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**No. 222**

**What happened to the smiling face of Indonesian Islam?  
Muslim intellectualism and the conservative  
turn in post-Suharto Indonesia**

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## ABSTRACT

The transition from authoritarian to democratic rule in Indonesia has been accompanied by the apparent decline of the liberal Muslim discourse that was dominant during the 1970s and 1980s and the increasing prominence of Islamist and fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. This paper attempts to go beyond a superficial reading of these developments and explores the conditions that favoured the flourishing of liberal Muslim thought during the New Order as well as the various factors that from the 1980s onwards supported the rise of transnational Islamist movements, at the expense of the established mainstream organisations, Muhammadiyah and NU.

Liberal Muslim thought during the New Order developed in two distinct environments: among university students and graduates and the newly emerging Muslim middle class, whose family backgrounds connected them with reformist Islam, on the one hand, and among intellectuals and NGO activists hailing from the traditionalist milieu of the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) on the other. Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid were the most brilliant representatives of these environments. Although both adopted similar positions on such key issues as the idea of an Islamic state and inter-religious relations, they arrived at these positions by different trajectories. The paper analyses the development of religious and social thought in these two environments in its changing social and political context, and also traces the development and strengthening transnational connections of an undercurrent of Islamist and fundamentalist thought during the same period. It was through the Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI), established in 1990 as a vehicle for Muslim civil servants and businessmen, that the New Order regime co-opted formerly oppositional Islamists and fundamentalists and brought them into the mainstream.

Liberal and progressive Muslim thought by no means stagnated after the demise of the New Order; in fact, it reached higher levels of intellectual sophistication than in the heyday of Suharto's rule. However, liberal and progressive Muslims have lost the power of setting the terms of public debate to the numerically stronger currents of radical Islam. Considerable segments of the Muslim middle class have come under

the influence of Islamist or fundamentalist thought. Those who reject those radical varieties of Islam, appear to be more easily drawn to popular preachers leading Sufism-inspired devotional movements rather than to the intellectual successors of Madjid and Wahid.

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# What happened to the smiling face of Indonesian Islam? Muslim intellectualism and the conservative turn in post-Suharto Indonesia

*Dedicated to the memories of  
Abdurrahman Wahid and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd*

## 1. Introduction

Developments in Indonesia since the fall of Suharto in 1998 have greatly changed the image of Indonesian Islam and the existing perception of Indonesian Muslims as tolerant and inclined to compromise. In the heyday of the New Order, the 1970s and 1980s, Indonesian Islam had presented a smiling face—perhaps appropriately so, under an authoritarian ruler who was known as “the smiling general”. The dominant discourse was modernist and broadly supportive of the government’s development programme. It embraced the essentially secular state ideology of Pancasila, favoured harmonious relations (and equal rights) with the country’s non-Muslim minorities, and rejected the idea of an Islamic state as inappropriate for Indonesia. Some key representatives spoke of “cultural Islam” as their alternative to political Islam and emphasized that Indonesia’s Muslim cultures were as authentically Muslim as Middle Eastern varieties of Islam.

Like Suharto’s smile, the friendly face of the most visible Muslim spokespersons hid from view some less pleasant realities, notably the mass killings of alleged communists during 1965–1966, which had been orchestrated by Suharto’s military but largely carried out by killing squads recruited from the main Muslim organizations.<sup>1</sup> There was also an undercurrent of more fundamentalist Islamic thought and activism, and a broad fear—not entirely unjustified—of Christian efforts to subvert Islam.<sup>2</sup> However, the liberal, tolerant and open-minded discourse of the likes of Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid was almost hegemonic. It was widely covered in the press and was influential in the universities, in the Ministry of

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Cribb (Ed.), *The Indonesian killings 1965–1966. Studies from Java and Bali*, Clayton: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies Monash University, 1990; on the role of a major Muslim youth organization, affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama, see: Martin van Bruinessen, “Ansor”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Third Edition, Part 2, 2007, pp. 131–133.

<sup>2</sup> The fear of “Christianization” (*Kristenisasi*) the subject of the excellent study by Mujiburrahman, “Feeling threatened: Muslim-Christian relations in Indonesia’s New Order”, Ph.D. thesis, Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2006 (published by Amsterdam University Press, and available online at: <http://igitur-archive.library.uu.nl/dissertations/2006-0915-201013/index.htm>).

Religious Affairs and other major Muslim institutions, and among the emerging middle class.

The post-Suharto years have presented a very different face of Indonesian Islam. For several years, there were violent inter-religious conflicts all over the country; jihad movements (supported by factions of the military and local interest groups) carried the banner of Islam to local conflicts, turning them into battlefields in a struggle that appeared to divide the entire nation.<sup>3</sup> Terrorist groups with apparent transnational connections carried out spectacular attacks, including a series of simultaneous bombings of churches all over the country on Christmas eve of 2000 and the Bali bombings of October 2002, which killed around 200 people and wounded hundreds more, many of them foreign tourists.<sup>4</sup> Opinion surveys in the early 2000s indicated surprisingly high levels of professed sympathy for radical Muslim groups among the population at large and unprecedented support for the idea of an Islamic state.<sup>5</sup> Efforts to insert a reference to the Shariah—the so-called Jakarta Charter—into the Constitution were rejected by the People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR) in its 2001 and 2002 sessions, but in the following years numerous regions and districts adopted regulations that at least symbolically enshrined elements of the Shariah.<sup>6</sup>

Most of these developments, however, appear to have been temporary responses to the tremors of the political landscape rather than indications of a pervasive change of attitude of Indonesia’s Muslim majority. Meanwhile, both communal and terrorist violence have abated and it has become clear that much of the violence was directly related with struggles for the redistribution of economic and political resources in post-Suharto Indonesia. In most of the conflict-ridden regions a new balance of power has been established, although in some cases only after the

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<sup>3</sup> Probably the best study of these movements so far is: Noorhaidi Hasan, *Laskar Jihad: Islam, militancy and the quest for identity in post-New Order Indonesia*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Good analyses of Muslim terrorist networks are to be found in the reports written by Sidney Jones for the International Crisis Group, available at [www.crisisgroup.org/](http://www.crisisgroup.org/).

<sup>5</sup> See the survey carried out by Saiful Mujani and the Jakarta-based research institute PPIM, reported in Saiful Mujani and R. William Liddle, “Indonesia’s approaching elections: politics, Islam, and public opinion”, *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 15 No. 1 (2004), pp. 109–123, and the critical comments in Martin van Bruinessen, “Post-Soeharto Muslim engagements with civil society and democratization”, in: H. Samuel and H. Schulte Nordholt (Eds.), *Indonesia in transition. Rethinking “civil society”, “region” and “crisis”*, Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2004, pp. 37–66.

<sup>6</sup> An overview of these regulations is given by: Robin Bush, “Regional sharia regulations in Indonesia: anomaly or symptom?”, in: Greg Fealy and Sally White (Eds.), *Expressing Islam: religious life and politics in Indonesia*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2008, pp. 174–191.

relocation of considerable numbers of people, and the need for good neighbourly relations between the communities is widely affirmed. The terrorist networks have been largely uncovered and rounded up by the police, many of their activists being killed or arrested; the popular acceptance of violence in the name of Islam has been considerably reduced. The issuance of new regional Shariah regulations has by and large stopped—Aceh being the main exception where implementation of the Shariah remains on the agenda. The Muslim political parties, which in the general elections of 1999 and 2004 had recovered the high yield of around 40 per cent obtained in 1955, recorded significant losses in 2009, falling back to just over 25 per cent.

A more lasting development, however, appears to be the emergence of dynamic transnational Islamic movements that compete for influence with the older established Indonesian mainstream organizations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and make major contributions to setting the terms of the debate in Indonesia. Most significant among them are the Prosperous Welfare Party (PKS) and its affiliated associations, which constitute the Indonesian version of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Indonesian section of the Hizb ut-Tahrir (HTI), and the apolitical Tablighi Jama'at and Salafi movements. Within Muhammadiyah and NU, moreover, the balance between liberals and progressives on the one hand and conservative and fundamentalist forces on the other, has shifted towards the latter.

### *The conservative turn*

By 2005 it appeared that a conservative turn had taken place in mainstream Islam, and that the modernist and liberal views that had until recently found relatively broad support within Muhammadiyah and NU were increasingly rejected. Both organizations held their five-yearly congresses in 2004, and on both occasions the boards were purged of leaders considered as “liberals”, including persons who had rendered great service to their organizations. Many ulama and other Muslim leaders appear preoccupied with the struggle against “deviant” sects and ideas.

The clearest expression of the conservative turn was perhaps given by a number of controversial *fatwas*, authoritative opinions, issued by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI, Indonesian Council of Islamic Scholars) in 2005. One of the *fatwas* declared secularism, pluralism and religious liberalism—SiPiLis, in a suggestive acronym coined by fundamentalist opponents—to be incompatible with Islam. This *fatwa*, believed to be inspired by radical Islamists who had recently joined the MUI

but supported by many conservatives from the mainstream, was ostensibly a frontal attack on the small group of self-defined “liberal” Muslims of Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL, Liberal Islam Network) but attempted to delegitimize a much broader category of Muslim intellectuals and NGO activists, including some of the most respected Muslim personalities of the previous decades.<sup>7</sup> Other *fatwas* condemned the practice of inter-religious prayer meetings (which had emerged in the days of political strife and inter-religious conflict, when representatives of different faiths joined one another in praying for well-being and peace) and declared inter-religious marriage *haram*, even in the case of a Muslim man marrying a non-Muslim woman. A *fatwa* on the Ahmadiyah not only declared this sect to be outside the boundaries of Islam and Muslims who joined it to be apostates, but it also called upon the government to effectively ban all its activities.<sup>8</sup>

The MUI had been established in 1975 as an adviser to the government on policy matters concerning Islam and as a channel of communication between the government and the Muslim *umma*. For a quarter century its voice had predominantly been one of moderation and compromise, if not political expedience; but it also saw itself as the watchdog of religious orthodoxy and repeatedly made statements condemning deviant movements and sects. (It had already condemned the Qadiyani branch of the Ahmadiyah as early as 1980, but without any effect on government policy.) Critics of the Suharto regime had heaped scorn on the MUI for its subservience to the wishes of the government, but the existence of a body that could represent the viewpoint of the *umma* to the government was generally appreciated.<sup>9</sup> After Suharto’s fall, the MUI declared itself independent from the government, and it has since been setting its own agenda. At least one analyst interprets its current more assertive (and conservative) positioning as “an attempt to demarcate a role more

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<sup>7</sup> The Indonesian text of these *fatwas*, which were adopted by the MUI’s *fatwa* commission at the Majelis’ Seventh Conference (July 2005), as well as an explanation of the reasoning behind the *fatwa* against secularism, pluralism and liberalism, can be found at the MUI’s website, [www.mui.or.id/](http://www.mui.or.id/) (accessed June 2010). The concepts of “pluralism” and “religious liberalism” were defined in a restrictive sense as “proclaiming the equal validity of all religions” and “the purely rational interpretation of religious texts and the acceptance of only those religious doctrines that are compatible with reason”. The *fatwa* clearly targeted, however, various groups that adhered to less radical views of liberalism and pluralism and that will be discussed below.

<sup>8</sup> The Ahmadiyah had been the target of physical attacks by vigilante squads only weeks before the MUI conference. Significantly, the MUI made no statement condemning the violence against Ahmadiyah members and appeared to consider the Ahmadiyah as the offending party.

<sup>9</sup> See my analysis of MUI in: Martin van Bruinessen, “Islamic state or state Islam? Fifty years of state-Islam relations in Indonesia”, in: Ingrid Wessel (Ed.), *Indonesien am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Hamburg: Abera-Verlag, 1996, pp. 19–34 (available online at: <http://www.hum.uu.nl/medewerkers/m.vanbruinessen/publications/State-Islam.htm>).



aligned with the *umma*”,<sup>10</sup> suggesting that the majority of Indonesian Muslims may have held such conservative views all along.

The conservative turn does not mean that the liberal and progressive voices of the past have suddenly been silenced. There were in fact many who did protest. The former chairmen of Muhammadiyah and NU, Ahmad Syafi’i Ma’arif and Abdurrahman Wahid, who had been genuinely popular among their constituencies, spoke out loudly and clearly, and so did several other prominent members of these organizations, as well as larger numbers of young activists. But they had lost the power to define the terms of debate and had to leave the initiative to the conservatives and fundamentalists.

### *What happened?*

These developments call for an explanation. It is tempting to see a direct connection between Indonesia’s democratization and the declining influence of liberal and progressive views, but the assumption that the majority are inherently conservative or inclined to fundamentalist views is not a priori convincing. This would suggest that liberal Islamic thought could only flourish when it was patronized by an authoritarian regime. A related argument is that political democratization has drawn many of those who were previously involved in organizations or institutions supporting intellectual debate towards careers in political parties or institutions, thereby weakening the social basis of liberal and progressive Islamic discourse.

Another explanation (that has repeatedly been proffered by embattled liberals) concerns influences emanating from the Middle East and more specifically the Arabian Peninsula, in the form of returning graduates from Saudi universities, Saudi-owned and Saudi or Kuwaiti-funded educational institutions in Indonesia, sponsored translations of numerous simple “fundamentalist” texts, and ideological and financial support for transnational Islamic movements. The high visibility of Indonesian Arabs in leading positions in radical movements seemed to point to their role as middlemen in a process of Arabization of Indonesian Islam. The increased presence of Arab

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<sup>10</sup> Piers Gillespie, “Current issues in Indonesian Islam: analysing the 2005 Council of Indonesian Ulama *fatwa* No. 7 opposing pluralism, liberalism and secularism”, *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18(2), 2007, pp. 202–240, at p. 202.

actors and Arab funding is undeniable, but, as I have argued elsewhere, their influence does not exclusively work in an anti-liberal or fundamentalist direction.<sup>11</sup>

The public presence of the new transnational Islamic movements is an important phenomenon that has definitely changed the landscape of Indonesian Islam, reducing the central importance of Muhammadiyah and NU in defining the moderate mainstream. It is too early to say whether the slide of the latter organizations towards more conservative views was temporary; my observations at the most recent NU congress in March 2010 suggest that the anti-liberal trend has subsided and may even be reversed.<sup>12</sup>

*A brief note on the terms “liberal”, “progressive”, “conservative”, “fundamentalist” and “Islamist”*

I have, in the preceding, hesitantly used the term “liberal”, for lack of a better and less controversial one, but aware that this term carries connotations that many of the thinkers to whom it is applied reject. The founders of the Liberal Islam Network (JIL) adopted this name from an influential anthology of texts by modern Muslim thinkers that represented a broad range of intellectual positions.<sup>13</sup> They have also defended political and economic liberalism, which some of them see as inseparable from religious liberalism. Others, who may share many of the religious views of JIL, object to the term “liberal Islam” precisely because of the association with neo-liberalism. Conservatives have tended to employ the term “liberal” as a stigmatizing label against a wide range of critical religious thought, implying rationalism and irreligiosity.

