

Martin van Bruinessen, "Indonesia's ulama and politics: caught between legitimising the status quo and searching for alternatives", *Prisma — The Indonesian Indicator* (Jakarta), No. 49 (1990), 52-69.

Indonesia's Ulama and Politics: Caught Between Legitimising the Status Quo And Searching for Alternatives

The relationship between *ulama*, 'men of Islamic learning,' and *umara*, 'holders of political power,' has always been ambivalent. On the one hand, ulama at least in the Sunni tradition have always provided religious legitimation for the de facto power holders. On the other hand, there is also a general awareness that power corrupts and that proximity to those in power impairs the ulama's moral authority and the integrity of their learning. There is a well-known *hadith* to that effect, often quoted in popular sermons: "the worst among the ulama are those who go and see the umara, while the best among the umara are those who come and see the ulama." It has been pointed out that this *hadith* is actually 'weak' (*da'if*), meaning that its attribution to the Prophet is considered very dubious.^[1] The fact that it is frequently quoted by ulama and popular preachers in Indonesia nevertheless indicates that the saying expresses something about which they have strong feelings.

In a recent research project on the Indonesian ulama's worldview, about half the ulama interviewed volunteered this *hadith* when asked what was the correct form of Islam-state relations.^[2] Moral, economic and political independence (*kemandirian*) vis-à-vis the government is a quality that almost all respondents considered essential. At the same time, most respondents also admitted that they failed to meet their own ideal standards in this respect. The attitude of many government authorities, especially at the local level, who tend to interpret any indication of independence as a form of opposition, does not make it any easier for ulama to consistently define their positions.

This is not to say that all ulama agree on the nature and degree of independence required, or on what the umara should come and see the ulama for. Few would go as far as Warsidi, the spiritual leader of a disaffected group in Lampung, who when summoned by the *camat* (district governor) to account for his reportedly anti-government sermons, answered with the above *hadith*, adding that he had more important things to do and that the *camat* should come to his house if he wished to see him.^[3] But it is generally agreed that the purport of the *hadith* is that ulama should not seek favour, and that the government should ideally consult them on all matters of importance. Many if not most ulama are quite satisfied with an occasional courtesy visit by local government authorities. It has become common for ulama to be invited to say a prayer at the inauguration of government-sponsored projects, and many ulama are still quite happy with this division of labour. Only a minority feels that ulama should be involved at an earlier stage, in the selection and planning of projects.

More problematic is the not uncommon situation where ulama are invited to take part in a campaign to popularise a government programme, such as family planning. This situation is especially painful because many ulama, while publicly supporting the idea of contraception, privately still have reservations. The government's efforts to involve the ulama in this and other development programmes in order to lend them religious legitimation have at times caused these ulama some moral discomfort although this was no doubt

attenuated by various forms of compensation.

Even if the ulama are not required to say or do anything against their inner convictions, they may feel uncomfortable if closely associated with the government. One learned and generally respected ulama, who leads a small *pesantren* not far from Jakarta, told me:

“you’d better just call me a *kiai*, not an ulama. A real ulama has to be uncompromising and is therefore usually disliked by worldly authorities. On the other hand, I am liked by government people: they often ask me to come and give sermons, and I oblige them. I feel I don’t deserve to be called an ulama...”

This ulama (I believe he nonetheless deserves the title) is neither a government opponent in disguise nor an accommodationist out of fear or personal ambition. He carefully maintains his economic independence by politely but resolutely refusing government aid to himself or his *pesantren*. Although critical of some policies, he is nevertheless generally in favour of the government. However, he does feel that he should maintain a greater distance than he actually does. He speaks, I believe, for many of his colleagues, although few express themselves as candidly as he does.

Such displays of self-sufficiency are much praised but have now become relatively rare. Especially since the Nahdlatul Ulama organisation broke its formal ties with the (then) Muslim party PPP in 1984, many *kiai*, ‘religious leaders,’ have established relations with Golkar and through this channel received government funds and other facilities. Among the other ulama too, dependence on the state has on the whole been gradually increasing under the New Order. This has at times caused some alienation between the *ummah* (the ‘community of believers’) and the more accommodationist ulama, and has contributed to the popularity of those ulama who have maintained a critical distance from the government. The purpose of this article is to describe the various types of Indonesian ulama and their organisations, and to explore their ambiguous relationship with the state.

Ulama and Politics: The Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)

The most obvious example of ulama involvement in politics is of course the Nahdlatul Ulama organisation, which was a political party from 1952 (when it broke away from Masyumi) until its fusion in 1973 with three other Muslim parties in the PPP; it remained an integral component of this party until 1984.

The NU is a unique phenomenon, not just in Indonesia but probably in the entire Muslim world, an organisation controlled by ulama that has a real mass following. It is the country’s largest organisation, with firm roots in the population (especially in East Java, Central Java and South Kalimantan), and is the object of very strong, almost primordial, loyalties. It has, more successfully than any other organisation, survived the New Order’s ‘floating mass’ policies of depoliticisation and demobilisation by the banning of party activities at sub-regency levels. Although it has usually been highly accommodating towards the government, in conformity with the Sunni political tradition, its strong mass base has been a matter of concern and even suspicion on the part of the New Order government. This was a major factor, though not the only one, contributing to its farewell to ‘practical politics’ in 1984.

