

## Scholar to challenge the views of extremists

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■ **INDONESIA: ANALYSIS**

Joe Cochrane in Jakarta

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The Indonesian government is extremely proud of running the world's largest Muslim-majority nation. But as the saying goes, "Twice the pride, double the fall".

On more than one occasion in the past five years, Indonesia has attempted to wade into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by volunteering to be a peace broker - and was promptly ignored by Israel, the Middle East Quartet, and even their fellow Muslims in Palestine. Jakarta also hosted an international conference on halting sectarian fighting in Iraq, but a number of Sunni and Shiite figures didn't show up.



Perhaps Indonesia was taking too seriously the praise by some Western countries, most notably the United States, that it was capable of being "a bridge" between Islam and the West. While Indonesia is a successful emerging democracy with more than 190 million Muslim citizens, it is also 6,000 kilometres away from the Arab Peninsula.

"The Indonesian government has too big ambitions. They don't understand the situation in Palestine and in Israel," said Syafii Anwar, executive director of the International Centre for Islam and Pluralism in Jakarta. "The situation in our country is totally different than that of the Middle East, but we need to take a clear position that Asian Muslims have a different perspective in solving the problems."

And therein lies a potential solution, according to one group that wants to move the "global bridge" out of the Jakarta government's hands. Today, a delegation led by Kyai Haji Achmad Mustofa Bisri, a prominent Indonesian cleric, will fly to Europe for a two-week trip to meet with government officials and civil society figures in Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands. He will also give lectures during his tour.

Bisri (pictured) is a revered Islamic scholar and senior leader of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama, one of the largest Muslim organisations in the world. The group follows the centuries-old traditions of Islamic pluralism, tolerance, and spirituality.

Bisri, a leading Muslim theologian, will directly and publicly challenge extremist interpretations of the Koran and Islamic teachings - but not just by fringe Muslim extremist and terrorist groups, but also those being espoused by extremist Christian groups and others.

"What makes us extremely worried is our perception that the world we live in is like very dry grass," Bisri said in Jakarta yesterday on the eve of his departure. "And very dry grass catches fire and burns easily because of hatred and phobias in the world of Islam and the West."

Bisri is under no illusions that he has his work cut out for him. "I am part of a majority that has a very specific interpretation of Islam," he said. "While in Europe, I will represent the majority and share the majority views on Islam."

Bisri's trip comes as negotiations are continuing to form a Dutch right coalition government that would include Geert Wilders, the rabidly anti-Muslim lawmaker, and his far-right Party for Freedom.

C. Holland Taylor, co-founder of the LibForAll Foundation, a US-based group that promotes culture and religious tolerance globally, said both Muslim and Christian extremists are misinterpreting Islam and thus equally responsible for the recent escalation in debate.

"Geert Wilders' understanding of Islam is very similar to that of Osama bin Laden," Taylor, who is travelling with Bisri to Europe, said. "They agree on the obligations of Muslims [to wage violent jihad]. They just disagree on whether it's a good thing."

But the debate is not just limited to extremists. In Germany, there is growing public concern about the appearance of towering mosque minarets in city centres, and whether German children from Muslim families should be allowed to have a religious education instead of a secular one, said Rainer Heufers, Indonesia country director of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation.

Bisri said much of the debate globally is fuelled by "people who don't understand Islam but think they do. Ironically, Islamophobists and radical Muslims both have the same understanding of Islam. It's impossible to extinguish fire with fire. You need water."