The term “neo-modernist”, used by the Australian scholar Greg Barton to describe the thought of Nurcholish Madjid and friends,<sup>14</sup> does not carry the same

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<sup>11</sup> Ethnic Arab leaders of radical Islamic movements in Indonesia included Ja’far Umar Thalib of Laskar Jihad, Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba’asyir of Jama’ah Islamiyah, “Habib” Rizieq Syihab of Front Pembela Islam, and Abdurrahman al-Baghdadi of Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia. I have discussed the “Arabization thesis” in an article in Dutch: Martin van Bruinessen, “Arabisering van de Indonesische Islam?” *ZemZem, Tijdschrift over het Midden-Oosten, Noord-Afrika en Islam* 2(1), 2006, pp. 73–84.

<sup>12</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, “New leadership, new policies? The Nahdlatul Ulama congress in Makassar”, *Inside Indonesia* 101, July–September 2010, online at [www.insideindonesia.org/](http://www.insideindonesia.org/)

<sup>13</sup> Charles Kurzman, *Liberal Islam: a source book*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; translated into Indonesian as *Wacana Islam Liberal*, Jakarta: Paramadina, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Gregory James Barton, “The emergence of neo-modernism: a progressive, liberal movement of Islamic thought in Indonesia. A textual study examining the writings of Nurcholish Madjid, Djohan Effendi, Ahmad Wahib and Abdurrahman Wahid, 1968–1980”, Ph.D. thesis, Clayton: Monash University, 1995; translated into Indonesian as: *Gagasan Islam liberal di Indonesia : pemikiran neo-modernisme Nurcholish Madjid, Djohan Effendi, Ahmad Wahib, dan Abdurrahman Wahid*, Jakarta: Paramadina, 1999.

connotations of economic and political policy but is hardly appropriate to refer to the thinkers whose intellectual roots lie in the traditionalist rather than the reformist side of the spectrum. Some of those who reject the label of “liberal” prefer to call their views, because of the emphasis on human rights (especially women’s and minority rights) and on empowerment of the weak and oppressed, and because of their generally left orientation, “progressive” or “emancipatory Islam”.<sup>15</sup> Several other terms have been suggested but none has gained general acceptance. I shall be speaking of “liberals and progressives” to refer to the entire range of thinkers and activists offering non-literal reinterpretations of Islamic concepts.

The term “conservative” refers to the various currents that reject modernist, liberal or progressive re-interpretations of Islamic teachings and adhere to established doctrines and social order. Conservatives notably object to the idea of gender equality and challenges to established authority, as well as to modern hermeneutical approaches to scripture. There are conservatives among traditionalist as well as reformist Muslims (i.e. in NU as well as Muhammadiyah). By “fundamentalist”, I mean those currents that focus on the key scriptural sources of Islam—Qur’an and *hadith*—and adhere to a literal and strict reading thereof. They obviously share some views with most conservatives, such as the rejection of hermeneutics and rights-based discourses but may clash with conservatives over established practices lacking strong scriptural foundations. The term “Islamist” finally refers to the movements that have a conception of Islam as a political system and strive to establish an Islamic state.

#### *Who are the embattled liberals?*

The immediate target of the notorious MUI fatwa and the purges in NU and Muhammadiyah was the Liberal Islam Network, JIL, which had most explicitly and most provocatively challenged the increasingly vocal fundamentalist and Islamist discourses. One of the first public clashes between Islamists and JIL occurred in response to a short film clip entitled “Islam has many colours” (*Islam warna-warni*), for which JIL had bought air time on several commercial television channels in mid-2002. The clip showed colourful images of Muslim rituals and festivities, including

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<sup>15</sup> A programmatic book outlining similar approaches, mostly written by Muslim intellectuals living in the West, is: Omid Safi (Ed.), *Progressive Muslims: on justice, gender and pluralism*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2003. Articles by one of the contributors to this volume appeared in Indonesian translation: Ebrahim Moosa, *Islam progresif: refleksi dilematis tentang HAM, modernitas dan hak-hak perempuan di dalam hukum Islam [Progressive Islam, reflections on the dilemmas of human rights, modernity and women’s rights in Islamic law]*, Jakarta: International Center for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP), 2004.

music and dance, a variety of local styles of mosque architecture and of dress styles that differed from the new Islamic covering style favoured by the Islamists. It was a celebration of the distinctly Indonesian forms of expression of Islam, and of the rich cultural variety of these expressions. At least one group of Islamists took offense at this film. The Majelis Mujahidin (Council of Holy Warriors, MM), one of the more militant organizations striving for an Islamic state, wrote a letter to the television channels calling the film an insult to Islam and threatening court action if they would not stop airing the film. The MM's argument was simple: Muslims could have many colours, but there is only one Islam and God's commands are unequivocal. By suggesting that the divine message could be adapted to local circumstances, the liberals were blasphemously misrepresenting Islam. Although many prominent lawyers and intellectuals came out in support of the film, the letter proved effective and the channels stopped broadcasting it.<sup>16</sup>

This seemingly minor incident brings out clearly one aspect of the conservative turn: it is the result of an asymmetrical struggle between two visions of Islam—asymmetrical because one of the two attempts to silence the other whereas the latter only challenges its opponents' truth claims and defends the possibility of other views. In the ensuing years, self-appointed conservative or fundamentalist guardians of orthodoxy have made efforts to silence “deviant” Muslim groups, from the Ahmadiyah and various syncretistic mystical movements to “liberal Islam”, through force of argument, court action, or (the threat of) physical violence. It proved considerably easier to mobilize mobs against the “deviant” groups than to organize effective support for religious freedom.

Intellectually, JIL is heir to two distinct currents of religious thought of the New Order period, which had Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid as their most prominent spokespersons. Numerous personal and intellectual connections link JIL to the other movements and institutions that derive from these predecessors. All of these are commonly lumped together as “liberal, secularist and pluralist” by their conservative opponents. This includes Nurcholish' Paramadina Foundation and a number of related institutions, largely staffed by graduates of Jakarta's State Institute

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<sup>16</sup> The letter to the television stations and various reactions to the issue, along with a range of other criticisms of JIL are reproduced in: Fauzan Al-Anshori, *Melawan konspirasi JIL “Jaringan Islam Liberal” [Against the conspiracy of JIL]*, Jakarta: Pustaka Al-Furqan, 2003. Al-Anshori was at the time one of the two spokespersons of the Majelis Mujahidin. JIL's view of pluralism was defended by one of its leading thinkers, Luthfi Asy-Syaukani, in the Jakarta daily *Koran Tempo*, 13 August 2002; available online at: <http://islamlib.com/id/artikel/islam-warna-warni/>.

of Islamic Studies (IAIN, currently named State Islamic University, UIN), where many liberal Muslims had received their academic training.<sup>17</sup>

In Muhammadiyah, the “liberals” include several senior persons who once had prominent positions in the organization (such as M. Dawam Raharjo, M. Syafi’i Ma’arif, Amin Abdullah) and a youth group known as JIMM (Network of Young Muhammadiyah Intellectuals), among whom the more senior Moeslim Abdurrahman has much influence. In NU circles, the liberals and progressives are typically found in NGOs, which have taken up different causes and addressed different audiences than the urban middle class, focussing on the social world around the *pesantren* and issues of subaltern groups. Some of these NGOs are actually affiliated with NU but most have a more tenuous relationship with the organization and cautiously guard their independence. Several of the latter have made significant efforts to enrich traditionalist Muslim discourse with later intellectual developments and an awareness of contemporary social and political issues. Another important group of NGOs, which cannot be easily classified with the reformist or traditionalist wing of Indonesian Muslim activism, has concentrated on issues of women’s rights or minority rights.

In the following sections of this paper, I shall present the major liberal and progressive currents of Islamic discourse and action of the New Order period and take a look at the various resources that were mobilized in their support and the changes in the support base that occurred in the post-Suharto period. I shall also take account of the various forces that opposed these liberal and progressive Muslim movements and their political fortunes. It will become clear that the development of liberal and progressive Islamic thought and action in Indonesia by no means stopped or stagnated with the demise of the New Order; in fact, they received new impulses and reached new audiences, although they lost the power to define the terms of the debate.

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<sup>17</sup> Not only Paramadina but also the IAIN became subject to fierce critical attacks, one of which accused the institution of nothing less than stimulating apostasy from Islam: Hartono Ahmad Jaiz, *Ada pemurtadan di IAIN [There is an effort to produce apostasy at the IAIN]*, Jakarta: Pustaka Al-Kautsar, 2005. The title of a book criticizing a Paramadina publication is indicative of the tone of some of these attacks: Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia, *Kekafiran berfikir sekte Paramadina [The heathen thought of the Paramadina sect]*, Yogyakarta: Wihdah Press, 2004.

## 2. Nurcholish Madjid and the movement for “religious renewal” (*pembaruan pemikiran agama*)<sup>18</sup>

Nurcholish Madjid’s career as a public intellectual coincides with Indonesia’s New Order: his first provocative and widely discussed speech dates from 1970, and he remained a prolific writer and speaker almost up to his death in August 2005. He was a prominent member of the student generation of 1966, which played an active role in the demonstrations that weakened Sukarno and prepared the way for Suharto’s final takeover in 1966 and many members of which were soon to fill the ranks of the New Order’s civilian elite. In that crucial year he was elected the chairman of the most important Muslim student union, HMI, and he was to hold this position for two consecutive three-year terms. His education, his gifts as a speaker and his career as a student leader appeared to make him the ideal successor to the respected Mohamad Natsir as the leader of Indonesia’s reformist Islam. Natsir had been the most prominent leader of the reformist party, Masyumi, at once a politician and a religious thinker. He had been jailed under Sukarno and was never fully rehabilitated under Suharto; his party, Masyumi, had been banned by Sukarno, and Suharto did not allow it to re-emerge, but many reformist-minded Muslims felt primordial ties of loyalty towards Masyumi. People had already started calling Nurcholish “the young Natsir” and expected him to take care of the survival of Masyumi and its ideals.

Under these conditions, the programmatic speech that Nurcholish delivered in early 1970, at a joint meeting of all reformist Muslim student unions, came as a shock. Speaking on “[t]he need for renewal of Islamic thought, and problems of the integration of the *umma*”,<sup>19</sup> Nurcholish firmly distanced himself from Masyumi and the sort of Muslim politics it represented, as well as from the established reformist Muslim associations (Muhammadiyah, Persis, Al-Irshad), which in his view had lost their dynamism and had become conservative. He perceived a growing interest in Islam and increasing devotion among the population at large, but the Muslim parties and the ideas they claimed to represent held little attraction for the new Muslim

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<sup>18</sup> Earlier versions of the following sections appeared in: Martin van Bruinessen, “Liberal and progressive voices in Indonesian Islam”, in: Shireen T. Hunter (Ed.), *Reformist voices of Islam: mediating Islam and modernity*, Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2008, pp. 187–207.

<sup>19</sup> “*Keharusan pembaruan pemikiran Islam dan masalah integrasi umat*” [“The Need for Renewal of Islamic Thought and Problems of Integration of the *Umma*”]. The text of this speech is reproduced in: Nurcholish Madjid, *Islam, kemodernan dan keindonesiaan [Islam, Modernity and Indonesianness]*, Bandung: Mizan, 1987, pp. 204–214.

public. Their ideas were stagnant, even fossilized, and the parties projected an image of unpleasant infighting and even corruption.<sup>20</sup> The attitude of the new Muslim public, Nurcholish claimed, could be summarized as “*Islam yes, partai Islam no!*”

The older generation of Masyumi leaders never forgave Nurcholish for what they perceived as a betrayal of their struggle and collusion with the regime’s efforts to depoliticize Islam. In the heated debates that followed this speech, it was commonly taken for granted that the slogan “*Islam yes, partai Islam no!*” represented Nurcholish’ own programme. He did not, in fact, oppose Muslim parties as a matter of principle but claimed they were irrelevant to the religious concerns of many Muslims. (Years later, in the 1977 elections, Nurcholish was to campaign for the one remaining Muslim party, PPP, though he never became a member.)

The same speech gave rise to more misunderstandings: Nurcholish called for what he termed “secularization”. Although he made an effort to distinguish this concept clearly from secularism, which he rejected, his opponents were to accuse him of being a secularist who wished to take Islam out of the public sphere and make it a matter of private piety only. His intention was perhaps even more iconoclastic: he explained “secularization” as the “de-sacralization” of all concepts and institutions that had been turned into sacred objects by the Muslim community. The Muslim political party, as the context suggested (though Nurcholish did not state so explicitly), was one of these idols. Traditions, he insisted, including the established patterns of thought and action of the reformist movement, should not be taken for sacred Islamic principles. The Muslim community needed intellectual freedom and an open mind. One should not be afraid to recognize Islamic values in certain Western concepts. The Muslim *umma* had come to recognize the family resemblance between the Western concept of democracy and the Islamic concept of *shura*. However, the Islamic teachings concerning social justice and protection of the weak, poor and oppressed, on which the Qur’an is quite explicit, were not put into practice, and even the word socialism was taboo in Muslim circles. Belief in progress, and not conservatism, was an Islamic value, consonant with the belief that God had created each human being with a good and positive nature (*fitra*) and a righteous (*hanif*) disposition. Because the earlier reformist movements had become conservative, there

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<sup>20</sup> Nurcholish probably referred to the events surrounding the party that was established to replace Masyumi, the Partai Muslim in Indonesia. See Ken E. Ward, *The foundation of the Partai Muslim in Indonesia*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1970.

was the need for a new movement of “liberal” renewal of Islamic ideas, non-traditional and non-sectarian.<sup>21</sup>

Some of these ideas had been discussed in smaller circles before; there was a handful of students, all of them associated with the same student union HMI, who were thinking along similar lines and who shared Nurcholish’ intellectual curiosity and open-mindedness. They became known as the “renewal” (*pembaruan*) movement, a reference to the title of this programmatic speech.<sup>22</sup> Nurcholish was to remain the figurehead of the group, its best public speaker and one of the few with a proper theological training. Important contributions came, however, from a group originally based in Yogyakarta and that was to play a key role in broadening the discussion and in disseminating the liberal reformist thought that was developing. The Yogyakarta group (all of whose members moved to Jakarta in the early 1970s, incidentally) and the intellectual climate of Yogyakarta deserve some special attention.