The NU had been established in 1926 by ulama based in *pesantrens*, ‘religious schools,’ with the aim of safeguarding and promoting traditional Islam as embodied in the four orthodox Sunni schools of legal

thought (*madzhab*)^[4] and laid down in the traditional texts studied in the pesantren, the *kitab kuning* then under attack by reformist and modernist Muslims. It grew into a large interest group representing the pesantren milieu, and was both held together by the charisma of the senior kiai and cemented by intricate bonds of patronage between teachers and former disciples. Although the ulama represent but a small fraction of NU's members and activists, they have always considered it their organisation, a claim recognised in theory by all members. Supreme authority is in the hands of its central board (*Syuriah*), headed by the *Rois Aam* (director-general). Day-to-day matters are left to the executive board (*Tanfidziyah*), whose members are not necessarily Ulama, but which is responsible to the *Syuriah*. There has often been a cultural as well as geographical gap between both boards, the former based primarily in East Javanese pesantren, the latter based in the capital and directly involved in national political life. Participation in parliamentary politics in the past brought the NU many rewards, especially when the party kept supporting Sukarno during the Guided Democracy period.^[5] From 1953 to 1971 all Ministers of Religious Affairs were prominent NU members; the Ministry became an NU fortress, giving the party much patronage to dispense in the form of employment and other facilities. The Ministry supervised all religious education and it was an NU minister, Saifuddin Zuhri, who presided over the rapid increase of Institutes of Higher Islamic Education (IAIN) during the 1960's. NU's members of parliament (and later provincial and district councils) were obviously also in a position to dispense patronage.

It has often been remarked that NU was more patronage-oriented than any other party. Patronage cemented the ties between members and activists, and it was through patronage, not ideas or programmes, that Muslims from outside the pesantren milieu were drawn into the NU.^[6] These recruits were necessary because the pesantren did not produce enough people with the qualifications needed for the NU to operate as a political party. Locally too, the NU depended on others than ulama alone. Local branches were financially supported by landlords, traders and other entrepreneurs, in exchange for the local kiai's blessing and usually also other, more worldly rewards. It was the *Tanfidziyah* that channeled most patronage, giving it control over the local branches. These forms of patronage were more tangible than the primarily moral patronage dispensed by the kiai to their followers, which was the initial source for the NU's cohesion.

This was a situation that bore the seeds of conflict between the kiai and politicians. In the New Order's first elections in 1971, the NU proved to be the most formidable rival to the government-sponsored Golkar organisation (Ward 1974). The young and controversial leader Subchan, who was disliked by many kiai because of his easygoing life-style but was immensely popular among rank-and-file NU members, set the tone for a campaign in which the party was uncharacteristically confrontational. Subchan, who had no NU family background, had been the only NU leader to play a part in the establishment of the New Order, after which the 1968 party congress elected him the *Tanfidziyah*'s second-in-command. His scathing criticism of emerging undemocratic tendencies in the New Order and his strong defence of the NU against the Golkar offensive was probably the major reason for his re-election at the 1971 congress, in spite of a virtual veto by the *Rois Aam* of the day, Bisri Syansuri. This was a definite sign of defiance towards the government and perhaps the first case where the ulama's control of the NU was openly challenged by the branches. However, a month later Subchan was expelled from the board by the *Rois Aam* and the *Tanfidziyah*'s chairman, Idham Chalid.^[7]

Under the latter pliable politician, *Tanfidziyah* chairman since 1955, the NU sought to re-establish good relations with the government. The government showed its confidence in him by making him speaker of parliament. However, Idham Chalid's new official function could not compensate for an important loss: the government took the single major source of patronage away from the NU, appointing as Minister of Religious Affairs a neutral and unaffiliated scholar, A. Mukti Ali. Other sources of patronage through parliamentary representation also gradually dried up, as the NU was forced into a fusion with the other

Muslim parties (1973). The new United Development Party (PPP) was from 1978 dominated by Djaelani Naro, a shrewd political operator without personal popular support but with strong government backing. Naro made sure that he was the fountainhead for all patronage, and set out to systematically weaken the voice of the NU within the party. In 1982, Naro's blatant manipulation of the list of candidates effectively blocked the NU's most vocal spokesmen from re-election. Under these circumstances, there was little benefit in further participation in parliamentary politics. The event strengthened the hands of those who wished, for a variety of reasons, that the NU should leave the arena of 'practical politics.'

From Opposition to Withdrawal

Naro's attempts to undermine the parliamentary strength of the NU were not unrelated to the fact that the NU had clashed with the government several times during the 1970s. More successfully than the other parties, NU had prevented Golkar from making significant incursions into its electorate. The NU ulama had enforced loyalty upon their peers and followers by various means. The few ulama who went over to Golkar were successfully isolated: in 1977 and again in 1982 ulama issued *fatwa* (authoritative opinions) declaring the vote for PPP a religious duty for all believers. In 1973 the Rois Aam, Bisri Syansuri, spoke out firmly against a controversial draft marriage law, which contained several paragraphs that according to him were in conflict with the *shari`a* (Islamic legal code). The NU parliamentarians, following him, rejected these paragraphs and forced a modification of the law. Most spectacularly, in the 1978 National Assembly, which was to ratify the broad guidelines of government policy (GBHN) for the next five years, NU representatives openly opposed the government on two issues that were clearly important to it. This concerned the obligatory *Pancasila* indoctrination courses that the government was considering and the official recognition of syncretistic Javanese mystical sects (*aliran kepercayaan*). The NU deputies knew that their opposition on these issues would not be successful, but rather than being outvoted, they demonstratively walked out of the Assembly when these points were put to the vote, and they were followed by many other PPP members. As with the marriage law, the NU politicians acted under instructions from the ulama (more precisely, the *Rois Aam*), who declared that these were 'matters of principle, on which no compromise was acceptable.'^[8] This was the most open show of defiance ever seen in New Order Indonesia, and it was to have far-reaching consequences. Accommodationists on principle though the NU ulama are, they had signalled that issues of central concern to Islam were non-negotiable.

The NU's defiance provoked presidential anger and a lasting distrust of the NU's loyalty to the state. It may well have been the major reason for the imposition of *Pancasila* as the sole foundation for political parties and social associations, announced in 1983 and made into law in 1985. To the surprise of many observers, who had begun to see the NU as the most radical critic of New Order modernisation, the NU did not resist or even protest then. It was the first major organisation to formally make the *Pancasila* instead of Islam its sole foundation. If critics accused them of being inconsistent, NU ulama could respond that now no matter of principle was involved. They had devised a formula, acceptable to the government, that allowed them to formally comply with the new law without sacrificing an inch of their commitment to Islam. Basically this meant redefining what 'foundation' meant. The clause in the statutes stating that the NU was based on Islam was replaced by 'based on *Pancasila*,' but was followed by new clauses on the creed (*aqidah*) and aims of the organisation, which allowed it to maintain its identity unchanged. The leading NU ulama convinced themselves that these changes meant nothing more than reasserting their loyalty to the Indonesian state in its present form, which they had never questioned.

