

WILL INDONESIA SAVE ISLAM?

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*Monday's Archive was originally published in TTP on October 26, 2006. Indonesia is an enormous country – it's as far from the western tip of Sumatra to the border with Papua New Guinea as it is from London, England to Kabul, Afghanistan. In addition to being a "Nutshell History," what it says almost 17 years ago turns out quite prescient. In this week's *The Economist* is *Indonesia Wants to Export Moderate Islam*, which so leads from this Archive it follows below. Note that the Indonesian organization that is the focus of both articles, Nahdatul Ulama, has formed an international alliance called the Center for Shared Civilizational Values, in cooperation with its Liberty For All Foundation (Libforall.org).*

TTP, October 26, 2006

There are 245 million folks in Indonesia. 88% of them, or 215 million, are Moslem, comprising the largest Moslem population on earth. Just 8% of Indonesians are Christian, 2% are Hindu, and only 1% are Buddhist.

Yet the most famous landmark of Indonesia – the archaeological wonder of Borobudur – is Buddhist. In fact, it is the world's largest Buddhist monument. Indonesia's most famous tourist destination and most famous culture is the island of Bali. The people of Bali are not Moslem. They are Hindu.

Indonesia used to be Buddhist and Hindu, and is a long way from Arabia. How did this place become Moslem?

People have been living in Indonesia since before they were people. "Java Man," so-called because his 500,000 year-old bones were first discovered on Java, belonged to humanity's evolutionary precursor, *Homo erectus*.

By around 200 BC, Hindu kingdoms had emerged on Indonesia's two largest islands, Java and Sumatra. They co-existed with Buddhist kingdoms such as the Srivijaya thalassocracy (sea-based trading empire) that rose around 200 AD, and the Sailendra kingdom in central Java that built Borobudur between 778-824 AD.

They were all subsumed by the Majapahit empire, a Hindu kingdom that ruled over Java, Bali, Sumatra,

Borneo, and much of the Malay Peninsula from 1300 to 1500. Then came the Moslems.

Islam in Indonesia begins with an eccentric Javanese adventurer named Parameswara, who lived from 1344 to 1424. He claimed he was a Hindu prince and a descendant of Alexander the Great.

In 1402, he was able to establish a small trading town on the Malay Peninsula right across from Sumatra, calling it Malacca. Then he sailed off to China to make a deal with the Ming Emperor, Yongle.

Every trading ship from India and Arabia on its way to China had to sail through the narrow straits between Sumatra and Malaya – the alternative was a huge detour around Sumatra. Yongle was happy to support Parameswara in securing protection and control of the passage, which to this day is called the Strait of Malacca.

Now in his 60s, Parameswara became rich and powerful – but he proved no match for the charms of a young lady from Pasai. About a hundred years before, Moslem traders from Gujarat on the west coast of India had built a trading post on the northwest tip of Sumatra that had grown into a small Sultanate called Pasai.

In 1414, Parameswara met a girl whom the chronicles describe as “young,” “beautiful,” and a “princess.” The 70 year-old man was a goner and begged for her hand. She was a Moslem, she said, so the only way for her to accept would be for him to convert to Islam.

He did, they were married, he renamed himself Raja Iskander Shah (“Iskander” is the Arabic name for Alexander), declared his kingdom to be the Sultanate of Malacca, and demanded all his subjects become Moslem. Then he decided to go on Jihad against the now idolatrous Hindus of the Majapahit Empire.

The Majapahits finally succumbed to Parameswara’s successors, and by 1500 the Majapahit aristocracy, artisans, and followers fled to Bali establishing a Hindu redoubt that has resisted Islam right up to now.

In the wake of the Hindu retreat came a flood of Moslem missionaries demanding the Hindus and Buddhists of Java and Sumatra convert. This resulted in ambitious warlords-to-be constructing Islamic kingdoms such as the Sultanate of Mataram in central Java, which under its Sultan Agung (r. 1613-1645) controlled almost the entire island.

By the time the traders of the Dutch East India Company arrived in the mid-1600s, attracted by the spice trade in the archipelago, most of what was to become Indonesia had been Moslemized.