### *The Yogyakarta group*

Yogyakarta is Indonesia’s city of culture and education, with some of the country’s best universities (generally Muslim and Christian) and rich libraries. It has also a tradition of lively students’ discussion circles and easy communication across ethnic and religious boundaries. The leading lights of the Yogyakarta “*pembaruan*” group were Djohan Effendi, who studied at the State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN), and Dawam Rahardjo, a student of economics at Gadjah Mada University. Much of the discussions in this circle is reflected in the posthumously published diaries of a younger member of the group, the mathematics student (and later journalist) Ahmad Wahib.<sup>23</sup> These were very serious young men, strongly drawn towards religion and willing to question the certainties of their upbringing. Intellectual curiosity drew them

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<sup>21</sup> Two years later, Nurcholish delivered a public lecture in which he attempted to restate his ideas and redress misunderstandings. These lectures and other writings by Nurcholish are analysed in two doctoral dissertations: Barton, “The Emergence of Neo-Modernism” and Ann Kull, *Piety and Politics: Nurcholish Madjid and his Interpretation of Islam in Modern Indonesia*, Lund: Department of Anthropology and History of Religions, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> “*Pembaruan*” is of course the Indonesian translation of Arabic *tajdid*, which also means “renewal” but is often translated as “reform”. The Indonesian translation has a number of other terms for religious “reform” and “reformism”, which is why I prefer the literal “renewal”.

<sup>23</sup> Djohan Effendi and Ismed Natsir (Eds.), *Pergolakan pemikiran Islam: catatan harian Ahmad Wahib [The Effervescence of Islamic Thought: The Diary of Ahmad Wahib]*, Jakarta: LP3ES, 1981. Ahmad Wahib died young in a traffic accident in 1973. On Wahib, his diaries and the debates they generated, see also: Anthony H. Johns, “An Islamic System or Islamic Values? Nucleus of a Debate in Contemporary Indonesia”, in: W. R. Roff (Ed.), *Islam and the Political Economy of Meaning*, London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1987, pp. 254–280.



to a weekly study club of the Lahore Ahmadiyah, and to discussions with their Christian peers, at the local Jesuit college or in the Catholic student's dormitory where Wahib lived. A major intellectual influence was the "limited group", a discussion circle led by A. Mukti Ali, a professor of comparative religion at the IAIN, who was to act as a patron and protector to these younger men.

Mukti Ali had studied in Pakistan in the early 1950s; he had been drawn to the Indian subcontinent by his admiration for the modernist thinker Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Following a period in the secretariat of the Masyumi party, where he was a personal assistant to Natsir, Mukti Ali had then pursued postgraduate studies at McGill University, in the department of religious studies established by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and upon return to Indonesia he attempted to emulate the latter's example. He became a pioneer of comparative religion and of inter-religious dialogue, and he maintained a lifelong interest in Indian Muslim reformist thought. The "limited group" discussions he organized also involved non-Muslim clerics, thinkers and artists and were at the time the freest forum around. Mukti Ali may, as Dawam Rahardjo later wrote, have been the real inspiration of the call for a liberal reformist thought; he often criticized Muhammadiyah for being reformist only in its social and educational work, and conservative in religious thought, lagging far behind the reformist religious thought of Egypt and the Indian subcontinent.<sup>24</sup>

Of the Yogyakarta group, Djohan Effendi especially established close relations with the Ahmadiyah, but all greatly appreciated the contribution the Ahmadiyah had made to liberal Muslim thought among earlier generations in Indonesia. The Muslim pioneers of Indonesian nationalism and other Muslims with a modern general education had no access to Arabic thought, but since many thinkers of the Indian subcontinent expressed themselves in English, it had been they who mediated liberal reformist ideas to educated Indonesians. It was especially thinkers from the Indian subcontinent who exercised a stimulating influence on Indonesia's liberal Muslim thinkers. After Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the Ahmadiyah, Muhammad Iqbal became another looming influence, and soon Fazlur Rahman was to become the single major figure of authority for the entire "renewal" movement.

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<sup>24</sup> M. Dawam Rahardjo, "*Pembaharuan pemikiran Islam: sebuah catatan pribadi*" ("The Renewal of Islamic Thought: A Private Note"), posted at the Freedom Institute website, 20 May 2003, <http://www.freedom-institute.org/id/index.php?page=artikel&id=121>. For a more extensive analysis of Mukti Ali's thought and his impact, see: Ali Munhanif, "Islam and the Struggle for Religious Pluralism in Indonesia: A Political Reading of the Religious Thought of Mukti Ali", *Studia Islamika* (Jakarta), Vol. 3 No. 1, 1996, pp. 79–126.

The Yogyakarta group was in regular contact with Nurcholish in Jakarta and there was a strong convergence of ideas between them. All felt strongly that what was called “the struggle of Islam” had been conceived too narrowly as a political struggle for influence and for the imposition of Shariah obligations on all Muslim citizens. They not only opposed the idea of an Islamic state but were convinced that there existed no Islamic model of the state. Islam, in their view, has core values that may guide action, but these core values can only be distilled from the Qur’an and other scripture through hermeneutic reading, with due understanding of the historical and social context. They shared an open attitude towards other religions and were to become dedicated participants in inter-religious dialogue. And in these early days of the New Order, before the rise of a prosperous Muslim middle class, they all considered the social teachings of Islam, the message of social and economic justice and protection of the weak and poor, an essential aspect of their religion.

### 3. The *pembaruan* movement and the New Order

In the beginning, the ideas of this small group of friends did not find much support even among the other members of HMI, the student association to which they all belonged.<sup>25</sup> They long remained an isolated minority, fiercely criticized by their seniors and many of their peers. However, they achieved positions of influence and in due time succeeded in bringing about a major change in public Muslim discourse, helped no doubt by recognition and strong endorsement from the regime. There was an obvious congruence between the discourse of the *pembaruan* group and the New Order’s development policies, which demanded depoliticization and religious harmony. Mukti Ali was appointed Minister of Religious Affairs in 1972 (and remained in this position until 1978); he made Djohan Effendi his chief advisor, in charge, among other things, of organizing inter-religious dialogue.<sup>26</sup> Dawam Rahardjo joined the first major development-oriented NGO in Jakarta, LP3ES (Institute for Economic and Social Research, Education and Information), eventually becoming its

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<sup>25</sup> Djohan Effendi and Ahmad Wahib in fact resigned from HMI in September 1969 because they felt the local leaders of the association did not tolerate their questioning of established truths and wished to impose doctrinal conformity. See the discussion in Johns, “An Islamic system or Islamic values?”, pp. 266–270. Nurcholish made his provocative “*pembaruan*” speech after, not before, his re-election as the HMI chairman, and many HMI members strongly disagreed with his views.

<sup>26</sup> A good overview of government-initiated and spontaneous inter-religious dialogue in Indonesia is given in Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened: Muslim-Christian Relations in Indonesia’s New Order*, Amsterdam University Press, 2006, Chapter 6.

director. This NGO and its journal, *Prisma*, were at the heart of intellectual life in the first decades of the New Order.

The *pembaruan* group met regularly and took part in various publishing ventures to spread their ideas. Nurcholish maintained the highest public profile; he continued to draw angry criticism for his provocative speeches but also received much, and increasingly sympathetic, press coverage. In 1976 he was invited to Chicago for a semester by Fazlur Rahman and Leonard Binder, to take part in their project on Islam and modernization, and he could follow this up with Ph.D. studies in theology and philosophy under the former's supervision (1978–1984). The influence of Fazlur Rahman on Nurcholish and on the development of Muslim intellectualism in Indonesia can hardly be over-estimated.<sup>27</sup> He provided the *pembaruan* movement with a stronger philosophical grounding and opened their eyes to aspects of Muslim intellectual tradition that had been neglected by reformists as well as traditionalists. The subject of Nurcholish' thesis was reason and revelation in the thought of Ibn Taymiyya, the thinker most venerated by his opponents at home; and upon return to Indonesia his first major public statement was to publish a collection of translations of Muslim philosophical thinkers, from Kindi and Farabi to Afghani and Abduh, with a lengthy introductory essay on the intellectual heritage of Islam.<sup>28</sup>

During his stay in Chicago, Nurcholish had corresponded extensively with friends in Indonesia, and his letters were copied and circulated among the expanding network of admirers and sympathizers. His return worked as a catalyst to intellectual debate in the country. On university campuses, *pembaruan* ideas were finding an ever broader following; the IAIN at Ciputat in South Jakarta especially became a stronghold of the renewal movement. Its rector, Harun Nasution, was another McGill graduate, a non-conformist and self-professed follower of the Mu'tazila. Like Mukti Ali, he may not have shared all ideas of the *pembaruan* group, but he stimulated his

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<sup>27</sup> Besides Nurcholish, Fazlur Rahman had another Indonesian doctoral student at the same time, the historian M. Syafii Maarif, who was an influential intellectual through the 1980s and 1990s and became Muhammadiyah's chairman in the period 1999–2004. Several of Fazlur Rahman's books were translated into Indonesian and found an avid readership, and his work was the subject of at least two serious studies: Taufik Adnan Amal, *Islam dan tantangan modernitas: studi atas pemikiran hukum Fazlur Rahman [Islam and the Challenge of Modernity: A Study of the Legal Thought of Fazlur Rahman]*, Bandung: Mizan, 1989; and Abd. A'la, *Dari neomodernisme ke Islam liberal: jejak Fazlur Rahman dalam wacana Islam di Indonesia [From Neo-Modernism to Liberal Islam: The Impact of Fazlur Rahman on Muslim Discourse in Indonesia]*, Jakarta: Paramadina, 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, *Khazanah intelektual Islam [The Intellectual Resources of Islam]*, Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1985.

students to think independently and provided an environment where critical thought and intellectual debate could flourish.<sup>29</sup>

### *Intellectual influences in the 1980s*

Other factors contributed to make the mid- and late-1980s a period of great intellectual ferment in Indonesian Muslim circles. Economic growth, partly due to the oil boom, and the expansion of education had significantly enlarged the market for quality books and magazines; there was an educated public with an intellectual curiosity stimulated by the mushrooming discussion circles. The Iranian revolution made a significant impact, the intellectual dimension of which began to be felt by the mid-1980s. Many of Ali Shariati's writings were translated (from the English, initially; the first texts reached Indonesia by way of California) and left a deep impression on students. The attraction of Shariati's writing was in his metaphorical interpretations of Islam and its rituals, and in its anti-establishment orientation. It is perhaps significant for the intellectual climate of Indonesia in those years that the more philosophically minded and less overtly revolutionary works of Murtaza Mutahhari were also soon translated and more widely discussed than Shariati's. Besides the neo-modernism of the *pembaruan* movement and the fascination with the Iranian thinkers, a third intellectual current that began to be felt, although it would not reach its zenith until the late 1990s, was a revived interest in Sufism as part of the Islamic heritage. Initially, this appeared to be mere intellectual curiosity and taste for literature, in some developing into a fascination with the mental universes of Ibn 'Arabi and the sixteenth and seventeenth-century Malay mystics. From reading about Sufism, many were to take the step to actually seeking a teacher and following a spiritual discipline themselves.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Saiful Muzani, "Mu'tazilah Theology and the Modernization of the Indonesian Muslim Community: Intellectual Portrait of Harun Nasution", *Studia Islamika* (Jakarta), Vol. 1, No. 1, 1994, pp. 91–131.

<sup>30</sup> Jalaluddin Rachmat, who had been a very popular speaker at university campuses in the 1980s and one of the initiators of a movement of conversion—often politically motivated—to Shiah Islam, became a Sufi teacher serving Jakartan upper middle class audiences through the Foundation Tazkiyah Sejati. The Paramadina foundation (discussed below), which had been giving courses on various aspects of modern Islamic thought, began giving courses *about* Sufism in the late 1990s and co-operated with a Jakarta-based teacher of a major Sufi order, the Qadiriyya wa-Naqshbandiyya, to enable its students to experience the real thing. See Julia Day Howell, "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic revival", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, 2001, pp. 701–729; idem, "Modernity and Islamic spirituality in Indonesia's new Sufi networks", in: Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell (Eds.), *Sufism and the "modern" in Islam*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2007, pp. 217–240.

### *Institutional support and dissemination of pembaruan thought*

Two institutions need to be mentioned here that played major roles in disseminating *pembaruan* thought among a wider public. The “religious study club” Paramadina was established in 1986 by a few key members of the *pembaruan* group as a vehicle for spreading liberal religious views among the newly affluent Muslim middle class (many of whom were HMI alumni). The idea of this venture originated with Dawam Raharjo, who was consistently concerned with the need for forms of organization to replace the Masyumi political party format. Nurcholish became its leading thinker and speaker and he also coined the name.<sup>31</sup> Utomo Dananjaya, another former student leader and trusted friend of Nurcholish, became (and was to remain) the chief organizer, and Abdullatif, a businessman of HMI background, provided financial support and the venue for the first public meetings in his Pasaraya shopping mall. Dananjaya was a passionate educator and experienced manager, who moreover enjoyed great respect in circles of Muslim activists and thereby could prevent Paramadina’s isolation from other segments of the *umma*.<sup>32</sup> The support of businessmen of HMI background and with close connections to the regime remained a major factor in Paramadina’s success in reaching out to the middle and upper middle class. High officials were frequently present at Paramadina events, adding to their attraction for upwardly mobile professionals.