This compromise was not reached without conflict and a change of personnel in the NU leadership. Bisri Syansuri, the *Rois Aam* who had several times defied the government, died in 1980. He was the last

survivor of the East Javanese ulama who had founded the NU in 1926, and there was no one of equal reputation to succeed him. A conference of ulama chose as his successor the respected but not particularly well-known Ali Makshum of Yogyakarta, a senior but modern-minded kiai. Ali Maksum and other senior ulama were much displeased by the way Naro had treated the NU prior to the 1982 elections, and even more so when it appeared that Idham Chalid, the *Tanfidziyah* chairman, had connived in the manipulation of the list of candidates. Less openly expressed, but equally important, was the fact that Idham had increasingly less patronage to dispense; many kiai felt that he did not deliver what they expected from him. Clearly determined to re-establish the ulama's control of the NU, the senior ulama virtually forced Idham Chalid to resign from the *Tanfidziyah* and organised an ulama's conference in 1983 where the NU's farewell to parliamentary politics was decided.^[9]

The NU's departure from the PPP was phrased in positive terms as a 'return to the *khittah* (programme of action) of 1926,' which seemed to imply a restitution of the organisation to the ulama. Individual NU members still could join any party they liked, but board members were banned from holding positions in PPP (or any other party). The idea of the *khittah* and the formulation of what this amounted to originated with an atypical kiai whose star was rapidly rising, Achmad Siddiq of Jember.^[10] It was Achmad Siddiq who presented at this conference, to an initially unsympathetic audience, the compromise formula for accepting the Pancasila as the NU's sole foundation. Due to the support of the senior kiai, Achmad Siddiq's arguments were accepted by the conference as the NU's chief doctrine. The 1984 congress confirmed the new formulation of state-*ummah* relations by electing Achmad Siddiq as the Rois Aam.

Various groups within the NU had different reasons for the retreat from practical politics, reasons which happened to coincide. Many ulama felt that the political struggle had diverted too much attention from what they saw as their real tasks, the spiritual guidance and education of the *ummah*. A small but influential group of ulama and intellectuals, concerned about the lopsided effects of 'top-down' development and aware that the mass following of the NU was to be found among the less privileged, had become interested in alternative development models, in 'bottom-up' and more participatory development. They felt that the pesantren could and should also be centres of community development, besides being centres of traditional learning. There were also more pragmatic reasons for a formal break with politics. Many of the traders and entrepreneurs supporting the NU suffered from the suspicion that the NU was 'disloyal,' especially since 1978. Overzealous local government officials not only kept them out of government projects but at times even put pressure on private business partners as well. Many kiai too were discontented: the stream of patronage through PPP-NU channels was drying up, while they saw that government aid was easily available to colleagues who had gone over to Golkar. The depoliticisation of the NU satisfied all these interests: the government perceived that the NU had left the opposition benches; NU contractors got their tenders; the senior ulama felt they had a better grip on the organisation; while kiai could establish relations with the bupati or camat or with the Golkar organisations, without feeling disloyal towards the NU.

Not all kiai withdrew from PPP. Some the most vocal of them, such as Syansuri Badawi, a very popular teacher at the Tebuireng pesantren in Jombang, are still very active in the party, and in the recent reshuffle in the PPP's leadership several NU members attained leading positions. Some of the old, 'political' patronage links are still intact or are perhaps being revived. But the past five years have seen the creation of many new links of patronage, linking kiai (and allied businessmen) with the local government apparatus. On the whole, it seems that the kiai have thus become less dependent on the NU; what ties them to the organisation is simple loyalty, fostered by teacher-pupil bonds. It remains to be seen whether the NU will be able to maintain its formal strength in the absence of more tangible forms of patronage.

Other Ulama: Muballigh, Officials, Intellectuals

The pesantren-based kiai are, of course, not the only ulama in Indonesia, although they are the most easily identified group. Restricting a discussion of ulama and politics to the NU would, however, be to oversee some of the most important developments in Indonesian Islam. If we define ulama as ‘men (or women) of religious learning who, in one form or another, serve the spiritual needs of the *ummah*,’ it is obvious that there is a wide range of ulama with different functions and standing in different relations to politics. In 19th century Java one could make a simple dichotomy, between government ulama (*panghulu*), serving at the courts or government centres as judges, mosque officials, etc., and the independent teachers (*pesantren* kiai and itinerant preachers), who usually took care to maintain their geographical and social distance from the government. The situation is more complicated now.

For analytical purposes the same dichotomy may still be used, but many individual ulama take part in both government-sponsored and independent activities. This is because government involvement in religious affairs is much more pervasive than in colonial times. The *panghulu* have been succeeded by the sizeable bureaucracies of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Islamic Courts and the Indonesian Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia), while a significant proportion of religious education at all levels is paid for (and controlled) by the state. As mentioned above, many pesantren have been only too willing to receive government aid, in spite of the high value attached to independence and self-sufficiency.

The real heirs to the tradition of independent Islamic learning, in my view, are not so much the present kiai or their reformist counterparts but Muslim intellectuals, academics who often specialise in non-Islamic subjects but have a profound knowledge of and strong commitment to Islam. The most prominent of these form the subject of a later section of this article. In terms of direct social influence, the most important role has perhaps been that of the vast army of *muballigh*, preachers delivering sermons in mosques, private homes, hotels, public squares and government offices, from the largest cities down to the most distant villages. There are *muballigh* of all shades affiliated with all the different tendencies in Indonesian Islam, university graduates as well as poorly educated preachers, loyal government servants as well as severe critics of the government, addressing all the various strata of society from the political and business elite to peasant women, *becak* (pedicab) drivers or prostitutes. This form of *dakwah*, ‘religious propaganda,’ is not new, of course; it was known well before Independence. But under the New Order it has reached unprecedented dimensions, in part because many former political activists devoted all their energies to this field.