Far from being Christian Crusaders, the Dutch were only interested in creating a commercial empire in the “East Indies,” monopolizing the spice trade, and keeping competitors like the Portuguese and British out. They made minimal attempts at converting the Javanese or Sumatrans to Christianity.

With Islam forced upon them and the Dutch offering no enthusiastic alternative, the Indonesians coped by adopting a variant of Islam known as *Sufism*. They deeply resented the imposition of a foreign faith, and for over a century referred to Islam not by name but only as “*the Arab religion*.” Sufism was their way out.

Sufis (*sue-fee-z*) – the People of the Platform (named after disciples of Mohammed who met on the platform — *suffe* in Arabic — of the first Moslem mosque at Medina) – were Moslems who rejected Jihad and Islam as a Religion of the Sword.

They thus transformed Islam into a doctrine of non-violence, teaching a mystic path to Islamic enlightenment through a personal experience of the Divine rather than rote recitation of texts and unswerving adherence to religious regulations and dogma (compare what Jesus said to the Pharisees).

Indonesians proceeded to engage in an exercise of historical revisionism, removing from their collective memory the imposition of Islam upon them by the sword, and created a legend of holy wise men who came from afar (Persia, Turkey, India, it's never clear) to teach them the loving tolerance of Sufi Islam.

These holy men are known as the *Wali Songo* (Nine Saints), and their graves along the north coast of Java are revered pilgrimage sites for millions of Javanese.

Indonesian Islam became the antithesis of Jihadi Islam, of Saudi Wahhabi Islam, with its metaphorical interpretation of the Koran, instead of the literal can't-change-a-word Voice of God. So it has now become a major target of Saudi Wahhabis, who have poured hundreds of millions of dollars into the country attempting to inject their radical doctrine of religious hate and intolerance.

And the Indonesians are fighting back. Leading the fight is Indonesia's most respected religious leader, Abdurrahman Wahid, affectionately known as Gus Dur (Brother Dur, the "dur" taken from his first name). Elderly and almost blind, he remains the leader of *Nahdatul Ulama*, Indonesia's – and the world's – largest Moslem organization with 40 million members.

In the *Wall Street Journal* last December, Wahid published a ringing call for people of all faiths to unite in defeating the "extreme and perverse ideology" of radical Wahhabi "Islamism," entitled Right Islam vs. Wrong Islam.

Wahid, the most influential Islamic leader in the world's largest Islamic nation, has now joined forces with Indonesia's most popular – wildly popular – rock star, Ahmad Dhani.

As a counter to the Saudi-funded Moslem terrorist group in Indonesia, *Laskar Jihad* (Warriors of God), Dhani composed and his rock band recorded an album, *Laskar Cinta* (Warriors of Love), combining real rocker beats with syncopated Arabic rhythms, and lyrics praising religious freedom and tolerance with quotes from the Koran.

Released this past summer, it has already sold over one million legal copies (and many times that in illegal bootlegged ones).

Wahid and Dhani have joined to form an organization to combat radical Islamism not just in Indonesia but *worldwide*. It's called LibForAll (Liberty For All).

One of Libforall's more interesting projects is *LIGHT: Leaders Inspiring Global Healing and Tolerance*. Its purpose is to form an anti-Islamist global network, a "cultural, intellectual and theological bulwark" opposing Jihadi Islam. As an advisor to Libforall explained to me:

“Islamism – radical Jihadi Islam – is an existential threat to humanity, just as was Communism. We need to inoculate Moslem societies, immunize them before they die of the Islamist virus. This means stimulating the Islamist antibodies present in their cultural bloodstreams, so that the virus is killed and ejected.”

Our focus in the War on Islamic Terrorism has been the Middle East, then secondarily with fears that Europe is becoming Eurabia. But it may well turn out that this war will be won or lost in Indonesia.

The Jihadis are desperate to radicalize Indonesia’s Moslem millions. But 400 years of Sufi Islam has provided Indonesia with a healthy anti-Islamist immune system. If the Jihadis fail, and the Sufis led by men like Wahid and Dhani prevail, Jihadi Islamism may suffer a mortal blow – not just in Indonesia but throughout the Moslem world.

I encourage you to explore the LibForAllwebsite. You might even consider participating in its effort to rid the world of the disease of radical Islam.