Paramadina provided a new type of religious sermons, or rather seminar lectures, presented in posh modern surroundings, catering to the spiritual needs and intellectual ambitions of its target group. The country’s leading intellectuals were invited to deliver lectures at Paramadina, in tandem with a response in the form of a second lecture by Nurcholish himself and followed by a free and often wide-ranging discussion. This was so successful that Paramadina had to gradually increase the number of lectures and offer courses on a broader range of religious subjects.

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<sup>31</sup> The name is explained as a combination of the Sanskrit word *parama*, which means something like “supreme”, and *dina*, “religion”, but also alludes conveniently to Madina, the city of the Prophet, which for Nurcholish remained the ideal Muslim society.

<sup>32</sup> Utomo Dananjaya, affectionately known as “Mas Tom”, remained mostly in the background and his contribution to the *pembaruan* movement is often overlooked, but he was and still is a crucial figure in providing the conditions that made the flourishing of liberal Muslim thought possible. Utomo had been a leader of the Masyumi youth wing, PII (Pelajar Islam Indonesia, “Indonesian Muslim Students”) and remained a mentor of later generations of PII cadres when this organization became more fundamentalist. As the manager of the large traditionalist *pesantren* Asy-Syafi’iyah, he constituted a personal link between traditionalist, Islamist and liberal circles. He remains one of the driving forces behind the Paramadina Foundation and the University Paramadina. A praising overview of his contribution is given by two young Paramadina staffers in: Ahmad Gaus AF and Idi Subandy Ibrahim, *Mas Tom, “The Living Bridge”*, Jakarta: Universitas Paramadina, 2006.

Younger men, most of them graduates of the IAIN at Ciputat, were attracted as staffers and teachers. A conspicuous element in the teaching at Paramadina was the positive appreciation of other religious traditions; Nurcholish and his associates offered a religious discourse that was liberal and tolerant, compatible with New Order modernization, and attractive to a large constituency that would shy away from more “fundamentalist” discourses. Paramadina has played an important role in Islamizing the liberal Muslim middle class but also in preparing them for a degree of democratization.

A more narrowly defined audience, with a more solid knowledge of and interest in Islam’s intellectual tradition, was served by the Institute for the Study of Religion and Philosophy (Lembaga Studi Agama dan Filsafat, LSAF), another of Dawam Raharjo’s initiatives. Staffed by bright young IAIN graduates, LSAF organized small seminars and published an influential journal, *Ulumul Qur’an*, that explored new horizons in religious thought. The journal, which appeared quarterly from 1989 until the mid-1990s, reported sympathetically on varieties of Muslim belief and practice, Sufi metaphysics, local manifestations of Islam in past and present, Shi’i intellectual trends and Islamic feminism, and most issues contained at least one serious contribution on a non-Muslim religion. The seminars broke new ground with critical discussions of such subjects as the thought of Fazlur Rahman and developments in Islamic philosophy after Ibn Rushd, initiating debates that spread well beyond the inner circle of LSAF to highly educated young people committed to Islam. At LSAF, *pembaruan* ideas met with Islamic philosophy, Sufism and Shi’i thought, and it was taken for granted that other religions too might have valid teachings to offer. It should, therefore, not be surprising that the idea of Perennialism also aroused a warm interest here, especially following a visit by Seyyed Hossein Nasr to Jakarta in 1990.<sup>33</sup>

The religious pluralism celebrated by LSAF (and to a lesser extent Paramadina) resonated with the convictions of numerous Indonesians, who

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<sup>33</sup> Budhy Munawar-Rachman, who is the major representative of Perennialist thought in Indonesia, was an editor of *Ulumul Qur’an* then and later moved to Paramadina. According to him, many others, including Nurcholish himself, were strongly impressed with Nasr’s presentation of Perennialism through verses from the Qur’an, and they took to reading Nasr’s teachers, René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, as well as Huston Smith (interview with the author, 22 April 2006). Frithjof Schuon’s *Understanding Islam* had in fact already been translated into Indonesian as early as 1983; his *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* followed in 1993. On the ideas of this school of thought, see: Mark J. R. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

considered different religions not as mutually exclusive but as complementary claims to truth. It was until recently not unusual for the members of a single family to adhere to two or three different religions or denominations without this giving rise to conflict. Until half a century ago, the majority of Indonesian Muslims moreover adhered to religious beliefs and practices that could be described as “syncretistic”.<sup>34</sup> The main thrust of Islamic reformism in Indonesia had been directed towards the “correction” of these practices and the spreading of an awareness of Shariah-oriented Islam as the only path to salvation. During the New Order, major currents of reformist Islam developed moreover an antagonistic relationship with Christianity, informed by mutual suspicions—Christians were suspected of collusion with the military to subvert Islam, Muslims of secretly striving for an Islamic state.<sup>35</sup> Even more than the original *pembaruan* movement, the activities of LSAF were considered by certain other reformist circles to be a betrayal of the reformist cause.

#### *Anti-pembaruan responses*

The most hostile responses came from the Indonesian Islamic Da’wa Council (Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia, DDII). This body had been established in 1967 by Mohamad Natsir and other leaders of the banned Masyumi party as a way of carrying on the struggle for Islam with other means, in the cultural rather than the political arena. Its mission was to improve the quality of Indonesia’s Muslims, to which end it had established an extensive network of preachers and activists throughout the country. It was perhaps the most consistent voice of opposition to the New Order, criticizing both Suharto’s authoritarianism and the imposition of the “syncretistic” state ideology of Pancasila as an alternative to political Islam.

The DDII became the preferred Indonesian counterpart of the Muslim World League (Rabitat al-’Alam al-Islami), and the major channel through which the ideas and practices of the Muslim Brotherhood and various types of Salafi thought reached Indonesia.<sup>36</sup> The tone of the polemics gradually changed. The older Masyumi leaders,

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<sup>34</sup> The most influential statement on the syncretism is Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, New York: The Free Press, 1960. An important, more recent study of the same religious practices is Andrew Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>35</sup> The inter-religious antagonism, discourses of leaders on both sides and actions giving further food to conspiracy theories are documented in Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened*.

<sup>36</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, “Genealogies of Islamic radicalism in Indonesia”, *South East Asia Research* Vol. 10 No. 2, 2002, pp. 117–154.

who founded the DDII, had always been pro-Western and staunch defenders of liberal democracy, and they had maintained cordial or at least polite relations with their Christian counterparts in spite of political differences. Younger DDII activists tended to perceive local differences in the perspective of the global struggle between Islam on the one hand and Imperialism, Zionism, Orientalism and the other isms on the other, and they adopted a more uncompromising stand towards perceived deviations from proper Islam. By the late 1980s, the dominant DDII discourse was fiercely anti-Western and especially anti-Zionist if not outright anti-Semitic, with an undertone of anti-middle class resentment. The men and women active in Paramadina and LSAF were seen as collaborators with the dark forces that intended to weaken or destroy Islam.

Nurcholish Madjid, Dawam Raharjo and most of the younger people connected with LSAF also hailed from reformist Muslim families with Masyumi connections, and they were strict in their religious practice—a proof, if any were needed, that strict performance of religious duties and liberal attitudes are not incompatible—but this only increased their critics’ indignation at their defence of religious pluralism and their fascination with “deviant” movements in Islam. Philosophy, Sufism, Shi’ism, hermeneutics and contextual readings of the Qur’an: it sounded like a catalogue of the sinful “innovations” that in the Salafi view needed to be eradicated. The DDII’s journal, *Media Dakwah*, polemicized against the “deviations” of the *pembaruan* movement in general and especially against LSAF’s defence of pluralism, once significantly referring to LSAF’s journal as *Ulumul Talmud*.<sup>37</sup> The liberal Muslim discourse disseminated by Paramadina and LSAF received a degree of official protection and endorsement: this was the sort of modern Islam the regime found compatible with its development policies. In the *Media Dakwah* worldview, New Order authoritarianism, middle class indifference to social inequality, and the pluralism and religious liberalism of the *pembaruan* movement

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<sup>37</sup> In a seminar paper on *Media Dakwah*, the American political scientist, Bill Liddle, commented on the pervasive anti-Semitism in its pages, provoking some very unpleasant comments from public personalities close to the DDII. *Ulumul Qur’an* then published an Indonesian translation of Liddle’s paper (Vol. IV No. 3, 1993, pp. 53–65). The original English later appeared as R. William Liddle, “Media Dakwah Scripturalism: One Form of Islamic Political Thought and Action in New Order Indonesia”, in: M. R. Woodward (Ed.), *Toward a New Paradigm: Recent Developments in Indonesian Islamic Thought*, Tempe, Arizona: Arizona State University Program for Southeast Asian Studies, 1996, pp. 323–356.



were intimately connected, and this nexus played into the hands of the global Jewish-Christian effort to weaken the political muscle of Islam.

President Suharto's gradual turn from syncretism to orthodox Islam and his accommodation with reformist Islam, around 1990, strengthened the position of the critics of liberal Muslim thought. There is no consensus about what caused this major shift in New Order policies,<sup>38</sup> but the effect was greater freedom of expression for fundamentalist and even Islamist voices that had previously been suppressed. The 1990s saw, besides a continuing production of Muslim intellectual writings, an unprecedented flood of simpler publications of fundamentalist and anti-liberal inspiration that reflected a Manichean worldview opposing true Islam to its many enemies—the West, the Jews and the liberals. A meeting in December 1992, at which Nurcholish faced his critics, marked the changing conditions. He had been invited to a dialogue, but found the meeting had been set up as a public trial before a 4,000-strong audience, at which critics accused him of debasing Islam and serving foreign interests and he was shouted down when he attempted to present his own point of view.<sup>39</sup> From that time onwards, Nurcholish and other liberal Muslim thinkers in Indonesia have increasingly been forced into the defensive, even while still having a broad base of middle class followers and sympathizers.

One of the most significant phenomena of the New Order's "turn to Islam" in the 1990s was the emergence of the Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia (Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals, ICMI), which had Suharto's personal blessing and was led by his trusted adjutant, B. J. Habibie. Members of the *pembaruan* group were involved in setting up this association—Dawam as an organizer, and Nurcholish as the drafter of ICMI's statement of principles—but never controlled it and soon became marginalized within it. ICMI was primarily a body of Muslim bureaucrats and businessmen; Muslim civil servants of medium and higher echelons were virtually obliged to become members and many used it to their

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<sup>38</sup> For two attempts at explanation see: R. William Liddle, "The Islamic turn in Indonesia: a political explanation", *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 55, 1996, pp. 613–634, and van Bruinessen, "Islamic state or state Islam".

<sup>39</sup> The event, which took place in the Amir Hamzah mosque in the Taman Ismail Marzuki cultural centre in Jakarta, and which was organised by DDII, was widely reported in the press. Nurcholish was fiercely criticised by his former colleague in the HMI board and former politician, Ridwan Saidi, and the lecturer Daud Rasyid, a recent graduate from Egypt's Azhar University. It is recalled with gusto in Adian Husaini, *Wajah peradaban Barat: dari hegemoni Kristen ke dominasi sekular-liberal [The face of Western civilisation: from Christian hegemony to liberal-secular dominance]*, Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 2005, p. 269n.

advantage in their careers. To educated conservative and fundamentalist Muslims it provided an entry point into the national mainstream and access to careers within the system. For the aspiring new Muslim middle class, ICMI represented more opportunities than the *pembaruan* movement had provided. The latter remained, until the end of the Suharto regime, loyal to ICMI, although they were aware that the very existence of the association to some extent undermined their own support structures.

#### **4. Traditionalist Islam, the *pesantren* and the search for a socially relevant *fiqh***

The debates mentioned so far all took place in urban middle class circles, and the participants belonged to the reformist wing of Indonesian mainstream Islam. The vast majority of Muslims outside those circles long remained unaffected, until in the mid-1980s a new generation of leaders took control of the large traditionalist Muslim association Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and created the conditions for a surprising flourishing of social activism and intellectual debate. Abdurrahman Wahid, who served as the general chairman of the organization from 1984 to 1999, played an extremely important role as a cultural and political broker between his large conservative constituency and the worlds of international human rights activism and liberal Islamic reform on the one hand and religious minorities on the other.

##### *Abdurrahman Wahid and the social roots of his progressive thought*

Abdurrahman Wahid had been a regular participant in the *pembaruan* discussions since he settled in Jakarta in the late 1970s and had become known as a strong supporter of some of the same views that had made Nurcholish controversial.<sup>40</sup> He rejected the idea that Islam prescribes a specific type of state, strongly supported Indonesia's secular state ideology of Pancasila and endorsed the notion that religious minorities (including those not recognized by the state) should enjoy protection as well as equal rights. He defended the notion of "cultural Islam", which was associated with the *pembaruan* movement and New Order policies, against the varieties of

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<sup>40</sup> Some observers, notably Greg Barton, have for this reason lumped him together with the *pembaruan* movement as representing Indonesian Islamic "Neo-Modernism"; see Barton, "The Emergence of Neo-Modernism" and Greg Barton, "Indonesia's Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid as Intellectual 'Ulamâ: The Meeting of Islamic Traditionalism and Modernism in Neo-Modernist Thought", *Studia Islamika* Vol. 4 No. 1, 1997, pp. 29–81. The distinctiveness of Abdurrahman Wahid, his background and his thought is brought out more clearly in a judicious study by Mujiburrahman, "Islam and Politics in Indonesia: The Political Thought of Abdurrahman Wahid", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* Vol. 10, 1999, pp. 339–352.

political Islam represented by the legal Islamic parties as well as radical underground movements. In the way he used the expression, “cultural Islam” acquired overtones of local culture, traditional religious practices, bottom-up social activism and individual moral values. It also implied religious tolerance and protection of non-Muslims and even heterodox Muslim sects. His views were often even more liberal than those of Nurcholish and his friends, and it was upon Abdurrahman, not Nurcholish, that Indonesian Christians and minority groups came to look as their protector.