Dakwah has been, I believe, the most important Muslim activity under the New Order. Together, these *muballigh* have changed the face of Indonesian Islam; they have strengthened Muslim awareness. If there is now a much wider interest in Islam and in what it means to be a good Muslim, this is probably not due to the few highly learned ulama or stimulating Muslim thinkers, but to the numerous less well-known *muballigh*.

Reformist Islam, Politics and the Power of Dakwah

In the past, the political vehicle of reformist Islam had been Masyumi, the other major Muslim party (besides the NU).^[11] In the NU milieu, descent from a kiai, control of a pesantren, and even a particular style of dress may have been more important than actual learning for recognition as an ulama. But among reformist Muslims there was no easily identifiable class of ulama. The reformists of the early 20th century objected to the monopoly of religious authority claimed by the kiai, and they rejected much of the

scholastic tradition on which these claims were based. They believed that every Muslim with sufficient knowledge of the Qur'an and *hadith* should be able to make his own judgments. There was no class of learned specialists who could claim ultimate control of the Muhammadiyah, for instance, as was the case with the NU. We therefore find among the reformists no sharp distinction between ulama and social activists or politicians. Several of the Masyumi's leading politicians, such as Mohammad Natsir and Sjafruddin Prawiranegara, were at the same time its leading religious thinkers. Both were creative thinkers, who made important contributions to Indonesian Muslim thought. In their political ideas, they were not so much heirs to the accommodationist Sunni tradition as to western democratic thought.^[12] This political style repeatedly brought the Masyumi into conflict with the increasingly authoritarian Sukarno. After the involvement of several Masyumi leaders in the abortive PRRI rebellion (1958) and the refusal of the party to disavow them, the Masyumi was threatened with a ban and decided to dissolve itself (1960). Under the New Order, a new party, the Partai Muslimin Indonesia, was established to represent the Masyumi's constituency. But the government forbade the leading Masyumi politicians from taking part in it.^[13] Many lesser Masyumi figures remained active in this party; others were co-opted into Golkar; smaller numbers turned from politics to mysticism or apolitical sectarianism. Some of the most prominent leaders of the Masyumi, however, made a high-profile shift from politics to *dakwah*.

Banned from active participation in political life, in 1967 Natsir and his close associates established the Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia, Indonesia's major *dakwah* organisation. Their turn from politics to *dakwah* was probably not simply due to the lack of an alternative, but was also inspired by political experiences of the 1950s. The Muslim parties had fought hard for acceptance of the Jakarta Charter in the Constituent Assembly in 1958 but had failed to achieve a parliamentary majority, which meant that many if not most Indonesian Muslims were not interested in or even averse to subjecting themselves to the *shari`a*.^[14] It must have seemed an obvious conclusion that the way to change lay not in parliament but in a transformation of the attitude of the Muslim community, which could be brought about by intensive *dakwah*. Be that as it may, the Dewan Dakwah, with its network of mosques and preachers and its various publications, became an important channel of communication, allowing the voice of Natsir and his associates to be widely heard. They often spoke out on political issues, and were not reluctant to criticise the government. Sjafruddin and Natsir, to name just these two, often irritated more pliable Muslims by their uncompromising attitudes. But they won a grudging admiration as well. Their almost unrivalled moral authority only increased with the years. Natsir through the Dewan and Sjafruddin through the Korps Muballigh Indonesia, which he led, inspired numerous younger muballigh, who put much social and political criticism into their sermons. The Dewan Dakwah group has long enjoyed excellent relations with Saudi Arabia: Natsir was a founding member and for many years a Vice-president of the Saudi-sponsored World Islamic League (*Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami*), and he was the trusted counterpart of this organisation for all its funding activities in Indonesia.^[15] This relationship no doubt had its benefits, in the form of support and international connections as well as added prestige among Indonesian Muslims. But there was also a drawback that became clear during the 1980s. Whereas the Masyumi leaders had been religious socialists in the 1950s, they were now allied with the most conservative force in the Muslim world. This must have been the major factor that determined their extremely negative attitude towards the Iranian revolution and towards Shi'ism. The Dewan Dakwah sponsored various rabidly anti-Shi'i publications (some of them written by Dewan authors). This cut them off from large segments of the young generation of committed Muslims, who were fascinated by the revolution and discovered much of interest in modern Shi'i authors like Shari'ati and Mutahhari.

The most interesting contributions to Muslim thought in Indonesia in the past two decades have been made by a small and heterogenous group of mostly university-based Muslim intellectuals. One is tempted to speak of a new type of ulama, although they have predecessors. They are highly educated, in most cases in other than traditional Islamic disciplines, and have had extensive exposure to foreign cultures, but are also more widely read in Islamic literature than earlier generations. The major focus of their interests is on the social teachings of Islam. They have in common a concern with social justice and the social and economic well-being of the *ummah*, although their perceptions and interpretations appear to differ rather widely. Some of them receive more media exposure than others, reflecting different degrees of acceptability to the authorities, but they all have large followings among students and other young people. They are frequently invited to deliver sermons and speeches. This ensures that their ideas become widely known (be it sometimes in distorted form) and stimulate discussion throughout the country. In an era of depoliticisation, they have pointed out a whole range of new issues that Muslims should address. As the title of the first overview of these Muslim intellectuals has put it, they have "opened up new roads for Islam" (Ali and Effendy, 1986). It is impossible to do justice to these thinkers and their ideas in a short survey like this; only the barest sketch can be given. Several of the presently most prominent thinkers among them first came to the fore around 1970 in discussions in the Muslim students' union, HMI, in Jakarta and in a discussion group in Yogyakarta around the McGill-educated scholar A. Mukti Ali (who was made the Minister of Religion in 1971). They became associated with the catchword *pembaharuan*, which means 'renewal' but is perhaps better rendered as 'reorientation,' for that is really what they thought. A good insight into their concerns and views and the questions they posed in the formative stage of this movement is provided by the diary of Ahmad Wahib, which was published posthumously after he died in a traffic accident.^[16] It found an enthusiastic reading public among a new generation of students. What immediately strikes one in these notes is the sincere quest for the true, deeper meaning of Islam and its relevance to human society, as well as a deep dissatisfaction with the external forms and ingrained habits that have taken the place of reflection and real spirituality.

