

## **NEO-MODERN ISLAM IN SUHARTO'S INDONESIA**

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A recent article in the *New York Times*, 30 April, 2002 reported the emergence of a new Shariah based political movement in Indonesia called the Justice Party. As a party it is still young with only seven seats in the Indonesian Parliament, but its message is potentially explosive, catering as it does to the climate of fear and misunderstanding fomented in recent times by events in the USA, Palestine and Afghanistan. Its top echelon, Hidayat Nur Wahid, the party leader; Annis Matta, the secretary general; and Lutsi Ishak, the treasurer are all graduates of Saudi Arabian universities. Many of the members joined after passing through the strident Islamic student organization, the Indonesian Muslim Student Action Union, known for its aggressive street protests in favour of an Islamic state. The party's platform is similar to those found in other Muslim countries from Morocco and Algeria to Pakistan and Malaysia. The goal is nothing less than to impose the traditional Shariah, or Quranic law, on Indonesia. The report suggests that Justice Party supporters believe that such a change would "instil a sense of purpose, pride and self-confidence in Indonesians and restore a moral focus in a country that has fallen into chaos and widespread corruption."<sup>2</sup> The party's senior leaders insist that they are not interested in establishing in Indonesia all aspects of Wahhabism, the conservative form of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia. However, the introduction of Shariah is a basic goal. "The implementation of Shariah would mean justice would be upheld."<sup>3</sup>

Does this phenomenon mark what may be the end of the dominance of a liberal progressive voice of Islam in Indonesia, articulated by ex-President Abdurrachman Wahid, speaker of the Indonesian Parliament Amien Rias, and acknowledged spokesperson for what has been called Islamic neo-modernism Dr Nurcholish Madjid? If it does, then the emergence of the Justice Party as a

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<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, 30 April 2002.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

political force will be replicating in Indonesia religious ideas and passions always latent in Muslim communities, pulled as they are between the individualising requirements of a God centred life and communal demands of radical Islam.<sup>4</sup> In Indonesia, as in other parts of the diverse civilisation of Islam, the Muslim community seems to be bracing itself for the emergence of the Islamic religious right onto political centre stage.

It is true that at this stage the Justice Party seems to believe in the soft-gloved approach. Members speak of empowering villagers, setting a clean moral example, and spreading a pure vision of Islam. "We don't like the idea of forcing people to join Islam," a spokesperson said during a meeting at the party headquarters, rather: "We like to invite them."<sup>5</sup> The news report also noted that literature asserting that Jews organised the attack on the World Trade Centre was on sale at the front counter.

This emerging trend, if that is what it is, is in sharp contrast to the situation Muslims found themselves in during Suharto's Indonesia in the 1970s to the mid 1990s when an inclusive pluralism was one of the defining characteristics of Islam in Indonesia. Can it now be said that Islamic liberalism and its acknowledged spokesperson Dr Nurcholish Madjid<sup>6</sup> no longer represent the dominant voice of Islam in Indonesia? Does the Justice Party represent the future for Islam in Indonesia? The party has been spurred on and nourished in its claim to represent the authentic voice of Islam by recent events in the Middle East and elsewhere, and by the recent economic history of Indonesia. Since the Asian financial crisis, critical events have occurred in rapid succession, such as the ensuing collapse of the Indonesian economy, swiftly followed by the forced departure of President Suharto and, two years later, by the departure of Golkar from its decades long reign as the party of government. Since then, stability has been hard to come by, and after only two and a half years the popular liberal Muslim cleric and educator Abdurachman Wahid was forced to resign as President in 2001 amid scandals and widespread unrest throughout the archipelago.

Now Indonesia finds itself governed by a coalition led by Megawati Sukarnoputri whose electoral appeal seems to rest on her lineage as the daughter of the first President of Indonesia, Sukarno. Sukarno was a man deeply embedded in the founding story of the Indonesian Republic, by turns freedom fighter, diplomat, statesman and finally in the 1960s an apparently unwitting stooge of Soviet Communism's imperial aspirations in South East Asia.<sup>7</sup> Such turbulence and an apparent turning back of political sentiment to the heady days of Sukarno inspired populism, makes it difficult to place these events into the larger frame of Indonesian society and Indonesian Islamic history. However this study is just such an attempt.

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<sup>4</sup> Gellner, E. 1970-7:234-244. A Pendulum Swing Theory of Islam. *The Philosophical Forum*. 2:2 (Winter).

<sup>5</sup> *New York Times*. op cit.

<sup>6</sup> *New York Times*. ibid. Noted in the article as the leading spokesperson on neo-modern Islam in Indonesia.