This was much to do with the fact that the two men represented different segments of the Muslim community. Abdurrahman belonged to the most prominent family within NU; his father and both of his grandfathers had in their day been the NU’s most respected ulama. As the heir apparent, he commanded the self-evident respect of most of his constituency and did not permanently have to prove his loyalty or show Islamic credentials. Although he often voiced opinions that the rank-and-file of the NU found it hard to accept or understand, when challenged he was usually capable of restating them in a language that his constituency understood. He maintained close links with supporters at the grassroots level and was no doubt the most “rooted” of Indonesia’s Muslim intellectuals. His example inspired numerous young NU men and women and helped to transform the NU from an intellectual backwater into the site of lively exploration of ideas and debate.

#### *Nahdlatul Ulama, the pesantren and their development*

The NU represented the world of the *pesantren* and *ulama* or *kiai*, the traditional Islamic boarding schools and their charismatic teachers, who exerted a strong influence in rural Java and in some of the other islands. This is the world where *fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence, of the Shafi’i school is the dominant intellectual tradition and great *ulama* of the past are venerated, where life is punctuated by commemorations of the Prophet’s birth (*mawlid*) and the death anniversaries of saints and local *kiai*, where lengthy pious recitations and invocations supplement the five daily prayers, where death does not represent the end of all communication and the living can contribute to the religious merit accumulated by the dead, as deceased saints can intercede on behalf of the living.

The NU had been established in 1926 as an association of ulama for the defence of traditional religious beliefs and practices, which were under assault on the part of modern-educated reformists. Upon Indonesia’s Independence it became a

political party, which proved capable of mobilizing the votes of almost 20 per cent of the electorate in the free parliamentary elections of 1955. In Suharto's New Order Indonesia, the NU remained the only party with a large, identifiable and loyal constituency at the grassroots, even after it had been obliged to merge with the other Muslim parties into the Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP, United Development Party) in 1973. After a number of major clashes with the government and heavy-handed intervention in the PPP's internal affairs, the NU decided in 1984 to withdraw as an organization from "practical politics" and redirect its efforts towards education, social welfare and religious guidance.

Several of the men who took over at the helm of the NU in 1984, including Abdurrahman Wahid himself, had been involved over the previous decade in efforts to give the *pesantren* a role to play in community development, and they were much influenced by the encounter with the international NGO world and its grand narratives of development from below, empowerment, human rights and, in the years to come, gender equality, civil society and democratization. The NU's shift from party politics to involvement in social welfare activities gave more active young NU members exposure to NGO activities and the attendant discourses, teaching them various useful skills and broadening their mental horizon.

The idea of involving the *pesantren* in community development had originated with LP3ES, the Jakarta-based "development" NGO, and the German foundation that was its chief foreign sponsor in the early 1970s. It resonated with the ideals of development from below, adapted to local traditions that were current then; moreover, the *pesantren* was the only autonomous institution at the village level and therefore the most promising channel for reaching the rural population. The ubiquitous Dawam Raharjo was in charge of the *pesantren* projects. In order to gain access to NU-affiliated *pesantren*—Dawam Raharjo and his colleagues at LP3ES had urban Muslim reformist backgrounds—a number of young men of NU background were recruited to the programme. The *pesantren*-based projects were not an undivided success: with a few exceptions, most *kiai* were concerned that their authority might be challenged by too much empowerment of poor villagers, and they attempted rather to use the projects' resources to shore up their own positions. However, numerous young people acquired new experiences through these projects, which they later put into practice in other NGOs. The number of NGOs active in the *pesantren* environment and actually run by persons with a *pesantren* background increased. The NU also established its

own NGO for community development, staffed entirely by young NU members, giving the NGO world a legitimate entry into this previously closed bastion of traditionalism. And an entire generation of *pesantren* students grew up with the awareness that there should be a relationship between religious discourse and social and economic activities.<sup>41</sup>

*From “development” to “discourse”*

In the late 1980s there was a shift in the nature of NGO activities, at least partly in response to the experiences of the first encounter between the *pesantren* world and the discourse of international development activism. Most of the new ideas were alien to the *pesantren* world and many *kiai* therefore rejected them out of hand. It was felt that these ideas had to be “translated” into the language of *fiqh* in order to be accepted as legitimate, and that on the other hand the discourse of traditional *fiqh* needed to be stretched in order to accommodate modern ideas and be relevant to contemporary social problems. An NGO that had been established specifically for *pesantren*-based activities, P3M, pioneered efforts in this field of cultural brokerage.<sup>42</sup> With the support of some senior *kiai* who had previously been involved in community development projects, P3M organized a series of seminars—announced as *halqa*, “study circles”—in which relatively open-minded *kiai* were brought together with specialists in various fields, from rural sociology and economics to law and medicine, and where contemporary issues were discussed to which the *kiai* were challenged to find relevant Islamic answers. This included grave moral issues such as those surrounding organ transplants and euthanasia but also, and more especially, political questions including land expropriations by the state, the nature of popular representation, and women’s rights. The organizers made great efforts to develop, and find endorsement for, “progressive” perspectives.

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<sup>41</sup> The story of the various NGO activities in the NU environment is told in: Martin van Bruinessen and Farid Wajidi, “Syu’un Ijtima’iyah and the *Kiai* Rakyat: Traditionalist Islam, Civil Society and Social Concerns”, in: H. Schulte Nordholt (Ed.), *Indonesian Transitions*, Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2006, pp. 205–248.

<sup>42</sup> P3M stands for Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat, “Association for the Development of *Pesantren* and Society”. It was established in 1983 to enable the German sponsor of LP3ES’ *pesantren* programme to continue funding similar activities beyond the 10-year period that any project was maximally to last. Initially, P3M continued community development activities, but soon the focus shifted to the development of a religious discourse relevant to contemporary social problems.

The chief organizer and thinker behind these *halqa* was the non-conformist NU intellectual, Masdar F. Mas'udi. Masdar's strength was that he had a thorough *pesantren* education and naturally thought like a *kiai*, in the categories of *fiqh*, but due to his intelligence and wide-ranging contacts with NGO activists of different backgrounds had a much broader perspective on society. He wrote a highly original book on *zakat* and social justice, in which he derived moral priorities and ideas of a just society from the Qur'anic verses on *zakat* and the classical *fiqh* elaborations about how *zakat* should be divided.<sup>43</sup> In preparation of a series of *halqa* discussions on parliamentary democracy and on people's rights to property (organized at a time when the state expropriated much land for "development" purposes, without paying adequate compensation), he wrote thought-provoking discussion papers in which he took classical *fiqh* works as his point of departure but with an original analysis arrived at "progressive" conclusions.<sup>44</sup>

These *halqa* of P3M were facilitated by the NU organization due to the support of influential senior *kiai* and the progressive new leadership of the organization. *Kiai* Sahal Mahfudh was one of those senior *kiai* who not only were widely read in the classical *fiqh* literature but also regularly participated in discussions with politicians and NGO workers. Though anxious not to antagonize the government, he was a committed supporter and the chief legitimizer of P3M's *halqa*, and he made himself a number of methodological contributions to stretching the conventional *fiqh* discourse of his colleagues. Thus he argued in favour of greater sensitivity to context in applying the rulings (*qawl*) of the authoritative ulama of the Shafi'i school instead of simply following them to the letter, as was the dominant attitude of NU ulama. *Kiai* Sahal frequently spoke in public and wrote in the mass media, discussing social questions from a progressive *fiqh* perspective.<sup>45</sup>

#### *Bahth al-masa'il: discussing religious questions*

The need for more flexibility in *fiqh*, to enable the ulama to address issues and problems on which classical *fiqh* was silent, was felt more broadly, and the *halqa*

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<sup>43</sup> Masdar F. Mas'udi, *Agama keadilan. Risalah zakat (pajak) dalam Islam [Religion of Justice. An Essay on Zakat (Tax) in Islam]*, Jakarta: Pustaka Firdaus, 1991.

<sup>44</sup> Masdar F. Mas'udi, *Fiqh permusyawaratan/perwakilan rakyat [The Fiqh of Consultation and People's Representation]*, Jakarta: P3M – RMI – Pesantren Cipasung, 1992; idem, *Agama dan hak rakyat [Religion and the Rights of the People]*, Jakarta: P3M, 1993.

<sup>45</sup> A large number of his speeches and articles were published as: Sahal Mahfudh, *Nuansa fiqh sosial [Nuances of a Socially Relevant Fiqh]*, Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1994.

made an impact on the way in which *fatwas* were issued by the leading ulama of NU. The national congresses and conferences of this organization had always been the occasions for the leading ulama to deliberate on questions that had come up, resulting in collective *fatwas*. In the late 1980s, NU established a special body to prepare and co-ordinate these deliberations, with the implicit intention of ensuring that the ulama discussed important contemporary problems. Deliberations (*bahth al-masa'il*, “discussion of questions”) were held at various levels of the NU organization—district, province and national—and the organizers prepared discussion materials on a number of major practical and ethical questions, from buying and selling shares in the (recently established) stock exchange to in-vitro fertilization, organ transplants and sex change operations. Secular experts were invited to present a proper explanation of each subject before the ulama discussed whether and under which conditions certain actions were allowed or forbidden.<sup>46</sup>

This type of questions could not be reduced to those already discussed in the classical *fiqh* texts, and the NU’s ulama had long refrained from addressing such matters because they lacked a language to do so. In traditional *fiqh*, one had to follow literally the rulings (*qawl*) of the leading scholars of the *madhhab* or reduce a new question to an older one on which a ruling existed (this is called *ilhaq*). Reformists had replaced the reliance on the great ulama of the past by a return to the Qur’an and *hadith* and the exercise of reasoned interpretation, *ijtihad*, but the essence of traditionalist Islam was the rejection of that sort of reform and loyalty to the Shafi’i school of *fiqh* (and the three other orthodox *madhhab*). The NU’s ulama came to agree on a compromise between *ijtihad* and tradition by distinguishing between the literal words (*qawl*) of the great ulama of the *madhhab* and the method (*manhaj*) by which these had reached their verdicts. In cases where no relevant *qawl* or a possibility of *ilhaq* was available, it was decided that the ulama could legitimately exercise “collective *ijtihad*”, following the *manhaj* of the founding fathers. Theoretically, this allowed a much greater flexibility and use of reason even while

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<sup>46</sup> Thus the chairman of the Jakarta stock exchange came to explain to the *ulama* how his institution worked; surgeons explained what was involved in organ transplants and sex change operations, and a well-known popular singer, a former transvestite who had become a woman, explained the latter operation from the experiential point of view. For more on NU’s innovative *bahth al-masa'il*, see also: Martin van Bruinessen, “Traditions for the Future: The Reconstruction of Traditionalist Discourse within NU”, in: G. Barton and G. Fealy (Eds.), *Nahdlatul Ulama, Traditional Islam and Modernity in Indonesia*, Clayton, VIC: Monash Asia Institute, 1996, pp. 163–189; Greg Barton and Andrée Feillard, “Nahdlatul Ulama, Abdurrahman Wahid and reformation: what does NU’s November 1997 national gathering tell us?” *Studia Islamika* Vol. 6 No. 1, 1999, pp. 1–42.

remaining loyal to the *madhhab*. In practice, however, such collective *ijtihad* was not often exercised, and after promising beginnings in the 1990s the NU's *bahth al-masa'il* returned to more conventional topics and more conservative *fatwas* in the 2000s.<sup>47</sup>

## 5. Gender issues, liberation theology and human rights in traditionalist circles

The limited opening of the gate of *ijtihad* that the NU's ulama allowed themselves did not satisfy the demand for a more relevant and progressive religious discourse that developed among young NU members active in discussion circles and NGOs. One area in which it was strongly felt that a more drastic change was needed and where the existing *fiqh* discourse needed to be completely reconstructed concerned women's rights and gender issues in general. Contacts with Indonesian secular women's NGOs and with foreign sponsors eager to support advocacy and training programmes directed at Muslim women, beginning in the late 1980s, gave rise to rapidly growing interest in discussions of women's rights in an Islamic perspective. Around the same time, the first writings of Islamic feminists such as Riffat Hassan, Fatima Mernissi and Asghar Ali Engineer reached Indonesia and were eagerly discussed. P3M devoted one of its *halqa* to a critical discussion of the treatment of women's rights and obligations in the standard literature studied in the *pesantren*. Other discussion circles also took up women's issues, and in several cities Muslim women's groups emerged that engaged in various activities to raise gender awareness.

By the mid-1990s, P3M received funding (from the Ford Foundation) for a large project on women's reproductive health that had two components: the development of a woman-friendly *fiqh* discourse and grassroots education on reproductive health through a network of *pesantren*. The dynamic Muslim feminist activist Lies Marcoes-Natsir was the driving force behind this project, which resulted in a vast network of women activists in the *pesantren* world, and the development of a new, gender-sensitive discourse grafted on but critical of traditional *fiqh*, for which

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<sup>47</sup> The NU formally adopted the principle of "collective *ijtihad*" at its 1992 National Convention, and the most interesting and freest discussions took place in the period 1992–1997. A systematic analysis of the NU's *fatwas* and the debates about methodology is presented in: Ahmad Zahro, *Tradisi Intelektual NU: Lajnah Bahtsul Masa'il 1926–1999* [NU's Intellectual Tradition: The Committee for Bahth al-Masa'il, 1926–1999], Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2004. Out of the 428 *fatwas* studied only 8, issued during the 1990s, were explicitly based on a *manhaji* approach.



the name *fiqh al-nisa'* ("*fiqh* concerning women") was coined.<sup>48</sup> Masdar Mas'udi was an early major contributor to this rights-based discourse, but a highly respected *kiai* from the Cirebon region with solid traditionalist credentials, *Kiai* Husein Muhammad, became the leading thinker involved. Various new Muslim women's NGOs were established that owed their inspiration to the *fiqh al-nisa'* project and that became involved in advocacy and gender awareness training for *pesantren* students, the education of female preachers, establishing women's crisis centres and shelters, or the critical discussion of the dominant *pesantren* discourse on male-female relations.<sup>49</sup>

The emerging Islamic feminism was part of a broader movement for developing a progressive, rights-based Muslim discourse, which was especially strong among student activists of NU backgrounds. Most of these studied or had studied at one of the IAINs, the only institutes of higher education that were easily accessible to *pesantren* graduates and that constituted the major channel of social mobility for rural Muslim youth. Discussion circles and action committees in Yogyakarta and Surabaya, and later in other cities, brought young people of different experiences and abilities together: some had taken part in *pesantren*-based community development projects, or in solidarity actions for villagers who were displaced in development projects; others contributed language skills and acquainted their peers with recent English and Arabic writings—evinced a special interest in post-modernism and contemporary Arab philosophers. Through contacts with Catholic NGOs and through their reading, NU activists had, from the mid-1980s onward, been aware of Catholic liberation theology as developed in Latin America and the Philippines, and there had been attempts to develop a Muslim theology of liberation, a religious discourse that unambiguously sided with the oppressed and powerless against the oppressors.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Lies M. Marcoes-Natsir and Syafiq Hasyim, *P3M dan program fiqh an-nisa untuk penguatan hak-hak reproduksi perempuan [P3M and the Program of Women's Fiqh for the Empowerment of Women's Reproductive Rights]*, Jakarta: P3M, 1997. This is both a training manual and a description of the programme.

