Rock Star Rattles Radical Islam

Popular Indonesian Singer Woos Youths With Songs of Peace and Romance

By REBECCA U. CIO
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To the millions of Indonesian youths who sell out his concerts, Ahmad Dhani is a superstar who has commanded the nation’s rock scene for more than a decade. But the charismatic leader of Dewa, one of Indonesia’s top bands, isn’t just any entertainer crooning about the heartaches of romantic love. Dhani is an ambassador for peace, using his music to lead Indonesia’s youth away from radical Islam.

This week, the Muslim rocker was in the United States to share his message of religious tolerance with an entirely different audience: top U.S. government and military leaders at a national conference on homeland defense. Dhani, 34, says attacking the ideology that motivates terrorists is the key to suppressing radical Islam.

With a long-time acquaintance, former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid, Dhani spoke to the group on Tuesday about a long-term strategy to combat religious extremism. "The countries in the West cannot be disengaged from the Muslim world," Dhani said in an interview before his speech. "Building up the values of tolerance is critical in Indonesia and the Muslim world in order to defeat terrorism.

The November 2005 release of the album "Laskar Cinta" marked a turn in Dhani’s music from love songs toward direct denunciation of radical Islam and its spread in Indonesia. Dhani said he credited the change to his spiritual journey in Sufism, a mystical, moderate form of Islam. The album’s title is a play on Laskar Jihad, or Holy War Warriors, an Indonesian militant group possibly linked to al-Qaeda. Dhani’s outspoken campaign to fight militant ideologies drew the attention of Islamic radicals. After some extremist groups started calling him an enemy of Islam, Dhani went into hiding with his wife, Indonesian pop star Mai, and their children.

Despite the furor created by their music, Dhani and his group emerged in December with a new song, also with the title "Laskar Cinta," that soared to No. 1 on Indonesian radio and MTV Asia. "Laskar Cinta" is the first track in Dewa’s latest album, “Republic of Love.”

References to the Koran are woven into one of Dewa’s most popular songs, "Laskar Cinta," or "Warriors of Love." Dhani said he wrote the lyrics to beckon his fans into a loving Islam.

"Hey there, all you lovers of peace," the song goes. "Watch out, watch out and be on guard — for lost souls, anger twisting their hearts, for lost souls, poisoned by ignorance and hate .... Warriors of love, teach the mystical science of love, for only love is the eternal truth and the shining path for all God’s children everywhere in the world."

As a teenager, Dhani dropped out of a school that embraced Wahhabism, a strictly traditional Islamic sect, to begin Dewa. The group quickly became one of the most popular rock bands in Indonesia.

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Dewa’s first English-language version of its music is set for international release in 2007.

Ahmad Dhani, center, lead singer of the Indonesian rock group Dewa, is trying to spread a message of tolerance to keep Muslim youths from militant Islamic groups.

Some of the lyrics to 'Laskar Cinta' ('Warriors of Love'):
Hey there, all you lovers of peace
Watch out, watch out and be on guard
For lost souls, anger twisting their hearts,
For lost souls, poisoned by ignorance and hate ....
Warriors of love, teach the mystical science of love,
For only love is the eternal truth
And the shining path for all God’s children
Everywhere in the world.