<sup>7</sup> Kingsbury, D. 1998. *The Politics of Indonesia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## The Brief

This paper investigates some of the connections between the politics of the New Order and Islamic liberalism. The story is told from the point of view of the Muslim intellectuals within the Indonesian Muslim community who influenced the New Order Government to the degree that liberal Islam received the support of the New Order Government. As will be discussed in this study, these men saw themselves as inheritors of, and spokespersons for, an intellectual and social movement that traces its roots back to 19<sup>th</sup> century Indonesian Islamic history and beyond. The author carried out the interviews that contribute to this study in the years 1993-1997, including meetings with some of the protagonists during that time, Drs Harun Nasution, Nurcholish Madjid and to a lesser extent with Abdurachman Wahid, Djohan Effendi and Taufik Abdullah, along with numerous scholars and commentators within the Islamic teaching institutions of Indonesia. The purpose of the study is to understand some of the synergies between the New Order Government and liberal Islam. More specifically, the objective is to provide some insight into the conditions – political and religious – that were conducive to the emergence of a liberal, socially responsive Islam, under a government that some western commentators on Indonesia political life regard as one of the most despotic and authoritarian regimes of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> The study is based around the figure of Harun Nasution who can be seen as playing a pivotal role in promoting a version of Islam that was acceptable to the New Order Government. Nasution's role was supported by the public pronouncements of others who, since his retirement, have assumed his mantle, in particular the Chicago trained Islamic scholar Nurcholish Madjid.

## Islam in Indonesia

During the days of Suharto, the Ministry of Religion, under the direction of a series of well educated and liberal ministers supported the teaching and practice of a liberal, humanistic tradition of Islam that Barton and others have called 'neo-modern' Islam. It appears that the Muslim intelligentsia is now nostalgic for that time.<sup>9</sup> It may be that the rest of the Muslim world and the whole region of South East Asia (which includes Australia and New Zealand) ought also to reflect with a similar nostalgia upon the role of Islam as it was during those days of the New Order Government, as a model of faith, reason and common sense, apolitical and moral, determined on finding the 'straight

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<sup>8</sup> Kingsbury, D. op cit. 1998; Anderson, B. 1983. Old State, New Society. Indonesia's New Order in Comparative Historical Perspective. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 42, 3:491; Schwartz, A. 1994. *A Nation in Waiting: Indonesia in the 1990s*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

<sup>9</sup> Barton, G. 1995. 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. Unpublished Phd. Monash.

path,'<sup>10</sup> in asceticism and socially responsible practice.

Looking back from our present perspective it is possible, whilst acknowledging the political and economic failings of the New Order Governments of Suharto, to see that the economic growth and political stability of the 1980s and early 1990s lifted at least one hundred million of Indonesia's two hundred million citizens from a precarious subsistence existence to a position of relative economic and social security.<sup>11</sup> Of particular interest for this study, the New Order Government's policies facilitated the flowering of a humanist tradition in Islam that has its roots in the history of Islam in Indonesia.<sup>12</sup> The argument made in this paper is that the liberal neo-modern tradition, whilst it had an elective affinity with the policies of the New Order Government, needs to be considered not merely as a response to government policy but also as a unique (at least in the last 100 years) contribution to Islam's discourse with modernity.

In hindsight it is possible to see that since the early 1970s, whilst the rest of the Islamic world has been caught up in renewal movements that are strongly political in nature, Islam in Indonesia has experienced the growth of a reflexive, personal piety that has occurred not because of access to political power, but despite it.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it could be said that since the early 1970s there was an emerging view among Muslim leaders in Indonesia from across the social/religious spectrum, from *Imams* in local mosques to academics in state universities, that Islam was compatible with, yet transcended, the struggles of party politics. The separation of religion and politics, a policy objective of the New Order government since it came to power in 1967, seems to have been successful in turning the hearts and minds of an increasing number of Muslims towards a domesticated Islam of private faith and social good works, as noted by Siddique in 1987.<sup>14</sup> In Siddique's account, Islam in Indonesia lacked the politicised self-confidence of its Malaysian neighbours who, Siddique suggests, coupled Islam to nationalist/Malay identity.<sup>15</sup> In Indonesia there was little support for the notion of an Islamic state as such, contrary to the enthusiasm of Malaysia for the extension of Islamic law to all fields of practice. Indonesians seemed to be more introverted and more exoteric in their understanding of the message of the Quran, seeing it as more to do with spiritual and human values in the context of individual lives, than as an absolute coda of rules and laws. Looking back it could be argued that in the ethical/political consciousness of its middle classes Indonesia was showing more

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<sup>10</sup> Esposito, J. 1988. *Islam the Straight Path*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Robison and Goodman. 1995. *The New Rich in Asia*. Sydney and London: Routledge.