The leading spokesman of the *pembaharuan* movement, Nurcholish Madjid, caused passionate debate by his call for what he named 'secularisation,' a term much misunderstood and therefore fiercely attacked by people who felt that Islam itself was under threat.^[17] What he apparently meant was that institutions such as the Muslim party had come to be considered as sacred institutions, integral parts of religion. An Islamic way of life and Islamic morality, he argued, did not necessitate Muslim parties and Muslim politicking. Another important element in his ideas was tolerance of and respect for other religions: he was one of the first Indonesian Muslim thinkers to free himself of the common apologetic and defensive attitude towards Christianity. These two strains in his thought were congenial to two key New Order policies, depoliticisation and the prevention of strife between the various religions, which no doubt contributed to the amount of sympathetic media coverage the *pembaharuan* group has received. The group have often been considered the New Order's chief Muslim legitimisers, although there was nothing mercenary in their attitudes. They kept meeting through the 1970s and 1980s and further developing their ideas, although pursuing diverging careers. Several of them put their ideas on the social relevance of Islam into practice as activists in non-government organisations active in community development.

Nurcholish, who remains the leading thinker of the *pembaharuan* movement, pursued further studies in theology and Islamic philosophy at Chicago University under Fazlur Rahman. A specialist of Ibn Taymiyya's thought, he has made important contributions to raising the intellectual level of Muslim discourse in Indonesia by making several hitherto unknown classical Muslim thinkers known to the Indonesian public (for instance, the collection of important texts in translation published upon his return from Chicago: Madjid, 1984). Much influenced by the sociological thought of men like Robert Bellah and Marshall Hodgson, he has a keen awareness that religious teachings should be placed in their proper social

context. Convinced that democracy can only develop when it is borne by a broad middle class, one of his concerns has been how to develop a strong Muslim middle class in Indonesia. This is perhaps why much of his effort now goes into his foundation, Paramadina, which caters to the spiritual needs of the Muslim middle class. Its public *pengajian*, 'religious study sessions,' to which Muslim thinkers of quite various backgrounds are invited as speakers and in which difference of opinion is presented as a most natural thing, are among the most liberal discussion forums in Jakarta.

A highly interesting and nonconformist Muslim thinker with some links to the *pembaharuan* group, who cannot, however, be easily pigeonholed, is Abdurrahman Wahid, the present chairman of the NU. As the grandson of two of the NU's founding fathers, Hasyim Asy'ari and Bisri Syansuri, and the son of the NU's first Minister of Religious Affairs, Wahid Hasyim, he enjoys firm traditional legitimacy for leadership in NU circles, although he is hardly representative of traditional ulama. Having been exposed to both a western-style and a pesantren education, as well as to higher studies in fiqh and literature in Egypt and Iraq, he is the ideal cultural broker between traditional, reformist and secular Muslims. One of his chief concerns is with the economic and intellectual backwardness of large segments of the Indonesian *ummah*. He was one of the driving forces behind the effort to turn the pesantren into centres of community development (working together with members of the *pembaharuan* movement such as Dawam Rahardjo, the long-time director of LP3ES). He is associated with a large number of non-government organisations that are active in rural development. A fierce critic of narrow-mindedness, he argues that Islam stands for universal values also found in other religions, such as justice, equality, and the protection of every individual's rights, but he does not prescribe any specific system of political or economic organisation. More vocally than Nurcholish, he insists that the Qur'an should be understood within its historical and social context and that one does not have to adopt Arab habits in order to be a good Muslim, which has occasionally made him the target of fierce criticism.^[18] Like Nurcholish, he is open to dialogue with other religions, to the extent of addressing a recent meeting of Protestant churchmen, openly speaking about shortcomings of the Muslim community. Through his numerous provocative statements, usually widely reported, he has stimulated the emergence of independent thought among the young generation. The recent NU congress (November 1989) showed that, in spite of criticism by some of the older kiai, he enjoys the massive support of the rank-and-file of his organisation.

A young Muslim thinker with a very different style, who has always stood aloof from the *pembaharuan* movement, is Amien Rais, an American-educated political scientist lecturing at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta. As a young Muhammadiyah activist, he was influenced by the ideas of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, about whom he later wrote a thesis. Close to the Dewan Dakwah, he has always been critical of the accommodationism of the *pembaharuan* group and many of their contextualising ideas. He has avoided association with government authorities. His writings (some of which are collected in Rais 1987) show apprehension about the threats to Islam posed by imperialism, zionism, orientalism, westernisation and secularisation. One of his major concerns, however, is with social justice and economic equality, and on these issues he is closer to Abdurrahman Wahid's position than both seem to realise. One of his best-known theses, defended in many forums, is that the Islamic institution of *zakat*, being a mechanism of economic redistribution, should be adapted to present needs. Instead of the canonical 2.5 per cent of net earnings, the higher income brackets should contribute at least 20 per cent in order to fulfil the proper aims of the divine command. Presently a member of Muhammadiyah's board, Amien Rais may play an important part in helping this organisation to recover its initial spirit of social reform and redefine its present social tasks.

The international development that had the largest impact on Indonesian Muslim thought in the 1980s was no doubt the Iranian revolution. Due to the widespread interest it generated, writings of Iranian thinkers

like Shari'ati and Mutahhari were soon translated and found a wide readership, influencing several of Indonesia's leading Muslim thinkers. Compared to the dour writings of the likes of Maududi and Qutb, that had given an earlier generation their ideas of political Islam, these texts have a striking freshness and social relevance. Amien Rais was one of Shari'ati's early admirers, translating and introducing a number of his essays. Several of his own writings also show the influence of both Shari'ati and Bani Sadr.

