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BY **ANDREW HIGGINS**  
IN JAKARTA

In the early 1980s, Nasir Tamara, a young Indonesian scholar, needed money to fund a study of Islam and politics. He went to the Jakarta office of the U.S.-based Ford Foundation to ask for help. He left empty-handed. The United States, he was told, was “not interested in getting into Islam.”

The rebuff came from President Obama’s mother, Ann Dunham, a U.S. anthropologist who lived in Indonesia for more than a decade. Dunham, who died in 1995, focused on issues of economic development, not matters of faith and politics, sensitive subjects in a country then ruled by a secular-minded autocrat.

“It was not fashionable to ‘do Islam’ back then,” Tamara recalled.

Today, Indonesia is a democracy and the role of Islam is one of the most important issues facing U.S. policy in a country with many more Muslims than Egypt, Syria, Jordan and all the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf combined. What kind of Islam prevails here is critical to U.S. interests across the wider Muslim world.

“This is a fight for ideas, a fight for what kind of future Indonesia wants,” said Walter North, Jakarta mission chief for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), who knew Dunham while she was here in the 1980s.

It is also a fight that raises a tricky question: Should Americans stand apart from Islam’s internal struggles around the world or jump in and try to bolster Muslims who are in sync with American views?

A close look at U.S. interactions with Muslim groups in Indonesia – Obama’s boyhood home for four years – shows how, since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, rival strategies have played out, often with consequences very different from what Washington intended.

In the debate over how best to influence the country’s religious direction, some champion intervention, most notably a private organization from North Carolina that has waded deep into Indonesia’s theological struggles. But, in the main, U.S. thinking has moved back toward what it was in Dunham’s day: stay out of Islam.

## As Indonesia debates Islam’s role, U.S. stays out

*Post-9/11 push to boost moderates gives way*



Muslim students listen to a sermon at their school in Padang recently. Indonesians generally practice an eclectic and flexible brand of Islam.

## **A change in public mood**

In many ways, Indonesia – a nation of 240 million people scattered across 17,000 islands – is moving in America’s direction. It has flirted with Saudi-style dogmatism on its fringes. But while increasingly pious, it shows few signs of dumping what, since Islam arrived here in the 14th century, has generally been an eclectic and flexible brand of the faith.

Terrorism, which many Indonesians previously considered an American-made myth, now stirs general revulsion. When a key suspect in July suicide bombings in Jakarta was killed recently in a shootout with a U.S.-trained police unit, his native village, appalled by his violent activities, refused to take the body for burial.

A band of Islamic moral vigilantes this month forced a Japanese porn star to call off a trip to Jakarta. But the group no longer storms bars, nightclubs and hotels as it did regularly a few years ago, at the height of a U.S. drive to promote “moderate” Islam. Aceh, a particularly devout Indonesian region and a big recipient of U.S. aid after a 2004 tsunami, recently introduced a bylaw that mandates the stoning to death of adulterers, but few expect the penalty to be carried out. Aceh’s governor, who has an American adviser paid for by USAID, opposes stoning.

Public fury at the United States over the [Iraq](#) war has faded, a trend accelerated by the departure of President George W. Bush and the election of Obama. In 2003, the first year of the war, 15 percent of Indonesians surveyed by the Pew Research Center had a favorable view of the United States – compared with 75 percent before Bush took office. America’s favorability rating is now 63 percent.

There are many reasons for the change of mood: an economy that is growing fast despite the global slump; increasing political stability rooted in elections that are generally free and fair; moves by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a U.S.-trained former general who won reelection by a landslide in July, to co-opt Islamic political parties.

Another reason, said Masdar Mas’udi, a senior cleric at Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia’s – and the world’s – largest Islamic organization, is that the United States has backed away from overt intrusions into religious matters. A foe of hard-line Muslims who has worked closely with Americans, Mas’udi said he now believes that U.S. intervention in theological quarrels often provides radicals with “a sparring partner” that strengthens them. These days, instead of tinkering with religious doctrine, a pet project focuses on providing organic rice seeds to poor Muslim farmers.

In the immediate aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, Washington deployed money and rhetoric in a big push to bolster “moderate” Muslims against what Bush called the “real and profound ideology” of “Islamofascism.” Obama, promising a “new beginning between America and Muslims around the world,” has avoided dividing Muslims into competing theological camps. He has denounced “violent extremists” but, in a June speech in Cairo, stated that “Islam is not part of the problem.”

North, the USAID mission chief, said the best way to help “champions of an enlightened perspective win the day” is to avoid theology and help Indonesia “address some of the problems here, such as poverty and corruption.” Trying to groom Muslim leaders America likes, he said, won’t help.