<sup>12</sup> Hasan Hanafi. 1985. 'The Origin of Modern Conservatism and Islamic Fundamentalism'. In *Islamic Dilemmas: Reformers, Nationalists and Industrialisation, the Southern Shore of the Mediterranean*. (ed.) Gellner, E. Berlin: Mouton Publishers.

<sup>13</sup> Siddique, S. 1987. *Islam and Ideology in Southeast Asia*. Centre of South East Asian Studies. National University of Singapore.

<sup>14</sup> Siddique, S. *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Siddique, S. *ibid.*:341. Islam can be seen to be a code word in Malaysia for Malay, especially when one considers that all references to racial issues are prohibited. Malay nationalism is as significant in the resurgence of Islam in Malaysia as any other factor.

and more of the attributes identified by Marshall Hodgson<sup>16</sup> and Ira Lapidus<sup>17</sup> as being characteristic of the ideals of Islamic Humanism (*adab al Islam*). A situation thus arose where the New Order Government, in its attempts to control political expression, and through the very success of its economic policies, was instrumental in strengthening a dimension of Indonesian society, the liberal, socially engaged, Muslim middle class.

For whatever reason – an unintended outcome of pragmatic policy, or a shared objective – the Indonesian Government during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s assumed the role of promoter and sustainer of Islamic values and Islamic ideas of the ‘good’. Some of the primary ‘goods’ promulgated by Muslims leaders were: the development of economically autonomous individuals guaranteed in their autonomy by their right of own property,<sup>18</sup> the right to deal with contemporary social issues in reference to a set of values rather than prescriptive rules,<sup>19</sup> and the guarantee of individual autonomy, in the relationship between the individual and Allah.<sup>20</sup>

As already noted, it is possible to suggest then, that there was both an historical (in reference to Muslim civil society) and functional (in reference to authoritarian government) relationship between the style of government and the place accorded to Islam in Indonesia during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. The policies may have been consciously designed to stifle political debate and centralise economic and political decision making, as argued by Anderson.<sup>21</sup> However an alternative and historically valid reading suggests that these policies served another purpose: to increase the visibility and influence of an Islamic civil tradition that goes back to the sixteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Robert Hefner also notes this fact when he writes approvingly of Islamic teaching and scholarship in Indonesia since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. “They are the ones, after all, who maintained an independent tradition of schools, mosques, and welfare associations not only throughout the New Order period but during the degradations of the colonial era.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Hodgson, M.G.S. 1974. *The Venture of Islam*. Vol 1. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

<sup>17</sup> Lapidus, I.M. 1984. ‘Knowledge, Virtue and Action: The Classical Muslim Conception of Adab and the Nature of Religious Fulfillment’. Chapter 2. In *Moral Conduct and Authority: The place of Adab in South Asian Islam*. (ed.) Metcalfe, B. Berkeley & London: University of California Press.

<sup>18</sup> Goldberg, E. 1993:248-271. ‘Private Goods, Public Wrongs, and Civil Society in Some Medieval Arab Theory and Practice’. In *Rules and Rights in the Middle East: Democracy, Law and Society*. (ed.) Goldberg, Kasaba, and Migdal. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

<sup>19</sup> Nasution H. 1977. *Islam Ditinjau dari Berbagai Aspeknya*. Jakarta: Bulan Bintang. Vol 1.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Professor Shihab. Ciputat IAIN. June 1995.

<sup>21</sup> McDonald, H. 1980:112. *Suharto’s Indonesia*. Victoria. Fontana.

<sup>22</sup> Reid, A. 1993. *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680*. Vol 2., Expansion and Crisis. New Haven: Yale University Press.

<sup>23</sup> Hefner, R. W. 1998:246. ‘Markets and Justice for Indonesian Muslims’. In *Markets and Cultures. Society and Morality in the New Asian Capitalisms*. (ed.) Hefner, R. W. Boston: Harper Collins.

Hefner, in discussion of contemporary leaders of the middle class in Indonesia, refers to the “political and intellectual sophistication (not to mention decency) of middle class leaders.”<sup>24</sup> Other scholars, including the noted Japanese anthropologist Mitsui Nakamura, suggests that the term '*ulama intelek*' denotes a combination in one person of the higher levels of traditional Islamic learning and an education in the best of Western scholarship.<sup>25</sup> Even Benedict Anderson, no apologist for modern Indonesian political life, called men such as Mohammed Hatta (vice President of Indonesia from 1948-55), “diplomats from Islam”, not politicians but participants in what they assume to be a rational discourse, willing to compromise in order to achieve valued goals, but not caught up in the power game for its own sake.<sup>26</sup> This then, was the intellectual climate within the Muslim community that found an elective affinity between its own values and social objectives, and those of the New Order Government.