The man who soon emerged as the chief guru and spokesman of Indonesia's admirers of contemporary Shi'i thought, however, was a young Bandung lecturer in mass communications, Jalaluddin Rahmat. His Shi'i sympathies initially caused him to be banned from speaking in the Salman mosque, the chief centre of Bandung's committed Muslim students, but this did not prevent him from becoming the most popular preacher in student circles, with a large, devoted following. Widely read in classical as well as modern Sunni and Shi'i literature, and also a good orator and debater, he has made his mark in many public discussions. His interest in Shi'ism was initially generated by its emphasis on social justice, the modern Iranian authors' concern with the *mustad'afin* (the 'oppressed'), and their opposition to the status quo. These are the concerns expressed in many of his own sermons and writings (see the selection in Rahmat 1986), and it is this that made him popular among many of the politically disaffected young. [19]

The growing influence of Shi'i thought in Indonesia is, obviously, a matter of concern both to the government, perceiving its oppositional potential, and to many of the traditional and (especially) reformist ulama, who consider Shi'ism an intolerable heresy. It is undeniable, however, that the acquaintance with Shi'i thought, of both religio-political and philosophical kind, has enlivened and enriched Muslim discourse in Indonesia and stimulated serious intellectual discussion.

'Government Ulama': *The Majelis Ulama Indonesia*

The Muslim political parties, representing various categories of 'independent' ulama, were long the major interface between the committed Muslim community and the government. As we have seen, the role of these parties has been significantly reduced under the New Order. Feeling the need for an alternative channel of communication with the Muslim community, in 1975 the government established a national Council of Ulama, the 'Majelis Ulama Indonesia' (MUI). Although officially meant to facilitate two-way communication, in practice the council's function is, as aptly formulated by the present Minister of Religion, "to translate government policy into a language that the *ummah* understands." [20] Its functions are reminiscent of the traditional office of the *shaykh al-islam*, issuing *fatwa* to legitimise government policies; its ability to modify these policies is only very marginal.

Although the Majelis Ulama is a government-appointed body, most members are recruited from among the 'independent' ulama and relatively few belong to the bureaucracy of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. All major currents of mainstream Indonesian Islam are represented, including quite a few former Masyumi activists (the present chairman, KH. Hasan Basri, is in fact a former Masyumi man, who, unlike many others, has never renounced this affiliation). Many members appear to take part in the Majelis not out of opportunism but in the belief that, in a delicate balancing act between legitimating and influencing policies, they may serve the interests of the *ummah*.

This Ulama Council has had precursors. In the 1950s, when the Army was trying to win the hearts and minds of the West Javanese people in its struggle against those Muslims fighting for an Islamic state, the Darul Islam, the army command organised several meetings with regional ulama, demanding their political co-operation. In 1958 the provincial Ulama Council was established, consisting of ulama and military

personnel and with mainly security-oriented functions (Mahmuddin, 1975). In 1962 a similar body was established at the national level as a means to improve Muslim support for Sukarno's policies (Noer 1978: 65-66). The first New Order Ulama Council was again established under similar circumstances, in Aceh in 1965-66. At the time of the anti-communist operations following the failed Untung coup, the military commander of Aceh demanded some leading ulama to issue a fatwa allowing the killing of communists. Since these did not dare to take that responsibility alone, 56 leading ulama from all over the province were invited to an extraordinary congress (17-18 December 1965), that issued the requested fatwa, resulting in large-scale killing. The same congress decided to perpetuate its existence in the form of Aceh's Ulama Council.[\[21\]](#)

The present central MUI does not serve such direct military and security-related purposes, but it is nevertheless a highly political body. As indicated by the theme given to its founding conference in 1975 ('Ulama and Development'), it was created as a means of mobilising Muslim support for the government's development policies. Its working programme listed three broad objectives: the strengthening of religion, understood in the Pancasila way, as a basis of national resilience; the participation of ulama in the development effort; and the maintenance of harmonious relations with the other religions.[\[22\]](#) In practice, it has at times been requested to do more than that.

The Council gave a remarkable demonstration of one of its political functions in November 1988, when top members were flown to East Java, with the director-general of the Ministry of Religion, to drink milk at a press conference. In the preceding weeks, lists of food products supposedly containing pork fat or gelatin (frequently made of pig skin and bones) had been circulating, and received a considerable amount of press coverage. The list included the products of three large companies in which highly placed persons are widely believed to have important interests, and their sales declined rapidly. It was suspected that the campaign against these products had a political background.[\[23\]](#) MUI committees then visited these factories and declared that all ingredients used were *halal* ('permissible'); in the case of the milk and the noodles, they went to the extent of consuming them before the press and praising their quality.[\[24\]](#)

It would be unfair to the MUI to claim that this incident exemplifies its subservience to other interests. The MUI also serves other functions, issuing fatwa on more strictly religious subjects as well as problems of the modern age, giving guidance to the *ummah* and protecting it against heterodox doctrines (condemning deviant sects is one favourite activity of both the central MUI and its provincial 'daughters'). It also represents the Muslim community in meetings with representatives of other religions. Membership of the MUI of course brings personal rewards, but many leading members sincerely believe that it allows them to do something useful for the *ummah*. Their position, however, obliges them to sometimes make uneasy compromises, which leaves them vulnerable to criticism from the *ummah*. The first MUI chairman, the prolific author and well-known reformist ulama, Hamka, resigned in 1981 over a *fatwa* that the government deemed unacceptable but which he refused to rescind. His successors have been more cautious.