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Indonesia Wants To Export Moderate Islam

The Economist August 19, 2023 issue

On Christmas Eve 22 years ago, jihadist terrorists planted bombs at churches in cities across Indonesia, killing 18 people. Every Christmas since then, members of the country’s largest Muslim group, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), have gathered outside churches in Indonesia to ensure that Christians can worship in safety.

Now the powerful Islamic organization has a more ambitious goal: to spread its moderate views across the Muslim world.

Listen to this story.

Despite being the world’s most populous Muslim-majority country, Indonesia has long punched below its weight in the big Islamic debates. The dominant Muslim ideas, spiritual and political, long emanated from the conservative Middle East.

This is apparent among Indonesia’s 237m Muslims. Demonstrations of Middle-Eastern-style public piety have become much more common in recent decades. Many more women now wear a Muslim headscarf, or *hijab*. Yet most Indonesians still hew to the region’s syncretic traditions. In East Java, NU’s heartland, they mingle Islam with local Javanese beliefs called *kejawen*.

The country's state ideology, known as *pancasila*, encourages such moderation. It forbids atheism but allows religious freedom. Indonesia has six official religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism. Its main Muslim organizations are now pushing for a more inclusive, tolerant Islam that reflects the spirit of *pancasila*.

The views of NU, in particular, have heft. The group claims to have over 100 million followers—including several members of President Joko Widodo's cabinet—and runs 23,000 Islamic boarding schools and over 250 universities. In February over a million of its followers clogged the streets of Sidoarjo, a city in East Java, for the group's centenary celebrations.

Many of the country's top political figures, including the president (who is known as Jokowi), attended the event. NU used it to formally call for the abandonment of the caliphate, a notional authority that is considered to oversee all Muslims.

The group said Muslims should instead accept the reality of the nation state. It previously called on Muslims to reject the concept of a *kafir*, or infidel, and accept non-Muslims as fellow citizens. Modest as this reality-check might sound, coming from the world's largest Muslim civil-society organization it was significant, says James Dorsey, a scholar at RSIS, a think-tank in Singapore.

While chairing the G20 last year, Indonesia held a parallel religious forum, Religion 20. It was co-hosted by NU and the Muslim World League, a Saudi-backed organization that was long an ideological rival of NU's but in recent years has become more moderate. NU is preparing to host another forum on religion on the margin of an Association of South-East Asian Nations summit that Indonesia will host later this year.

"We cannot practice Islam as it was practiced by our forefathers and mothers in the past without any significant changes in our understanding," says Ulil Abshar Abdalla, a senior NU official. "You cannot impose *sharia* [Islamic law] as a positive law that is binding on all people."

Indonesia's Muslim leaders could have taken a more hardline course. The Christmas Eve bombings in 2000 marked the start of a campaign by Jemaah Islamiah, a group with links to al-Qaeda, to fight for a South-East Asian Islamic state. In the early 2000s, hundreds were killed in bomb attacks in Bali and at prominent landmarks in Jakarta, including the Australian embassy.

The power of radical Islamic groups peaked in 2016 when they went after the then-governor of Jakarta, a Chinese-Christian known as Ahok. As a result he was convicted of trumped-up blasphemy charges and imprisoned for two years.

That marked a turning-point for Jokowi. His administration banned two hardline Islamic groups, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia and the Islamic Defenders Front, in 2017 and 2020 respectively. The government also started monitoring civil servants for extremist beliefs.

The failure of al-Qaeda and Islamic State helped the government's push, says Mr Ulil. Saudi money, which had been flowing to Indonesian Islamists for years, has dropped off under Muhammad bin Salman, the Saudi Arabian crown prince. In May, Hanan Attaki, the unofficial leader of a conservative subculture popular with young, urban Muslims, known as the Hijrah movement, joined NU.

There are exceptions to this moderate trend. In April, Indonesia was banned from hosting football's under-20s world championships after two provincial governors said Israel's team should not be allowed to participate. The increase in public piety is also striking.

Celebrities now flock to social media and television to describe how they practice Islam. One civil servant says that when he joined his government ministry, over two decades ago, the building's prayer room was hardly used. These days, it is packed. "But that doesn't mean we're now extremists. It just means we've become more observant," he says.

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