<sup>49</sup> An elaborate description of the emerging Muslim feminist discourse and of the theological arguments that were developed is presented in Chapter 7 of Djohan Effendi's Ph.D. thesis, "Progressive Traditionalists: The Emergence of a New Discourse in Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama during the Abdurrahman Wahid Era", Deakin University, Department of Religious Studies, Melbourne, 2000 (published as: *A renewal without breaking tradition: the emergence of a new discourse in Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama during the Abdurrahman Wahid era*, Yogyakarta: Interfidei, 2008). A more easily accessible but more limited study is: Andr e Feillard, "Indonesia's Emerging Muslim Feminism: Women Leaders on Equality, Inheritance and Other Gender Issues", *Studia Islamika* Vol. 4 No. 1, 1997, pp. 83–111.

<sup>50</sup> The first statements are by Moeslim Abdurrahman and Mansour Fakih, two NGO activists of reformist background who became very influential among the younger NU activists: Moeslim Abdurrahman, "Wong cilik dan kebutuhan teologi transformatif" ["The Little People and the Need for

*In search of a new paradigm*

The young NU thinkers and activists of the generation that emerged in the early 1990s demanded a more radical rethinking of traditionalist Islamic discourse that the ulama were willing to countenance. Replacing the *qawl* of the great ulama of the Shafi'i *madhhab* by their *manhaj* was not sufficient to get rid of the injustices and inequalities of established traditionalist discourse. They sought inspiration beyond the boundaries of the *madhhab* and dared to go further than their reformist predecessors of the *pembaruan* movement. From contemporary Western thought, the concept of deconstruction as well as Foucault's writings on power and knowledge came to hold a strong appeal in these circles, although few may have actually read the French post-structuralists systematically. Key ideas were absorbed through seminars and group discussions, to which outsiders with specific knowledge were invited.

There was also an active search for useful new ideas emerging elsewhere in the Muslim world. One possible reconstruction that allowed for gender equality and equal rights for religious minorities was the radical revisionist reading of the Qur'an by the Sudanese scholar Mahmud Muhammad Taha, with which they first became acquainted through Abdullahi An-Na'im's book on Taha.<sup>51</sup> Other Arabic authors whose works were eagerly absorbed, discussed and translated included Hasan Hanafi (if only because of the title of the journal he once published, *al-Yasar al-Islami*, "The Islamic Left"), Mohammed Abed al-Jabri (because of his philosophical critique of Arabic thought), and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (whose work on hermeneutics of the Qur'an was an eye-opener for many).

There is an interesting paradox here: much of the inspiration for the liberal and progressive thought that made Indonesian Islam in the 1990s quite unique in the world came from authors writing in Arabic, to whom Indonesia's young thinkers had

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a Transformative Theology"], in: Masyhur Amin (Ed.), *Teologi pembangunan; paradigma baru pemikiran Islam [The Theology of Development: A New Paradigm for Islamic Thought]*, Yogyakarta: LKPSM NU DIY, 1988, pp. 153–161; Mansour Fakih, "Mencari teologi untuk kaum tertindas" ["In Search of a Theology for the Oppressed"], in: H. A. Suminto (Ed.), *Refleksi pembaharuan pemikiran Islam: 70 tahun Harun Nasution [Reflections on the Renewal of Islamic Thought: Harun Nasution at 70]*, Jakarta: LSAF, 1989, pp. 165–177.

<sup>51</sup> Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law*, Syracuse University Press, 1990. This book was translated into Indonesian and published by the most prominent of the NU-affiliated NGOs under the significant title of *Dekonstruksi syari'ah* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1994). Soon, Taha's own works in Arabic and the English translation, *The Second Message of Islam* (Syracuse University Press, 1987) were being passed from hand to hand. The latter was published in Indonesian under an equally significant title: *Syari'ah demokratik* (Surabaya: èLSAD, 1996).

access because of the Saudi effort to disseminate knowledge of modern written Arabic.<sup>52</sup> Authors like al-Jabri, Hanafi, Abu Zayd and An-Na'im (the last-named writing in English) may have found more readers and made a greater impact in Indonesia than in their own countries.<sup>53</sup>

In the course of the 1990s, several informal discussion groups transformed themselves into NGOs, which allowed them to seek external funding for some of their activities. The Yogyakarta-based NGO, LKiS, later joined by its Surabaya-based counterpart èLSAD, emerged as the major brokers of alternative religious ideas, most of them critical of the political and religious establishment. LKiS published numerous books that made a great impact, and it organized, in imitation of and in co-operation with the women's NGOs, training courses for *pesantren* youth on Islam and human rights. These NGOs were not formally affiliated with NU, and external funding gave them a degree of independence from the parent organization. Moreover, Abdurrahman Wahid, who was the NU's general chairman from 1984 to 1999, gave the search for a rights-based Islamic discourse his strong endorsement (although there were few direct contacts between him and the young activists). He was in fact a major source of inspiration for many of the young NU activists and frequently made public statements that were even more radically critical of dominant religious discourse.

The activists were aware that, in order to get a hearing and make an impact on thought and attitudes in NU circles, they had to formulate their critique and revisions in the language of traditionalist Islam. Many *kiai* had always been suspicious of

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<sup>52</sup> Several of the young liberals and progressives who became prominent in the 2000s had studied Arabic at the Saudi-run Institute of Islamic and Arabic Studies (LIPIA) in Jakarta. On this institution see Noorhaidi Hasan, *Laskar Jihad*, pp. 47–53. Former LIPIA students include Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, who was to become the leading and most provocative thinker of the Liberal Islam Network, Ahmad Baso, a productive young essayist and NGO activist, and the intellectual and university teacher Mujiburrahman, who translated al-Jabri into Indonesian.

<sup>53</sup> An-Na'im's *Toward an Islamic reformation* was translated as *Dekonstruksi Syari'ah*, Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1994, and was followed two years later by *Dekonstruksi Syari'ah II*, the translation of an edited volume of responses to the original work. Hasan Hanafi was first made more widely known through a translated study by a Japanese scholar: Kazuo Shimogaki, *Kiri Islam: Antara Modernisme dan Post-modernisme* [*The Islamic Left, between modernism and post-modernism*], Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1993; his own works started to be translated after 2000, e.g. Hassan Hanafi, *Agama, Kekerasan, & Islam Kontemporer* [*Religion, violence and contemporary Islam*], Yogyakarta: Jendela, 2001; idem, *Oposisi pasca tradisi* [*Post-traditional opposition*], Yogyakarta: Syarikat Indonesia, 2003. The first, and most influential, books by Jabri and Abu Zayd were: Muhammad Abid Al Jabiri, *Post-tradisionalisme Islam*, Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2000; idem, *Syura: tradisi, partikularitas, universalitas* [translation of *Al-Dimuqratiyya wa huquq al-insan*], Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2003; Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, *Tekstualitas Al-Qur'an: kritik terhadap Ulumul Qur'an* [*The Qur'an as text, a critique of the Qur'anic sciences*], Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2003; idem, *Dekonstruksi gender: kritik wacana perempuan dalam Islam* [*The deconstruction of gender, a critique of the Islamic discourse of gender*], Yogyakarta: SAMHA, 2003. All these books sold very well.

foreign ideas, and from the 1980s on they were warned from various sides that the West had embarked upon a concerted ideological offensive (*al-ghazw al-fikri*) to subvert Islam by an invasion of Western values. Publications sponsored by the Muslim World League and students returning from study in the Middle East popularized this view of an Islam under ideological attack—which found most easy acceptance in circles close to the Dewan Dakwah but also influenced many of the *kiai*.<sup>54</sup> As long as NGOs carried out income-generating or social welfare projects, the *kiai* did not object, but when they started questioning established religious ideas and practices and discussing normative concepts that appeared Western, they ran into strong opposition. P3M's *halqa* were a balancing act, an effort to make the *kiai* reflect on contemporary issues in dialogue with experts whose discourse was external to Islamic tradition. *Fiqh al-nisa'* was an attempt to formulate ideas of women's rights in the language of *fiqh* and to critique established views by methods that referred to Islamic concepts. It was hard enough to find acceptance for these moderate efforts to reform traditionalist discourse. But when LKiS announced the theme of a new training programme to be given in *pesantren* to NU youth as “direct democracy”, even the more open-minded *kiai* demurred and vetoed the programme.

#### *The rediscovery of maqasid al-shari'a*

The “direct democracy” training programme was developed in 1997, the year of the last elections of the Suharto era, at a time when the regime was already shaking; a year later, mass demonstrations were to bring Suharto down. The *kiai*'s objections were probably not just religious but also a matter of political caution. The activists then replaced explicit discussion of democracy and human rights by a discussion of the classical Islamic concept of the five “basic needs” (*al-daruriyyat al-khamsa*), which had earlier been proposed by Abdurrahman Wahid as the proper Islamic basis for a human rights discourse and had been taken up by P3M in another series of *halqa* discussions.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> The first book that introduced the concept in Indonesia may have been A. S. Marzuq, *Ghazwul Fikri*. Jakarta: Al Kautsar, 1990. The term soon was widely used in the conservative Muslim press.

<sup>55</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid may have been the first in Indonesia to connect the concept of *al-daruriyyat al-khamsa* with a modern conception of human rights, as he did in several discussions in Jakarta in the late 1980s and a number of published articles, briefly discussed in Mujiburrahman, “Islam and Politics”, p. 344. The P3M *halqa* on this subject, and the interpretations that emerged there, are discussed in Effendi, “Progressive Traditionalists”, pp. 162–172.

This concept was well-known to the *kiai* because Ghazali, the eleventh-century divine who is one of the most highly respected classical authorities in NU circles, discusses it at length in his work on the principles of *fiqh*, *al-Mustasfa*. The objective of Shariah, in Ghazali's discussion and that of later authors, is *maslaha*, defined as that which brings benefit or prevents harm (to the *umma*). There are different categories of *maslaha*, ranging from the necessary (*daruri*) to the commendable (*tahsini*), and in the former category Ghazali lists five essential needs: the protection of religion (*hifz al-din*), self (*hifz al-nafs*), family (*hifz al-nasl*), property (*hifz al-mal*) and intellect (*hifz al-'aql*). The concept of *maslaha* was further developed and given a more central place in Islamic legal thought by the thirteenth and fourteenth-century jurists Tufi and Shatibi. The former, who is known for his opinion that *maslaha* should take precedence over the texts in all matters apart from worship, has a small circle of admirers among Indonesian ulama specializing in the principles of *fiqh*. It was Shatibi, however, whose treatment of the subject was felt to lend itself most easily to a modern rights-based discourse; the *halqa* organized by P3M and the human rights and democracy training courses set up by LKiS were based on Shatibi's discussion of the objectives of the Shariah (*maqasid al-shari'a*).<sup>56</sup> The LKiS training sessions began with a reading of the contemporary Moroccan philosopher, Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, who compares Ghazali's treatment of the *daruriyyat* with Shatibi's and explains why he considers the latter as superior. The participants read fragments of both Shatibi and Jabri in group sessions, and then discussed how concepts of democracy and human rights could be derived from the five "basic needs".<sup>57</sup>

The interpretation given by P3M and LKiS activists to the five essential needs was very different from that of Ghazali (and, for that matter, from the pragmatic utilitarianism, if not political opportunism, that earlier generations of NU leaders had justified with references to *maslaha*). For Ghazali, the imperative of *hifz al-din* provided, among other things, the justification of the death penalty for apostasy. The activists, on the other hand, interpreted it as freedom of religion in the widest possible sense, including the freedom to choose any religion (i.e. the freedom of apostasy) and

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<sup>56</sup> Shatibi's treatment of *maslaha* and the five *daruriyya* is discussed in Muhammad Khalid Masud, *Shatibi's Philosophy of Islamic Law*, Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1995, pp. 151–162.

<sup>57</sup> This paragraph is based on discussions with Jadul Maula and Luthfi, the LKiS activists who devised and organized the training course. The training is also briefly discussed in: Mochamad Sodik, *Gejolak santri kota: aktivis muda NU merambah jalan lain [The Urban Santri as Torch-bearer: Young NU Activists Paving a New Way]*, Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana, 2000, pp. 59–62.

the freedom to spread any religion.<sup>58</sup> The other essentials were also given a human rights-related interpretation: *hifz al-nafs* not only entailed the right to life but also freedom from torture, the right to medical services, and respect and human dignity; *hifz al-nasl* implied the freedom to choose one's spouse but also the right of both spouses (i.e. not only the male partner) to sexual enjoyment; *hifz al-mal* the right to defend property against expropriations by the state or other institution, and the right to employment and fair pay; and *hifz al-'aql* the right to education, freedom of opinion, expression, association and protection of (local) cultural practices.<sup>59</sup>

#### *Eclecticism and social activism in the development of religious discourse*

The most striking aspect of the religious discourse that was developed by the young NU activists is perhaps its eclecticism: they borrowed selectively from *usul al-fiqh* and modern Arabic philosophers, Western cultural studies, social sciences and Oriental studies, and they were much influenced by the concerns of the international NGO movement (and later, the anti-globalization movement). The result was something uniquely Indonesian in spite of all the borrowings, and it reflected perhaps also the context in which it had emerged. Most of the contributors to the discourse had a *pesantren* education and were among the first of their families to have extensive exposure to other social circles and intellectual influences. They were typically not primarily thinkers but activists, who developed their ideas in the course of their social and political action, in which they were guided by an inner moral conviction, which only later they attempted to found on scriptural arguments.