## **Rethinking post-9/11 tack**

This is a sharp retreat from the approach taken right after the Sept. 11 attacks, when a raft of U.S.-funded programs sought to amplify the voice of “moderates.” Hundreds of Indonesian clerics went through U.S.-sponsored courses that taught a reform-minded reading of the Koran. A handbook for preachers, published with U.S. money, offered tips on what to preach. One American-funded Muslim group even tried to script Friday prayer sermons.

Such initiatives mimicked a strategy adopted during the Cold War, when, to counter communist ideology, the United States funded a host of cultural, educational and other groups in tune with America’s goals. Even some of the key actors were the same. The Asia Foundation, founded with covert U.S. funding in the 1950s to combat communism, took the lead in battling noxious strands of Islam in Indonesia as part of a USAID-financed program called Islam and Civil Society. The program began before the Sept. 11 attacks but ramped up its activities after.

“We wanted to challenge hard-line ideas head-on,” recalled Ulil Abshar Abdalla, an Indonesian expert in Islamic theology who, with Asia Foundation funding, set up the Liberal Islam Network in 2001. The network launched a weekly radio

program that questioned literal interpretations of sacred texts with respect to women, homosexuals and basic doctrine. It bought airtime on national television for a video that presented Islam as a faith of “many colors” and distributed leaflets promoting liberal theology in mosques.

Feted by Americans as a model moderate, Abdalla was flown to Washington in 2002 to meet officials at the State Department and the Pentagon, including Paul D. Wolfowitz, the then-deputy secretary of defense and a former U.S. ambassador to Jakarta. But efforts to transplant Cold War tactics into the Islamic world started to go very wrong. More-conservative Muslims never liked what they viewed as American meddling in theology. Their unease over U.S. motives escalated sharply with the start of the Iraq war and spread to a wider constituency. Iraq “destroyed everything,” said Abdalla, who started getting death threats.

Indonesia’s council of clerics, enraged by what it saw as a U.S. campaign to reshape Islam, issued a fatwa denouncing “secularism, pluralism and liberalism.”

The Asia Foundation pulled its funding for Abdalla’s network and began to rethink its strategy. It still works with Muslim groups but avoids sensitive theological issues, focusing instead on training to monitor budgets, battle corruption and lobby on behalf of the poor. “The foundation came to believe that it was more effective for intra-Islamic debates to take place without the involvement of international organizations,” said Robin Bush, head of the foundation’s Jakarta office.

Abdalla, meanwhile, left Indonesia and moved to Boston to study.

### **One U.S. group jumps in**

While the Asia Foundation and others dived for cover, one American outfit jumped into the theological fray with gusto. In December 2003, C. Holland Taylor, a former telecommunications executive from Winston-Salem, N.C., set up a combative outfit called LibForAll Foundation to “promote the culture of liberty and tolerance.”

Taylor, who speaks Indonesian, won some big-name supporters, including Indonesia’s former president, Abdurrahman Wahid, a prominent but ailing cleric, and a popular Indonesian pop star, who released a hit song that vowed, “No to the warriors of jihad! Yes to the warriors of love.” Taylor took Wahid to Washington, where they met Wolfowitz, Vice President Richard B. Cheney and others. He recruited a reform-minded Koran scholar from Egypt to help promote a “renaissance of Islamic pluralism, tolerance and critical thinking.”

Funding came from wealthy Americans, including heirs of the Hanes underwear fortune, and several European organizations. Taylor, in a recent interview in Jakarta, declined to identify his biggest American donor. He said he has repeatedly asked the U.S. government for money but has received only \$50,000, a grant from a State Department counterterrorism unit.

“You can’t win a war with that,” said Taylor, who is working on a 26-part TV documentary that aims to debunk hard-line Islamic doctrine. “People in Washington would prefer to think that if we do nothing we will be okay: just cut off the heads of terrorists and everything will be fine.”

As the atmosphere has grown less hostile, Abdalla, the much-reviled American favorite, returned this year to Jakarta. He hasn’t changed his liberal take on Islam but now avoids topics that fire up his foes. “I’ve changed. The environment has changed,” he said. “We now realize the radical groups are not as dominant as we thought in the beginning.”

Tired of being branded a fringe American stooge, he plans to run in an election next year for leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama, a pillar of Indonesia’s traditional religious establishment. He doesn’t stand much of a chance but wants to “engage with the mainstream instead of the periphery.” His Liberal Islam Network doesn’t get U.S. money anymore, skirts touchy topics on its radio show and no longer hands out leaflets in mosques.

“Religion is too sensitive. We shouldn’t get involved,” said Kay Ikranagara, a close American friend of Obama’s late mother who works in Jakarta for a small USAID-funded scholarship program. Ikranagara worries about Islam’s growing influence on daily life in the country, but she’s wary of outsiders who want to press Indonesians on matters of faith.

“We just get in a lot of trouble trying to do that,” she said.