The Last King of Java

The point is crucial to Mr. Wahid’s understanding of Islam as being somehow broader, deeper and better than the tradition-bound view of life imposed by Indonesian schools of Islamic law (all the more striking because Mr. Wahid is himself a leading theologian of the Jakarta-based Islamic party).

The globalization of ethics is all frightening to people, particularly Islamic radicals, he says in reference to a question about the so-called penalized legislation. For the past three years Indonesian politicians have been rolled by an Islamist attempt to label anything they deem sexually arousing to be a form of "porno-action." Mr. Wahid sees this as an insult on the part of Indonesia’s secularist state philosophy from the time of its founding. He also sees it as an assault on common sense. "Young people like to kiss each other," he says, throwing his hands in the air. "Why not? Just because old people don’t do it doesn’t mean it’s wrong." Mr. Wahid is equally relaxed about some of the controversies that have recently erupted between Muslims and the West. Pope John Paul’s recent speech in Indonesia was, he says, very good news, even if he thought the Vatican was taking too much time in the wrong direction.

As for the future, the Indonesian constitution, the Prophet Muhammad, he says, "you have to be very sensitive and not just a conventional, religiously-based" thinker. "What really worries me about Mr. Wahid is what he sees as the increasingly degrading state of the Indonesian nation. That problem is becoming especially acute at Indonesian universities and in some of the religious boarding schools that graduate hundreds of thousands of students every year. "We are experiencing the shallowing of religious education," he says, because there are no credentials that the best students must pass in order to graduate at the best schools. This is, to Mr. Wahid, a grave issue.

But Mr. Wahid’s critique is not just of formal Islamic education. He also attacks the West’s position of position, which, he says, tries too much on the ideas of conquering knowledge and mastering scientific principles alone. This purely empirical and essentially shallow view of things, broadly adopted by Indonesia’s secular intellectuals, gives its students a bleak choice: Either they follow the process or they’re cut out of the process. As a result, Western-style education in Indonesia has come to represent not just secularization but also the rejection of tradition.

So why did Mr. Wahid, as a religious leader, make the choice to go into politics? His decision was in the context of a broader question of whether Indonesia should continue to be a military dictatorship. He sees taking place in Indonesia as well as among Arabs in Palestine and Afghanistan.

The problem is not personalities, it is institutions, he says. For the past 25 years Mr. Wahid has no just left his concept of the rights of the individual but also Alexander Hamilton’s belief in a strong state. In order to function properly, democracy requires competent government leaders who can effectively uphold the rule of law. It also requires a broadly understood concept of self- governance, which is missing in too much of the developing world. "Here, ordinary citizens expect the government to do everything for them."

Mr. Wahid therefore takes a fairly dim view of Indonesia’s democratic prospects. "People thought that Saddam had caused them trouble, but it is much more painful to be tied to him," he says. "But as for the U.S. concept of democracy, they don’t understand it at all." The problem, he adds, does not go deep in the rest of the Arab world, where, he says, the prevailing view is that being a democracy is an expression of weakness, while being a dictator is a sign of strength.

What’s needed, in other words, is for countries like Indonesia and Iran to find a way to having effective government with a powerful respect for the rights of the citizens. But how one goes about doing that is its own deeper problem, a matter of culture. "How do we follow the West without becoming Westerners? How do you do that without becoming Westerners?"

In fact, Mr. Wahid has begun to develop an alternative democratic model that he calls "democratic socialism." He tells his students, his daughter Yenny, and Mr. Wahid, "There is a democracy of intellectuals, a democracy of intellectuals, and an American C. Holland Taylor, who works to develop the idea of democracy. "There isn’t a political system that has the idea of democracy. It’s up to us to develop a model of democracy in Indonesia."

Mr. Wahid says, "There is a new generation of people who think in terms of democracy. There is a new generation of people who think in terms of democracy."

"We have to go for pluralism, for tolerance," he adds. "We also believe that the "only solution" to the challenge of Islamic radicals in Indonesia is more democracy. But what about the examples of Islam, which came to power through democratic means, and of other