The concept of *maqasid al-shari'a*, the objectives (rather than the letter) of the divine law, and of *maslaha*, interpreted as the common good, had a self-evident appeal to activists who were convinced that Islam is a religion of social justice. It provided a useful connection between social activism directed towards the common good and the mental world of the *pesantren*; the training courses on democracy and *al-daruriyyat al-khamsa* were a great success, and the concept of *maqasid al-shari'a* gained considerable popularity.<sup>60</sup> NU activists have been active in supporting the

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<sup>58</sup> The last-named point is significant: in Indonesia, proselytization is prohibited except among the marginal populations that do not adhere to one of the five officially recognized religions. See Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened*, pp. 72–91.

<sup>59</sup> Effendi, "Progressive Traditionalists", pp. 168–172.

<sup>60</sup> The dangers of reliance on this utilitarian argument were brought home to the activists a few years later, when one of the Bali bombers, Amrozi, justified his act of terrorism with a reasoning that also appeared based on the protection of the five *daruriyyat*: protection of religion from foreign domination,

struggle for the rights of villagers whose land was confiscated for development projects, in protecting minority religious movements that were under threat, and in organizing education for the poor. They frequently co-operated with young Christian and “secular” activists, and they developed a fascination with Marxism. At times of anti-Christian riots, which occurred repeatedly during the last Suharto years, they naturally sided with the victims, and they sympathized with the small neo-Marxist student movement of that period. The ideas they developed and spread stressed inter-religious tolerance and pluralism, and an open-minded attitude towards the left.

Discourse and social action were also intimately connected in the case of the said *Kiai* Husein Muhammad, who is now the leading progressive thinker on Islam and gender relations. Together with his wife, he has been giving marriage counselling and running a women’s shelter for battered housewives in his *pesantren*, and he is actively involved in a grassroots NGO in Cirebon, Fahmina, that, among other things, fights human trafficking. His thinking and writing are intimately related with these experiences (and, no doubt, with ideas encountered in the transnational NGO network). Speaking of his claim that Islam, if properly understood, endorses gender equality and condemns domestic violence, he once remarked, “I *know* this is the correct understanding of Islam, but I have to seek Islamic references that can persuade my colleagues.”<sup>61</sup> He systematically combed the *tafsir* (Qur’anic exegesis) and *usul al-fiqh* literature as well as modern Arabic authors such as Taha, al-Jabri and Shahrur in an effort to deconstruct the dominant discourse and offer a well-reasoned alternative. The arguments developed by *Kiai* Husein were published by various NGOs and found immediate application in training courses.<sup>62</sup>

#### *Opposition to liberal and progressive thought in traditionalist circles*

During the years that Abdurrahman Wahid led the NU organization (1984–1999), he provided the younger activists and thinkers with a measure of protection from the

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etc. It made them aware that they needed additional arguments to support their own interpretation of *maslaha* against other versions.

<sup>61</sup> Conversation with *Kiai* Husein, September 2002.

<sup>62</sup> K. H. Husein Muhammad, *Islam Agama Ramah Perempuan: Pembelaan Kiai Pesantren [Islam, a Woman-Friendly Religion: Defense by a Pesantren Kiai]*, Yogyakarta: LKiS & Fahmina Institute, 2004. A book of training materials developed by *Kiai* Husein and his collaborators was translated into English: K. H. Husein Muhammad, Faqihuddin Abdul Qodir, Lies Marcoes-Natsir and Marzuki Wahid, *Dawrah Fiqh Concerning Women: Manual for a Course on Islam and Gender*, Cirebon: Fahmina Institute, 2006.

wrath of conservative *kiai*, and he actively stimulated them to think independently. He faced quite a bit of opposition from some of the senior *kiai* himself too, but usually found sufficient powerful allies within the organization to either be able to ignore his opponents or to force them into the margin—due to the wide respect his ancestry commanded, his personal charisma and a remarkable gift for the chess game of politics.

ICMI, which undermined the position of the *pembaruan* movement, was less of a threat to the progressive NGOs in NU circles because it targeted people with at least a few years' university education. Only few prominent NU personalities joined ICMI; Abdurrahman Wahid himself not only refused to join but became ICMI's most important public challenger. Together with a handful of other public intellectuals, most of whom were in fact non-Muslims, he established an alternative to ICMI, the Forum Demokrasi (abbreviated as Fordem).<sup>63</sup> This was a ridiculously small band to take on ICMI and the New Order, but Abdurrahman's presence gave it weight and guaranteed that it was in the news all the time. Fordem's leading thinkers recognized the potential of the changes in the international arena—the end of the Cold War and the arrival of the Clinton administration in the USA—for democratization at home.<sup>64</sup> They criticized ICMI as “sectarian” and as the type of corporatist organization that stood in the way of democratization. Fordem became a pole of orientation for Indonesian NGO activists, among whom human rights and democratization were becoming core issues.<sup>65</sup>

By the mid-1990s, Abdurrahman had arguably become Suharto's ablest opponent, allied with secularist intellectuals and “nationalist” generals against Suharto and his “Islamist” supporters in the armed forces and civilian bureaucracy. In the effort to unseat Abdurrahman from leadership of NU, Suharto and his “Islamist” allies attempted to persuade numerous *kiai* to withdraw their support from him and

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<sup>63</sup> S. R. S. Herdi, “Forum Demokrasi (Democratic Forum): an intellectuals' response to the state and political Islam”, *Studia Islamika* Vol. 2 No. 3, 1995, pp. 161–182; Douglas E. Ramage, *Politics in Indonesia: democracy, Islam and the ideology of tolerance*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 157–167.

<sup>64</sup> See the remarks by Marsillam Simanjuntak, Fordem's leading thinker besides Abdurrahman Wahid, on the perspectives for democratization, made at a conference in Australia: Marsillam Simanjuntak, “Democratisation in the 1990s: coming to terms with gradualism?” in: David Bouchier and John Legge (Eds.), *Democracy in Indonesia: 1950s and 1990s*, Clayton: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies Monash University, 1994, pp. 302–312.

<sup>65</sup> Anders Uhlin, *Indonesia and the “Third Wave of Democratization”: the Indonesian pro-democracy movement in a changing world*, Richmond: Curzon, 1997.



generally strengthened the conservative factions in NU.<sup>66</sup> Abdurrahman managed to maintain his position and later reached reconciliation with Suharto, but conservative voices in NU were becoming more vocal. Several senior *kiai* who had been supportive of the *halqa* discussions moreover died, which further changed the balance between progressive and conservative forces in favour of the latter.

After Suharto's resignation in 1998, Abdurrahman Wahid founded his own political party, the Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (National Awakening Party, PKB), and recruited many young NGO activists as party workers and politicians. Although this party was only moderately successful in the 1999 elections, it was the vehicle that brought him to the presidency. His successor as the NU chairman, Hasyim Muzadi, was a very different personality, distrustful of young intellectuals, and under his leadership progressive and liberal activists and thinkers were systematically marginalized.

## 6. The travails of liberal and progressive thought in post-Suharto Indonesia

### *The main issues and themes*

Human rights, democratization and the strengthening of civil society, women's rights and religious pluralism were among the central concerns of Muslim activists during the final years of Indonesia's New Order, and they remained high on the agenda in the post-Suharto years. The *pembaruan* movement and Paramadina shared these concerns with the NU activists, but they addressed different audiences and had recourse to different discursive strategies. Paramadina had found a large and affluent constituency among Jakarta's well-to-do middle class, who flocked to its courses. Many of the NU activists, on the other hand, addressed rural audiences and engaged in advocacy on behalf of subaltern groups, endangered communities and victims of inter-group violence. In spite of the severe economic crisis hitting Indonesia, or rather as a result of international efforts to weaken the impact of the crisis, there was in the first post-Suharto years a significant expansion of Islamic NGO activities, seminars and training programmes, and book publishing—made possible by generous sponsoring by such agencies as The Ford Foundation and The Asia Foundation. However, except

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<sup>66</sup> The conflict reached its zenith at the 1994 NU Congress in Tasikmalaya; see Greg Fealy, 'The 1994 NU Congress and aftermath: Abdurrahman Wahid, suksesi and the battle for control of NU', in: Greg Barton and Greg Fealy (Eds.), *Nahdlatul Ulama, traditional Islam and modernity in Indonesia*, Clayton, VIC: Monash Asia Institute, 1996, pp. 257–277.

under Abdurrahman Wahid's short-lived presidency (1999–2001), the state no longer patronized liberal Islamic thought, and the Muslim liberals and progressives increasingly were challenged by Islamists and fundamentalists.

The events surrounding the fall of Suharto had further strengthened Islamist groups. In an effort to restore order after Suharto had handed over the presidency to his deputy, B. J. Habibie, the armed forces commander recruited youth groups, most of them affiliated with Islamist movements, as voluntary civilian security forces (*PAM Swakarsa*), only nominally under police command. Many of these groups remained active as vigilante forces, imposing their version of Islamic morality and providing the muscle in the intra-elite struggles of the following years.<sup>67</sup> The gradual democratization allowed radical movements that had been underground to surface and organize themselves legally: in August 2000, various wing of the banned Darul Islam movement joined with other Islamists to establish the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia, which openly proclaimed its aim of turning Indonesia into an Islamic state. The main Islamic movements on campus consolidated themselves as the political party PK (later: PKS) and the extra-parliamentary Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia. The public sphere seemed, during the first years of transition, dominated by Islamist voices (even though the elections of 1999 and 2004 showed no increase in the total vote for Muslim parties, and those of 2009 a distinct decline). Newspaper stalls were full of Islamist journals and magazines, which reached higher circulation figures than any other publication.<sup>68</sup>

In this atmosphere, much of liberal and progressive discourse in these early post-Suharto years took on a defensive and anti-fundamentalist tone. Activists and thinkers presented themselves as alternatives to fundamentalism and Arabization of Indonesian Islam. In the arguments put forward by the young intellectuals working at Paramadina, there was a strong influence of philosophy, historical criticism and hermeneutical approaches to the Qur'an, reflecting the intellectual climate of the IAIN at Ciputat and the pervasive influence of Fazlur Rahman.

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<sup>67</sup> Togi Simanjuntak, FX Rudy Gunawan and Nezar Patria, *Premanisme politik*, Jakarta: ISAI, 2000; Kees van Dijk, *A country in despair: Indonesia between 1997 and 2000*, Leiden: KITLV Press, 2001, pp. 341–357.

<sup>68</sup> The weekly magazine *Sabili*, which was not affiliated with any one movement in particular but carried interviews with and columns by members of various radical Islamic movements, was for several years Indonesia's best selling publication (selling an alleged 120,000 copies in its best days). There were numerous other Islamist journals. After roughly 2005, their circulation declined and some even disappeared. *Sabili* lost much of its readership and changed its tone, apparently addressing the conservative wings of Muhammadiyah and NU rather than radical Islamists.

However, it was with courses on Sufism that Paramadina managed to reach wide audiences, including many who had previously been uninterested in religion or inclined to Javanese syncretism but were eager to learn about other sides of Islam than jihad and forced implementation of the Shariah. In response to popular demand, Sufism became an increasingly prominent element of the teaching at Paramadina, as well as in other urban middle-class study circles.<sup>69</sup>

In the years when much Islamist activism took the form of vigilante control of morality, inter-religious violence and jihad, Sufism had a strong appeal as a more irenic and “inclusive” version of the faith, but it was not the only Muslim response to radical Islam. Cases of inter-religious violence pressed upon intellectuals and activists the urgency of defending religious pluralism. After the terrorist church bombings of Christmas 2000, NU announced that its youth organization, Anshor, would henceforth guard churches at times of tension—and it has done so for the past 10 years. Not only churches were guarded; NU-affiliated groups have also attempted to protect Ahmadiyah communities when these were threatened with physical violence by vigilante groups. The communal conflicts in the Moluccas and elsewhere not only attracted jihadist groups that went there in support of their fellow believers, but there was also a very different aid effort. Muslim women’s NGOs in Jakarta collected money and goods which were sent as relief to victims at both sides in the conflict. Inter-faith prayer meetings, a new phenomenon, were a direct response to the inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflicts, as were a whole range of other demonstrations of inter-religious solidarity.

