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Interview: Gus Mus, Spiritual Leader of Millions of Indonesian Muslims “Radicalism Flourishes Under Democracy”

[even though] radical Muslims
are far outnumbered, argues Gus Mus

From our correspondent
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JAKARTA—Rampaging Muslim extremists have attacked churches and mosques that belong to different Muslim sects in Indonesia, acting with complete impunity. Extremist goons intimidate courts, disrupt film festivals and attack gay events. They even pressure the government, as militant groups threaten to dissolve the current administration and overthrow the president himself. Moderate Muslims say the extremists are a small minority, but that minority sets the tone, and the vast majority have been largely silent until now. But enough is enough, says Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri, the spiritual leader of millions of Indonesians.

Under Suharto, Muslim radicals were virtually invisible in Indonesia. The dictatorial president kept them well under control, with the aid of his military. Radicalism existed only underground, in secret, and played no significant role in society at large. It was only when Suharto fell, and Indonesia became a democracy, that radicals crawled out of their hiding places. “It’s ironic, that radicalism can only flourish in a democracy,” the *kyai* (teacher) bursts out laughing.

The Muslim scholar clearly has a sense of humor similar to that of his illustrious friend and predecessor, former Indonesian president Abdurrahman “Gus Dur” Wahid. He, too, could laugh at anything. Which does not mean that Mustofa Bisri fails to take important issues seriously. On the contrary. Especially when it comes to religious faith, and in particular, radical Muslims’ goal of establishing an Islamic state in Indonesia: on that topic the humor ends, and our interview becomes deadly earnest.

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Gus Mus
Muslim leader



Almost everyone knows Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri as “Gus Mus,” which—like “Gus Dur”—expresses affection and respect, and is also a lot quicker to say than his full name. Gus Mus is one of the top leaders of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which—with its 40 million members—is the world’s largest Muslim organization.

Gus Mus is a highly respected *kyai* (Muslim scholar and teacher). Last month, he traveled to Brussels and Washington to launch the English translation of a book entitled *The Illusion of an Islamic State*. An initiative of the deceased Abdurrahman Wahid and the American C. Holland Taylor, the book is a collection of texts in which leaders of major Muslim organizations are finally speaking out against radicals and terrorists.

The book appeared in Indonesia in 2009, and immediately ignited a firestorm in the Islamic world. The authors received death threats and were painted as “enemies of Islam” by the very people who defend terrorist attacks, and refer to terrorists as “martyrs” and “heroes.”

This is significant and noteworthy, because the book is directed against precisely these radicals, and against the irredeemable version of Islam they wish to impose on others. The book’s title is derived from Abdurrahman “Gus Dur” Wahid’s introductory text: “Their dream of an Islamic state is merely an illusion, for the true Islamic state is not to be found in the structure of any government, but rather, in hearts which are open to God and all his creatures.” In other words: God and politics have nothing to do with each other.

All of the book’s authors—including, first and foremost, Gus Dur and Gus Mus—are recognized as preeminent and authoritative spiritual leaders, who represent the vast, silent majority of Muslims.

“We are the majority,” says Gus Mus. “Our numbers are so much greater than theirs (the radicals). We are the majority, and should not allow such a small group to decide the future of our country.” The smile has just vanished from his face, because there is not much to laugh about here. This is the frustrating reality of Indonesia.

The Illusion of an Islamic State has accomplished a great deal, but not (yet) solved the problem. On the contrary. It seems the radicals in Indonesia have become even more brutal. Muslim thugs are attacking religious minorities, and burning churches and mosques, while the police just watch and the government does nothing to halt such behavior. The most notorious gang, the Front for the Defense of Islam (FPI), overtly threatened to overthrow the president, if he has the guts to ban their organization. And the president, indeed, has done nothing.

Gus Mus: “The radicals aren’t afraid of anyone. But the president seems terrified. I don’t understand him. What’s he afraid of? A few hardliners? They’re such a small group. Why doesn’t he act decisively?”

No answer has been forthcoming to this question, much to the frustration of moderate Muslims. Even Gus Mus’s patience is coming to an end: “The government should act decisively, but it doesn’t, and this only encourages the radicals. Should we [the Nahdlatul Ulama] be the ones to act? That [violence] is not our domain. But there comes a time when we must set ourselves in

motion. Soon the NU will make itself heard... We have our *Banser* (a militia) [with approximately 500,000 members]. When the times are tranquil and our nation secure, *Banser* sleeps. But if the radicals threaten to destroy us, and force us into a corner... there will be chaos in the land.

“The radicals just keep on pushing and pushing, to the point that we ourselves may no longer be moderate, but become like them [in opposition to their agenda]. Look at me: I firmly believe that we should not fight fire with fire, but now even I am beginning to doubt [this lifelong conviction]. Just think how dangerous the situation must be, if even I could become angry,” he laughs.

According to the book’s authors, the source of all this evil is Saudi Arabia, which is dominated by an orthodox and rigid version of Islam, “Wahhabism.” The Saudis do everything in their power to spread this variant of Islam. They pump huge amounts of oil money into Indonesia, seeking to place a straightjacket upon the open and tolerant form of Islam indigenous to that nation. They infiltrate the field of politics, the mass media and schools. Saudi money is used to build mosques, sponsor universities and print books.

Gus Mus is now traveling to the centers of Western power, with an English-language edition of the book. For *The Illusion of an Islamic State* is interesting and important not only for Indonesians, but also Western politicians, he says.

“Everyone can learn from the book. I hope they want to hear us, and wish to learn. For the biggest obstacle [to defeating radical Islam] is people who have no interest in learning, because they think they know it all. Take a politician like Mr. Wilders in the Netherlands. He denigrates Islam without understanding it. Anyone who contradicts him by speaking well of Islam is dismissed as having failed to “correctly” understand the religion, or as a blatant hypocrite.

“To discuss Islam with such a man is like talking with the Taliban about the West. They have no idea what America is, they have no idea what Israel is. They’re completely ignorant, yet curse the West. We must explain and clarify [about the West to Muslims, and Islam to the West]. We cannot give up or stop, for the only alternative [to mutual understanding between Muslims and the West] is a full-blown war between religions. For that’s what will happen if nothing changes [and the world continues on its current trajectory].”

The smile returns to Gus Mus’s face: “Fortunately, not everyone in the West is like Wilders, and not everyone in the Muslim world is like Habib Rizieq (head of the Muslim vigilante group, FPI). There are still people [in the Muslim world and the West] who are open-minded and spiritually-aware. It is our hope that those who think solely in black-and-white terms are a minority.”