The most emotional issue over which the Council and the *ummah* have been at odds in recent years was the government-sponsored soccer tote, Porkas ('forecast') and its successor of other names. In practice this tote, which was started in 1986, functioned as a lottery and provided Indonesia's only legal form of gambling. Muslim protest was immediate, with preachers all over the country demanding a ban of Porkas. Both the Muhammadiyah and the NU declared it a form of gambling and therefore *haram* ('forbidden'). Several provincial Ulama Councils followed suit, and asked the government to stop the tote. The central MUI long kept silent, considering it a matter on which the ulama's legal opinion was divided. But it finally sent a carefully phrased letter to the Coordinating Minister of Social Welfare (the former Minister of Religion, General Alamsyah), not condemning the tote on religious grounds but asking the government to

'review' its policy considering its negative social impact. The head of the MUI's *fatwa* committee, Prof. Ibrahim Hosen, had meanwhile produced arguments to the effect that the form of gambling forbidden by Islam, *maysir* (a gambling-match between two persons in which one's gain is the other's loss), differed in kind from lottery, so that Porkas was permissible. This produced an outcry from committed Muslims. Independent ulama refuted Hosen's arguments and issued fatwa condemning the tote. The government made it clear it intended to continue the Porkas because it needed its considerable contribution to the budget for sports and youth affairs. Several leading members of the MUI were known to have very strong feelings about the Porkas privately, but they refrained from raising their voices in spite of continuing pressure from all Muslim circles to take a clear stand. More than anything else, the Porkas affair has caused the MUI the loss of the confidence of large segments of the Muslim community.[25]

Another field in which the MUI has played an important part is the family planning programme. There was initially much resistance to the very idea of family planning, some of which was religiously motivated. Ulama were requested to join government officials in campaigns to propagate the programme, and later the MUI was asked for a fatwa in its support. Although many ulama privately had their doubts or were strongly opposed to the idea of contraception on religious grounds,[26] the government found sufficient numbers willing to take part in the campaigns, which seems to have contributed considerably to their success. Among those accepting family planning in principle, there was considerable disagreement about the use of intra-uterine devices (IUD), that were favoured by the government: their application would mean that the woman's sexual parts would be seen and even touched by a stranger. The fiqh expert Ibrahim Hosen, whose defence of the Porkas was mentioned above, in 1970 produced a well-argued reasoning to allow this method of contraception.[27] But he remained a minority of one. Because the ulama's opinions were so divided, the MUI did not issue its *fatwa* until 1983, after long deliberations. The principle of family planning, on condition of being voluntary, was declared to be acceptable to Islam, basically on grounds of *maslahah*, 'ensuring the welfare of the *ummah*.' Reservations were made for the use of IUDs, while tubectomy and vasectomy as well as abortion were in principle rejected.[28] This fatwa, too, went against the views of significant segments of the *ummah*. The NU, though permitting contraception, did not agree with the MUI's reasoning; it issued its own fatwa, based on more traditional arguments.[29] Many in Muhammadiyah and Persis circles remained strongly opposed in principle. Much of the social resistance to the family programme was however overcome, due to the MUI's support. The government accepted the MUI's objections to abortion, tubectomy and vasectomy, which are not officially propagated now, although still silently practised.

Conclusion

Few ulama feel that they have satisfactorily resolved the dilemma inherent in ulama-umara relations. Many ulama feel that many things in Indonesian society are not as they should be, be it corruption, poverty, women's dress, the influence of the churches, gambling, or the lack of political and economic democracy. But they do not know how to act. Withdrawal from politics in all forms means refusing to accept one's social responsibilities, while close association with the powers that be deprives one of one's independence. Outright opposition is advised against in the Sunni tradition because it might result in chaos. Moderate criticism, making marginal corrections, is what many see as the best way, but many of the country's umara are intolerant of criticism. Open Muslim criticism of the government has effectively been silenced, and voices of ulama speaking out against social wrongs are seldom heard. Significantly, in the numerous protest actions involving expropriation of land during the past year, the ulama have remained silent.[30]

It is perhaps appropriate to end this article with another *hadith* that I have heard frequently quoted by

ulama in this context: Whoever witnesses something objectionable (*munkar*, 'forbidden by religion') should correct this by his actions; if he cannot act, he should do so by his words (i.e., by admonitions or protest); and when even this is not possible, he should do so by his heart (i.e., in silent rejection or, as some have it, by praying to God). Many apparently feel relieved by the existence of the third alternative, even though the *hadith* ends with the reminder that "the last way, however, is a sign of weak faith."[\[31\]](#)

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Notes

[1] Yazid and Koho (1979: 185). *Hadith* are sayings attributed to the Prophet, transmitted orally by the first generation and later collected and laid down in writing. They constitute, after the Qur'an, the second major source of Islamic law and doctrine.

[2] The project 'Sikap dan pandangan hidup ulama Indonesia' [the Weltanschauung of Indonesia's ulama], carried out by the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, LIPI. The present author took part in the project as consultant for research methodology.

[3] See the Indonesian weekly Editor, 18 February 1989. The *camat* made his visit, taking with him military police. A fight ensued, in which a policeman was killed. Hours later, military reinforcements arrived and put down this little rebellion by brute force, killing tens, perhaps hundreds. The best English-language report on the Lampung incident appeared in *Asiaweek*, 24 February 1989.

[4] I.e., the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki and Hanbali schools of law. In practice, Indonesia's traditional ulama follow the Shafi'i *madzhab* and have only rarely had recourse to the rulings of other *madzhab*.

[5] On this period, see Maarif 1988 and the memoirs of the NU's last Minister of Religion (in the 1962-67 period), Saifuddin Zuhri (1987).

[6] Ward 1974: 97-100. The chapter in this book dealing with the NU (pp. 90-113) is one of the very few perceptive academic studies ever made of this organisation.

[7] On Subchan's role see Ward 1974: 108-09, 112-13; Mudatsir, 1983; Anam, 1985: 57-268.

[8] On the NU's stand in these cases, see Radi, 1984: 115-32, 147-53.

[9] On the crisis in NU in these years and Idham Chalid's forced resignation, which he later revoked, see: Adnan 1982; Irsyam 1984; Soebagijo 1982: 229-39; Jones 1984.

