

# Nurcholish Madjid

## Indonesian Muslim Intellectual

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Nurcholish Madjid's career as a public intellectual was closely correlated with the emergence and demise of Indonesia's New Order, the political system put in place by General Suharto. 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. In that crucial year he was elected the chairman of the Muslim student union, HMI—a position he held for two consecutive three-year terms. A number of provocative public statements he made about the need to rethink petrified modes of Muslim thought and patterns of action in the name of Islam received wide press coverage and gave him the reputation of chief legitimizer of the New Order's policies towards Islam. His statements could be, and were, read as a devastating critique of the existing Muslim parties and organizations, their obsession with the ideal of an Islamic state, and the general staleness of their religious ideas. A comment he made on secularization as the "de-sacralization" of concepts and institutions that had been turned into sacred objects by the Muslim community was misread as a call for secularism. This all went down well with the regime, which was bent on depoliticizing society and destroying the political muscle of Islam, but it earned Nurcholish the lasting enmity of many of the older generation of Muslim political leaders—especially those of the Masyumi party, who had been jailed or pushed into the political margin by Sukarno and were never rehabilitated under Suharto.

In the final days of Suharto's rule, when the president made a last-ditch attempt to form a new cabinet in response to the ever louder protests and calls for reform and invited nine Muslim leaders to give him advice, Nurcholish was the only one who had the courage to tell Suharto in polite words that those calls for reform meant that the people wanted him to step down. This was the other side of Nurcholish' position as New Order legitimizer: he could withhold legitimization, as he had been one of the few who could exercise the moderate criticism of a loyal but independent supporter of the regime. Unlike many others, including some who once had been vocal critics, Nurcholish never lost his independence.

### Islam, nationalism, intellectual heritage

The impact of Nurcholish' thought on the ideas and attitudes of the educated members of his own generation and the generations following can hardly be overestimated. At a time of rapid economic and social change, he argued for a rational and dynamic interpretation of Islam, in which change and development are natural processes and God is the only unchanging Truth; established practices and received ideas should not be made into sacred icons, for that would be tantamount

**Nurcholish Madjid, Indonesia's best known Muslim intellectual, died in August last year after a prolonged and painful illness. At the time of his death, the country appeared to be drifting away into increasing religious intolerance: physical attacks by radical Muslims on makeshift churches and assaults on the main centre of the Ahmadiyah movement, death threats against liberal Muslim thinkers, fatwas of Indonesia's Ulama Council, once a paragon of moderation, against "liberal Islam," secularism and religious pluralism. The days in which Nurcholish' voice of moderation and inter-religious understanding was almost hegemonic, at least in the media, are rapidly fading away, and memories of Nurcholish resonate with nostalgia for times of greater harmony.**

to *shirk*. In his numerous lectures and papers, quotations of Quranic verses and references to American sociologists and such thinkers as Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre stand side by side. Doctoral studies at the University of Chicago during 1978-84, under Leonard Binder and Fazlur Rahman, further broadened his horizon. He wrote his dissertation on reason and revelation in the thought of Ibn Taymiya, the thinker most venerated by the Islamists who were his opponents at home, and his first major public statement upon return was a collection of translations of Muslim philosophical thinkers, from Kindi and Farabi to Afghani and Abduh, with a lengthy introduction on the intellectual heritage of Islam.

Nurcholish saw himself, and wished to be seen, as standing in a reform-minded and philosophically oriented Muslim intellectual tradition, and he was anxious to point out the genealogy of the ideas for which some of the old Masyumi leaders branded him a heretic. During his years in Chicago, he entered into correspondence with another Masyumi leader, the moderate Mohammad Roem, to explain his ideas in a form acceptable to the older man, and he made sure copies of this correspondence were—against Roem's wishes—widely disseminated. Roem was famous as one of the men who had negotiated Indonesia's independence, a former minister in several cabinets, and a Masyumi politician who had always had excellent relations with secular nationalists; recognition by Roem was very important to Nurcholish, for it gave him, as it were, a legitimate pedigree in Indonesia's Islamic movement and pointed to a respected earlier case of Muslim accommodation with secular nationalism.

For Nurcholish, there was no contradiction between devotion to Islam and nationalism. Throughout his career he frequently made the argument, in one form or another, that the Indonesian nation owed its existence to Islam, for it had been Muslim rulers who had led the struggle against colonial occupation, and Muslim traders who united the archipelago through their trading networks and their lingua franca, Malay. The only art forms that were all-Indonesian and not specific to a single ethnic group are those associated with Islam, such as the musical *qasidah* and *dangdut* genres, with their Arab and Indian Ocean influences. One senses in Nurcholish' understanding of "Indonesian-ness" the influence of Marshall Hodgson's concept of "Islamicate" civilization, with which he became acquainted during his stay in Chicago. Christians, Hindus and Buddhists are equal citizens in Nurcholish' view of Indonesian society, but Islam provides the overarching civilizational unity.

### Muslim-Christian relations

Tense relations between Muslims and the Christian minority constituted an important but mostly hidden backdrop to the history of the New Order, occasionally erupting in riots and attacks on churches but soon submerged again, until violent power struggles became a dominant part of the political scene after the fall of Suharto. Muslim leaders, especially the old Masyumi politicians, were obsessed by perceived Christian efforts to undermine the Muslim ummah, to convert nominal Muslims and to expand their control of key positions in the state apparatus through a conspiracy of businessmen, military officers, and foreign sponsors. Against that background Nurcholish' friendly relations with (at least some of) his Christian peers and his consistent defence of the thesis that Jews and Christians are the Muslims' brothers-in-

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faith and that in several passages the Quran subsumes them under the label of Muslims represented a major departure from the apologetic or hostile attitudes of earlier reformist Muslim leaders. Along with the traditionalist leader Abdurrahman Wahid, who was to become an even more committed defender of the rights of religious minorities, Nurcholish was an effective builder of bridges between religious communities: not only between Muslims and Christians but also with Hindus and Buddhists (who, he insisted, should also be considered as *ahl al-kitab*, "People of the Book").

