect that does not believe that Muhammad was the last prophet.

Advocates of religious tolerance worry that the council's new clout could signal the start of religious radicalization in a country known for its moderate brand of Islam.

“Islamists use the M.U.I. as a major base of operations, coordinating support for the Islamist agenda,” said Holland Taylor, founder of LibForAll Foundation, an American and Indonesian nongovernmental group that promotes religious pluralism.

Among the goals of some prominent council members is the imposition of Shariah, or Islamic law, throughout traditionally secular Indonesia.

But other experts, even some concerned about the council’s conservative leanings and newfound influence, see the broader radicalization of Indonesian Islam as unlikely. They point out that Indonesia’s largest Islamic association, the Nahdlatul Ulama, promotes tolerance and religious pluralism and that Islamic political parties have struggled to gain ground in recent years.

Beyond that, broad antipornography legislation, which had been championed by the Council of Ulemas and its allies in Parliament, has been scaled back after a public backlash that included large street protests.

“I don’t think the Council of Ulemas is going to turn Indonesia into the Sudan,” said Sidney Jones, director of the International Crisis Group in Jakarta, citing “many other balancing forces.”

The council is an umbrella group that represents established Muslim organizations. In addition to advising the government on religious issues, it distributes fatwas, or religious directives, advising Muslims on how to practice their faith. Its fatwas are nonbinding.

Maruf Amin, the council’s deputy chairman, describes it as a moderate organization that represents the views of more than 60 Islamic groups in this overwhelmingly Muslim country.

“Our job is to communicate to the government the aspirations of Muslim people in Indonesia and to protect the Islamic population here from any bad influences that might lead them to deviate from their faith,” he said in an interview.

But some analysts who have studied the group say Islamic hard-liners have had an increasingly dominant role in the council in the last few years.

“The council has a long history of moderation, but lately it has been infiltrated by some hard-liners,” said Azyumardi Azra, director of the graduate school at Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University in Jakarta. “I have told its leaders that if they want to remain a representative organization, they need to be aware of this infiltration.”

The growing prominence of radical voices is partly a byproduct of the transition to democracy. Radical religious leaders who were often silenced during Suharto’s rule now have the freedom to propagate their views and have often proven adept at using the democratic system.

The growing relevance of the Council of Ulemas is partly a result of a budget some analysts believe is growing. (Neither the council nor the government would provide numbers.) Besides government financing, the council has sole authority to license halal food and medicine.

More recently, the council has tapped into Indonesia's lucrative Islamic banking industry. It acts as one of several organizations overseeing banks that refuse loans to companies in businesses that run contrary to Islamic values, like those producing alcohol or selling po.

These financing sources have allowed it to purchase its new office tower and to operate more than 150 satellite offices.

But analysts say the group has also benefited from its relationship with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Although the president is considered moderate, he said last year that after the council issues any fatwas, "the tools of the state can do their duty."

"Hopefully our cooperation will deepen in the future," he said during the speech, according to translations by the International Crisis Group.

Some experts said they suspected he was supporting the Council of Ulemas to shore up Muslim backing in elections next year. A coalition of Islamic political parties backed him when he first ran for president in 2004.

The council's biggest coup so far was Mr. Yudhoyono's decision in June to restrict the practices of Ahmadiya, a minority Muslim sect.

The council had been calling for a ban on Ahmadiya since 2005 when it issued two fatwas, one against the sect for not believing Muhammad is the last prophet and another calling on Muslims to reject "pluralism, liberalism and secularism."

On June 1 in Jakarta, opponents of Ahmadiya, some affiliated with Forum Umat Islam, an organization formed to promote the council's fatwas whose leaders include several prominent council members, clashed with demonstrators supporting the sect. Dozens were injured.

Despite an outcry over the incident, the government ordered Ahmadiya members to "stop disseminating interpretations that deviate from the main tenets of Islam" or face legal action. The government then asked the Council of Ulemas, with its network of chapters, to monitor Ahmadiya's compliance.

A report in July by the International Crisis Group, which analyzed the conditions leading to the decree, laid significant blame on the dominance of radicals within the council and the council's growing influence.

Several of those members are leaders of groups blamed for burning mosques and houses belonging to Ahmadiya adherents.

In its annual report on religious freedom in September, the United States State Department singled out the Council of Ulemas as "influential in enabling official and social discrimination" against minority religious groups in the last year in Indonesia.

Still, most of Indonesia's Muslims remain moderate, and some have begun to fight back.

Mr. Taylor, whose group promotes religious tolerance, said moderate groups would need to try to take control of the council or press the government to privatize or dissolve it.