[10] Achmad Siddiq, though the son of a kiai whose pesantren he now leads, had a bureaucratic career in the Ministry of Religious Affairs. His first position was as private secretary to Wahid Hasyim, the NU's

first Minister of Religion and the eldest son of its founder Hasyim Asy'ari; this association may have helped him in his rapid rise in the NU hierarchy. His ideas on what the NU should stand for were first published in 1979 in a booklet titled *Khitthah Nahdliyah* (Siddiq, 1979).

[11] Masyumi was really an umbrella organisation of various Muslim unions, most of them reformist but including also a few minor 'traditionalist' ones such as the West Javanese Persatuan Ummat Islam and the North Sumatran Jam'iyah Washliyah. The leadership was always in reformist-modernist hands. The most important study of Masyumi to date is by Deliar Noer (1987).

[12] Early writings by Natsir were collected in the two volumes of his *Capita Selecta*; selected articles by Sjafruddin were recently republished in two volumes edited by the prominent literary author, Ajip Rosidi (Prawiranegara 1986, 1988).

[13] See Ward 1970.

[14] The Jakarta Charter is the draft preamble to the Constitution, containing a controversial phrase to the effect that Muslim citizens would be obliged to perform all Islamic canonical duties ("*dengan kewadajiban mendjalankan Sjariat Islam bagi pemeluk-pemeluknja*"). Christians and secular nationalists strongly objected to this phrase, which they feared would give rise to 'fanaticism.' Both in the constitutional debates of 1945 and in those of 1959 it was rejected. See Boland 1971: 25-39, 90-99; Anshary 1981.

[15] As a result of Indonesian diplomatic pressure, the Saudis later replaced the embarrassing (to the Indonesian government) Natsir with the more pliable and less 'political' Prof. H.M. Rasjidi, the country's first Minister of Religious Affairs and also affiliated with the Dewan Dakwah.

[16] Wahib was a journalist, who took active part in the discussions of the Yogyakarta group. His diaries were published posthumously (Wahib 1981). See also the analysis of the diaries and of their impact by Anthony Johns (1987).

[17] For an (unsympathetic) study of Nurcholish's ideas of that period, see Hassan 1982. A number of important speeches and articles by Nurcholish, covering the period from 1970 to 1986, have been reprinted in Madjid 1987.

[18] His remark that one might as well greet a fellow Muslim in Indonesian with the words *selamat pagi* ('good morning') instead of with the traditional *as-salamu 'alaykum* aroused a storm of protest in NU circles, which only calmed down after he made formal apologies to the Rois Aam, KH. Ali Makshum, one of his former teachers.

[19] He has, however, gone beyond this admiration for the social and political doctrines of modern Shi'ism to a defense of other aspects of the Shi'i creed and a critique of various Sunni views. An admirer of Ayatollah Mutahhari, who in his view has combined a profound understanding of traditional disciplines with modern learning and political activism, he stimulates students and followers to combine social commitment with a serious study of the Muslim intellectual tradition. Having discovered the rich philosophical and mystical heritage preserved in the Shi'a world, he tries to awaken an interest in this neglected aspect of Islamic learning.

[20] Minister Munawir Sjadzali in his keynote address to the Seminar on “New Trends in Islamic Studies”, LIPI, Jakarta, September 1985.

[21] Interview with Ali Muhammad, head of the *fatwa* committee of Aceh's Majelis Ulama, Banda Aceh, 2 November 1986. An article by Ali Hasjmy (the chairman of the Majelis) in the Medan daily *Waspada* of 13 October 1983, summarises the *fatwa*: communist doctrine is *haram*, its conscious followers are *kafir*, those putting it in practice are *kafir harbi yang wajib ditumpas* ['enemy infidels, whose extermination is obligatory'], and those Muslims killed in the process will be *shahid* ['martyrs'].

[22] See Majelis Ulama Indonesia (1976, 1985). The third point in the working programme speaks of developing Islam's universal values while respecting local tradition and other religions and beliefs (i.e., the syncretistic mystical sects).

[23] The list originated from a university lecturer who had students visit local supermarkets and list products containing gelatin. Unknown persons later put this list in circulation after adding three very popular products, Indomie (instant noodles), soy sauce of the ABC factory (which almost monopolised the market), and Dancow powdered milk. The first two factories are Chinese-owned, the third a joint venture with the Nestlé concern, which had incidentally run into similar problems in Malaysia where the Consumers' Association of Penang publicised its use of (gelatin-based) emulsifier.

[24] On this 'pork fat affair,' see the weeklies, *Tempo* and *Editor* of 5, 12 and 19 November 1988.

[25] An excellent survey of the Porkas affair is given by Yatim 1987. Ibrahim Hosen's defense of Porkas and the fatwa of West Javanese ulama were later published separately (Hosen 1987; Badan Kerja Sama 1986). It should be noted that Ibrahim Hosen's defense of the lottery, politically convenient though it may have been, was entirely in conformity with traditional fiqh: it was, however, completely at odds with the *communis opinio* among Indonesia's Muslims.

[26] The Majlis Tarjih of the reformist organisation Muhammadiyah had in 1968 decided that contraception was contrary to the teachings of Islam and only permissible in situations of exigency (*darurat*). The puritan Persatuan Islam was even more strongly opposed.

[27] The argument involved the existence of an urgent need (*darurat*); it was implied that such a need was brought about by the threat of over-population, endangering the welfare of the *ummah*.

[28] Majelis Ulama Indonesia (1984: 155-174). IUDs were allowed if inserted by a female doctor or in the presence of the husband or another woman. Regarding the rejected methods, exceptions were made in the case of serious hereditary diseases and threats to the woman's psychological health

[29] The NU *fatwa* was based on an argument by the 11th-century scholar Ghazali, who considered coitus interruptus (*`azl*) an acceptable practice.

[30] The exception being Abdurrahman Wahid, who through a forum of non-government organisations pressed for the rights of the expropriated villagers of Kedung Ombo.

[31] Cf. Zuhri (1987: 135-136), and his explanation of the political implications of this *hadith*.