He did share the elder leaders' concern about the intentions of some Christian leaders, however, and was wary of being used as a legitimizer of efforts to spread Christianity and to weaken Islam. In the notorious *Monitor* affair of 1990—the popular magazine *Monitor* had published an article that many Muslims perceived as a deliberate insult of the Prophet Muhammad—he responded furiously. The magazine belonged to Indonesia's largest, Catholic-owned, press conglomerate. Militant Muslim groups, which had long nurtured grievances against the Christian domination of the press, organized angry and violent demonstrations against its offices. When the leading daily of the same conglomerate attempted to elicit a conciliatory statement from Nurcholish to deflate the issue, he angrily refused to be used, and made some uncharacteristically harsh comments to other journalists. It was left to Abdurrahman Wahid to try to calm down the situation and remind his fellow Muslims of the example that the Prophet himself had given of patience and forgiving in the face of insults.

The *Monitor* affair remained long on Nurcholish' mind and made him suspicious of Christian intentions. In later years he occasionally complained that Muslim tolerance went unanswered and that certain Christian circles plotted to weaken Islam and keep Muslims in a subjugated position. The only factor that might prevent future outbursts of inter-religious conflict, he believed, was the government's development policies, notably the educational revolution, which benefited especially the relatively underprivileged Muslim masses.

## Rise of the Muslim middle class

Young educated Muslims of Nurcholish' generation were in fact among the main beneficiaries of the rapid economic growth and expansion of education during the New Order period. The peer network of HMI alumni moreover provided strong mutual support, and the entire cohort experienced unprecedented social mobility, which enabled them to facilitate the same process for younger HMI members and alumni. By the mid 1980s, people became aware that a Muslim middle class has come into existence: Muslim in cultural background and self-identification, middle class in economic position and taste for consumption. A large proportion of this new Muslim middle class had been HMI members, and many looked up to Nurcholish as the thinker who best embodied Muslim modernity.

Nurcholish returned from Chicago convinced that a strong middle class was a necessary condition for democratization, and from that time on his efforts appeared to be focused on educating and Islamizing the Indonesian middle class. Aided by friends of his HMI days who were experienced organizers and others who were economically successful, he set up a sophisticated "religious studies club" named Paramadina, which was to disseminate "inclusive" religious thought and stimulate intellectual debate. 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 the new Muslim middle class. 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 very free 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, among which Sufism became increasingly prominent and the positive appreciation of other religions remained a conspicuous element. Paramadina has played an important role in enriching the intellectual content of public discourse on Islam, and it has not shied away from controversial issues.

Nurcholish continued to value his independence highly; he never accepted prestigious and well-paid official positions and, unlike many of his peers, stuck to a very modest, simple lifestyle. His prestige, however,



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**Nurcholish  
Madjid at the  
ISIM conference  
*Muslim  
Intellectuals  
and Modern  
Challenges,  
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was enormous; many former HMI activists reached high positions in politics, the media, business, education, and the bureaucracy, and they kept looking towards Nurcholish for moral and intellectual guidance. In the first freely elected parliament after Suharto's fall, the number of delegates with HMI affiliation (present in all major parties) was over fifty per cent—more seats than any single party had won. In an important sense, these elections crowned the success of HMI's political ascension and of Nurcholish' project of building a strong Muslim middle class as a step towards establishing liberal democracy.

## Critics and heritage

At the same time, Nurcholish continued to be the target of often fierce criticism, from the right as well as the left. Conservatives and hardliners objected strongly to his liberal religious views and his pluralistic acceptance of divergent views within Islam as well of other religions. The controversies that had surrounded him in the beginning of his career stayed with him throughout his life. In some of the attacks on Nurcholish in the Islamist media one also senses something of a class antagonism, expressions of disgust with the lifestyle of the affluent middle class with which Nurcholish became increasingly associated. This element is more explicitly present in some of the criticism from the left, inspired by liberation theology. Early in his career, Nurcholish spoke much of social justice as a core element of Islam's message and this dimension of his thought, some young critics assert, has gradually disappeared while he was serving the middle classes. His "bourgeois pluralism" (as one critical book is titled) engages with relations between religions but is blind to the greed and corruption of the middle class and the blatant impoverishment of the masses.

Yet in an important sense these left-wing critics also owe much to Nurcholish and continue aspects of his work. He did not establish a school of thought and did not groom favourites to become his successors. Rather, he stimulated many younger people to think independently and facilitated their intellectual development. Although Paramadina was established as the forum to present his thought to a wider audience, he never imposed his own version of Islam on the younger people who came to work there and who have their own concerns and personal spiritual and intellectual interests, often quite different from his. The role of provocative, innovative and liberating thinker and broker of ideas that he played for his own generation is now played by a highly varied group of younger men and women, in various institutions, NGOs, and informal networks. In his youth, Nurcholish was often called "the young Natsir," after the most influential reformist thinker of an earlier generation. It is his lasting merit that there are many "young Nurcholishes," none of them a clone of the original.

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