The themes of religious pluralism and of Christians, Hindus and Buddhists as “people of the book” with equal rights, which had been present in *pembaruan* thought from the beginning, had acquired a practical relevance and efforts were made to develop them theologically. A team of Paramadina-affiliated authors wrote a provocative book on “inter-religious *fiqh*”, in which they not only argued in favour of

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<sup>69</sup> Like his teacher Fazlur Rahman, Nurcholish Madjid was originally wary of Sufism because of its perceived irrationality, but he later came to look favourably upon those aspects of Sufi practice that could find Qur’anic legitimization. One of his closest younger collaborators at Paramadina has attempted to prove, with numerous quotations from his later writings, that he had in fact become a Sufi: Budhy Munawar-Rachman, “Argumen pengalaman iman Neo-Sufisme Nurcholish Madjid” [“The Argument of Nurcholish Madjid’s Neo-Sufi Religious Experience”], *Tsaqafah* Vol. 1, No. 1, 2002, pp. 30–58. Budhy Munawar Rachman himself is Indonesia’s leading exponent of Perennialism (which he also claims was largely accepted as valid by Nurcholish); another prominent young Paramadina staffer, Kautsar Azhari Noer, is an expert on Ibn Arabi. On the flourishing of Sufism see: Howell, “Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic revival”, and idem, “Modernity and Islamic spirituality in Indonesia’s new Sufi networks”.

religious pluralism but also, against the dominant view of the established ulama, defended mixed marriages, even between Muslim women and non-Muslim men.<sup>70</sup>

NGO activists of NU background, many of whom had long entertained friendly relations with non-Muslims, also became involved in the defence of other forms of pluralism. One NGO, Desantara, developed a special interest in the encounter of Islam and local cultures and became an advocate of local Muslim traditions as well as “syncretistic” communities and practices that were under threat. Another NGO, Syarikat, engaged in a dialogue with the relatives of victims of the 1965–1966 mass killings of communists (in which many of the perpetrators had been young NU members and which some NU leaders had helped orchestrate). Syarikat interviewed survivors of both sides to bring repressed memories back to the surface and to reconstruct the events, brought the survivors together in “truth and reconciliation” meetings and helped to organize the respectful reburial of a group of victims. The basis of reconciliation was sought in the Javanese syncretistic culture that united the political opponents.<sup>71</sup> In another effort at reconciliation, Syarikat moreover published the autobiographies of two surviving communist activists who had (before 1965) propagated a form of “Muslim communism”, a concept that during the New Order had seemed a contradiction in terms.<sup>72</sup>

### *The Liberal Islam Network*

The most direct responses to radical Islam came from the group that named itself the Jaringan Islam Liberal (Liberal Islam Network, JIL) and that has actively sought and gained a high media profile. Supported by The Asia Foundation and the Freedom

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<sup>70</sup> Zainun Kamal et al., *Fiqih lintas agama: membangun masyarakat inklusif-pluralis [Inter-Religious Fiqh: Building an Inclusive Pluralistic Society]*, Jakarta: Yayasan Wakaf Paramadina, 2004. The book provoked a storm of protest, especially from conservative and Islamist circles. Paramadina withdrew it from circulation after the leading scholar on its advisory board, Quraisy Syihab, objected strongly to the passages endorsing mixed marriage. The Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia organized a panel debate on the book, at which those of the authors who were present were fiercely attacked; see the transcript in: Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (Ed.), *Kekafiran berfikir sekte Paramadina: dari debat publik fiqih lintas agama Majelis Mujahidin versus tim penulis Paramadina [The heathen thought of the Paramadina sect : from the public debate on inter-religious fiqh, Majelis Mujahidin versus Paramadina's team of authors]*, Yogyakarta: Wihdah Press, 2004.

<sup>71</sup> Farid Wajidi, “Syarikat dan eksperimen rekonsiliasi kulturalnya (sebuah pengamatan awal)” [“Syarikat and its Experiment of a Cultural Reconciliation (A First Observation)”], *Tashwirul Afkar* No. 15, 2003, pp. 55–79. See also van Bruinessen and Wajidi, “Syu’un ijtima’iyah”.

<sup>72</sup> Hasan Raid, *Pergulatan Muslim komunis: otobiografi Hasan Raid [The struggle of a communist Muslim: autobiography of Hasan Raid]*, Yogyakarta: LKPSM/Syarikat, 2001; H. Achmadi Moestahal, *Dari Gontor ke pulau Buru. Memoar H. Achmadi Moestahal [From the pesantren of Gontor to the prison island of Buru: the memoirs of H. Achmadi Moestahal]*, Yogyakarta: Syarikat, 2002.

Institute, the think tank of a major Indonesian business conglomerate, JIL campaigned for the acceptance of religious pluralism and against narrow, literalist interpretations of the faith. Countering the efforts of Islamist groups to combat local ritual adaptations and “deviant” sects, JIL bought time on television for the aforementioned short documentary that showed the rich variety of cultural expressions of Indonesian Islam and proudly proclaimed that “Islam has many colours”. The angry response by Islamists showed that the acceptance of pluralism was a crucial issue. Pluralism has remained one of the central themes in JIL’s later contributions to the public debate. Another and related theme concerned the need to understand Qur’anic verses and *hadith* in their proper context rather than believing them immediately applicable. (JIL contributors often contrasted “liberal Islam” and “literal Islam”.)

In terms of background and intellectual orientation of its members, the Liberal Islam Network is even more heterogeneous than the *pembaruan* movement, of which it is in some sense the successor. There is a small core group that frequently presents its own, often provocatively formulated, views and acts as a forum where others are invited to respond or present their own views, observations and comments. Several members of the core group have an NU background and a thorough education in the classical Islamic disciplines, besides a wide reading of less conventional literature. In an important sense, the group combines the intellectual strengths of the *pembaruan* and NU-based movements.

The most prominent member and most interesting thinker of the group, Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, is *pesantren*-educated and was active in an NU-affiliated NGO; he improved his Arabic in Jakarta at the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies (LIPIA, see note 52) and sharpened his analytical skills at the (Catholic) Academy of Philosophy. The clearest programmatic statement of the group is to be found in a newspaper column that Ulil wrote in 2002 and that in content and even in title echoes Nurcholish’ provocative speech, more than 30 years earlier: “Refreshing Islamic thought”.<sup>73</sup> It was a well-written piece that caused much controversy (and even led some self-appointed arbiters of orthodoxy to sentence Ulil to death for insulting Islam).

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<sup>73</sup> “Menyegarkan kembali pemikiran Islam”, originally published in the daily *Kompas*, 18 November 2002; reprinted in: Ulil Abshar-Abdallah, *Menjadi Muslim liberal [Becoming a Liberal Muslim]*, Jakarta: Nalar, 2005, pp. 3–10.

“I consider Islam as a living organism”, Ulil began his declaration, “and not as a dead monument erected in the seventh century...” There is a strong tendency these days to treat Islam as a monument, petrified and immutable, and it is time to challenge that attitude. We need interpretations that are non-literal, substantive, contextual and consonant with the heartbeat of a human civilization that is ever-changing. The substance of Islam should be separated from the culture of the Arabian peninsula, and it is that universal substance that has to be interpreted in accordance with the local cultural context. Whipping, stoning and the cutting of hands, the *jilbab* (full female covering) and beard are Arab cultural peculiarities and there is no reason why other Muslims should follow them. There is not really a detailed divine law, as most Muslims believe, but only the general principles known as *maqasid al-shari’a*, the objectives of Islamic law, and these basic values have to be given concrete content in accordance with the social and historical context. We have to learn to understand and accept that there cannot be a single interpretation of Islam that is the only or the most correct and final one. We must open ourselves to what is true and good, even if it comes from outside Islam. Islamic values can also be found in Christianity and the other major religions, and even in minor local religious traditions. Islam should be seen as a *process*, never completed and closed; new interpretations may emerge, and the major criterion to judge interpretations by is *maslaha*, i.e. what is beneficial to mankind.<sup>74</sup>

Such views are shared by many well-educated Muslims in Indonesia, although not all would state them with the same bluntness. Unlike the original *pembaruan* movement, which emerged in a favourable political context and enjoyed a degree of official protection, the Liberal Islam group has from its inception been in opposition to resurgent puritan and radical Islamist movements with significant political muscle, and it has engaged more directly and explicitly with their ideas and actions. Its style has been provocative and confrontational, but the arguments offered were sophisticated and based on a wide reading of Islamic as well as Western literature.

JIL retained the support of some of the older liberal and progressive intellectuals—notably of Abdurrahman Wahid who, until his death in December 2009, appeared regularly in the weekly radio talk show “Kongkow bareng Gus Dur”

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<sup>74</sup> This is a very summary translation of the first part of the text; much of the second part consists of a fierce critique of the Islamists’ project of implementing the Shariah as a ready-made solution for all problems and of their Manichaeian worldview that places “Islam” and “the West” in mutual opposition.

(“Chatting with Gus Dur”) broadcast by JIL. However, for a variety of reasons many other friends and allies left them, or at least distanced themselves from them. One reason was JIL’s close relationship with the Freedom Institute and its championing of neo-liberal economic policies that disproportionately hurt the poorer segments of society. When JIL members publicly announced that they supported abolishing fuel price subsidies as demanded by the IMF, they were not only denounced by populist Islamists as serving foreign interests and betraying Indonesia’s poor but also alienated most left-leaning progressives. Another reason was that JIL’s confrontational style created such a backlash that NGOs working at the grassroots level found their activities greatly impeded when people associated them with “liberal Islam”. This led to the paradoxical situation where even The Asia Foundation, which had initially been proud of supporting JIL, cut its ties with the Network because it believed the work of other Muslim NGOs that it sponsored to be endangered by JIL—paradoxical because for JIL’s Islamist opponents it was precisely its dependence on American funding that delegitimized JIL.

Since 2005, the news value of JIL has decreased; there have been no major new controversies. The JIL website, <http://islamlib.com/>, is still active and is regularly updated with interesting essays, but there are far fewer public activities organized by JIL than in the first years of its existence. Most members have moved on with their lives and now have their main activities elsewhere.

#### *Sufism and its popular adaptations*

Neither JIL nor the NU-based Muslim NGOs enjoy the broad following among the urban middle class that the *pembaruan* movement once had, nor the ability to define the terms of debate on Islamic issues. Islamists and conservatives have acquired a major share of media attention and the agenda-setting power that comes with it, but with the exception of the Islamist party PKS the Islamists appear to have lost some of the support they enjoyed in the early years of the twenty-first century. It is various shades of Sufism that appear to constitute the true successor of *pembaruan* as the preferred form of Islamic piety among the urban middle class.

The established orthodox Sufi orders, such as the Qadiriyya wa-Naqshbandiyya, which were long active in Indonesia, have found a new following among the urban middle class, as has the Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniyya of the Cypriot Shaykh Nazim and his U.S.-based deputy, Hisham Kabbani. Syncretistic local Sufi

movements, such as Kadisiyah and Haqmaliyah, have also new circles of educated urban followers, as well as individual spiritual teachers without organized orders. As during the New Order period, several prominent politicians have affiliated themselves with Sufi teachers, either because they feel it is spiritually beneficial or because it contributes to their influence.<sup>75</sup> Thus, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, feeling that he needed some form of Islamic legitimacy, affiliated himself with the Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniyya—a photograph of him apparently receiving *bay‘a* (initiation or vow of allegiance) from Shaykh Hisham Kabbani circulated widely in the Internet.

The latest fashion, however, is that of mass participation in *dhikr* rituals, communal recitations of prayers and other pious formulas, led by celebrity preachers such as Arifin Ilham or Habib Munzir al-Musawwa. Regular forums for such mass *dhikr* rituals have popped up around the country and business companies or local government authorities from time to time organize a collective *dhikr* session with a popular preacher as a form of thanksgiving or in order to deflate social tension. President Yudhoyono established his own *dhikr* community, the Majelis Dzikir SBY Nurussalam, which holds *dhikr* sessions attended by thousands but claims no less than 5 million members nationwide.<sup>76</sup> This was obviously just a means of organizing a visible Muslim following prior to the 2009 presidential elections, but the Majelis Dzikir continues its activities.

Besides such *dhikr* rituals, there are also mass recitals of the Qur’an and of popular devotional texts about the Prophet.<sup>77</sup> The recitations may be preceded by a short sermon, but unlike in the lectures and sermons of the *pembaruan* movement (or,

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<sup>75</sup> On the place of Sufism, orthodox or syncretistic, in the political culture of the New Order see: Martin van Bruinessen, “Saints, politicians and Sufi bureaucrats: mysticism and politics in Indonesia’s New Order”, in: Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell (Ed.), *Sufism and the “modern” in Islam*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2007, pp. 92–112.

<sup>76</sup> “Majelis Dzikir Pendukung SBY Klaim Dukungan 5 Juta Orang”, daily *Kompas*, 11 May 2009. Online at:

<http://edukasi.kompas.com/read/2009/05/11/20291055/Majelis.Dzikir.Pendukung.SBY.Klaim.Dukung.an.5.Juta.Orang> (accessed 6 July 2010). See also the dedicated Facebook page, <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=42197633335>.

<sup>77</sup> Mass Qur’an recitals were first introduced by the eccentric Gus Miek, a charismatic *kiai* believed to be a living saint, in the early 1990s. In mass meetings known as *Sema’an Qur’an Manteb*, the entire text of the Qur’an was recited in a single night by dozens of *hafiz* (memorisers, people who know the Qur’an by heart) while thousands of villagers attended and chanted along those passages that they remembered. Group recitals of stories of the birth of the Prophet (*Mawlid* or *Mulud*), especially the one known as Barzanji, have long been common in rural communities, not only around the birth date but also throughout the year. In the 2000s, such rituals were urbanised and gentrified, attracting entirely new audiences.



for that matter, Islamist preachers), the discursive content of the sermon appears not to be very important; it is the collective chanting, the altered state of consciousness that it produces and its cathartic effect, that are the purpose and meaning of these meetings—as well as the religious merit the recitations bring the participant (and, on another level, the legitimization and political capital they may bestow upon the organizer). Instead of discursive knowledge, these new religious meetings produce good feelings. Placed besides the various alternatives—Muslim intellectualism, liberal Islam, political Islam, Salafi Puritanism—this “feel-good Islam”, as I am inclined to call it, appears currently to have the strongest appeal.

## **Conclusion**

The conservative turn in Indonesian mainstream Islam, mentioned in the introduction to this article, owes much to the recent international developments that appear to confront Islam and the West as well as to power struggles of the post-Suharto period that gave relatively small Islamist groups considerable leverage. Furthermore, it is in part a defensive reaction to the perceived threat some of the liberal Muslim thinkers posed to established authorities and deeply-held beliefs. In the mainstream organizations, the liberal and progressive voices have, temporarily at least, been sidelined but they have by no means been silenced. Their arguments are heard and discussed in national and regional media, seminars and public debates, and disseminated at the grassroots in training courses given by a wide range of NGOs. The intellectual debate about Islam and how it can be made relevant to modern society is perhaps not as visible as it was in the 1990s, and many Muslim moderates may feel more attracted to Sufism-inspired spiritual ideas and ritual practices. However, in numerous local discussion circles, the intellectual debates continue and may be livelier and reaching more people than ever before.

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