### **New Order Government support**

The New Order Government became active in its support of Islamic education in the mid 1960s when the Ministry of Religious Affairs set up fourteen *Institut Agama Islam Negeri* (Indonesian Islamic Universities, IAINs). They were entrusted by central government with the task of promoting the study and teaching of Islam at the tertiary level. Initially their existence depended on a small amount of support from the government and a lot of support from the two large Muslim organizations *Nahdatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah*. For their existence under the New Order Government the benefits that the IAIN gained belies the claims in some Muslim quarters that the government was hostile to Islam. It was deeply supportive of educational initiatives yet determined to resist the politicization of Islam in Indonesia. All the indications were that the Ministry of Religious affairs was very eager to accelerate the Islamic Universities' further development.<sup>27</sup> Not all of the IAIN had exactly the same curriculum, but there was a common core focusing on six fields of study, namely: Al-Quran and Hadith; Islamic Thought (theology, philosophy and mysticism); Social Institutions in Islam (including Islamic jurisprudence/al-Fiqh, political science/al Fiqh al Siasi, and economy); Arabic and Arabian literature; Islamic education (*Al-Tarbiyyah al-Islamiyyah*); and Propagation of the Faith.<sup>28</sup> The teaching of comparative religion was one of the innovations that provided a critical aspect to the education offered at the (IAIN) Jakarta

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* 1998. 237.

<sup>25</sup> Nakamura Mitsuo. 1984:86. *Hajji Muzzakkir and the Maturing of Indonesian Islam*. Jakarta: Mizan. No 3. Vol 1.

<sup>26</sup> Anderson B. 1972:1-69. 'The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture'. In *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*. (ed.) Holt, C. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

<sup>27</sup> INIS newsletter. Vol. IV. 1990:2.

<sup>28</sup> Nasution, H. 1989. *Refleksi Pembarun Pemikiran Islam, 70 Tahun*. Jakarta: Lembaga Studi Agama dan Filsafat.

campus at Ciputat. In the period 1970 – 1996 the university had close links with Temple University in Philadelphia and ecumenical seminars and conferences are a regular feature of the teaching on the Ciputat campus. Up until the end of Golkar's control of the affairs of government with their defeat in the 2000 election, government support was in evidence and new faculties were being established in regions of Indonesia previously lacking in Islamic Higher Education. In the interim, until these faculties reached full strength, they were regarded as branches of the Islamic State Universities.<sup>29</sup>

### **Islamic Liberalism in Indonesia**

Whilst liberalism has been a characteristic of Islam in Indonesia for all of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>30</sup> it came to increased prominence in the period from the late 1960s up until the middle of the 1990s. It represents a movement in Islamic thought with the most prominent contributors including Nurcholish Madjid, Abdurrachman Wahid, Djohan Effendi and Ahmad Wahib.<sup>31</sup> Barton identifies later contributors to this school of thought to include Amien Rais (the current speaker in the Indonesian House of Representatives) who wrote "Islam in Indonesia. An initiative in self-reflection"<sup>32</sup> and numerous others, including authors from Malaysia, India, and Morocco.<sup>33</sup> Barton, in his extended discussion of Islamic liberalism's antecedents identifies clear linkages to modernist and traditionalist scholarship, traditionalist in the sense of traditional Muslim educational practice, that being Pesantren education and scholarship in Arabic. Fachry Ali and Bahtiar Effendi in their book *Merambah Jalan Baru*,<sup>34</sup> identify factors essential to considering the approach of Islamic liberalism in Indonesia. Core among them are: the separation of the two spheres of knowledge into absolute (that which is eternally true) and the relative (that which can be modified as circumstances change). Effendi and Ali suggest that there are three principles that stem from this separation: a stress on individual autonomy in matters of faith, a stress on personal development and personal responsibility, in short a theology of individualism, rationality and natural law, a rejection of Taqlid and a celebration of Ijtihad.<sup>35</sup>

The Indonesian scholar Djohan Effendi (noted earlier as a proponent of Islamic liberalism and for twenty years Suharto's chief speechwriter on

<sup>29</sup> INIS Journal 1999.

<sup>30</sup> Nakamura M. op cit. 1984.

<sup>31</sup> Barton G. op cit. 1995:34.

<sup>32</sup> Rais, Amien. 1986. 'Islam in Indonesia: An initiative in self reflection'. In *Merambah Jalan Baru Islam: Recontruksi Pemikiran Islam Indonesia Masa Orde Baru*. (eds.) Ali, Fachry. Effendy Bahtair. Bandung: Penerbit Mizan, First Edition.

<sup>33</sup> Barton G. op cit. 1995:33.

<sup>34</sup> Ali, Fachry. And Effendy Bahtair. 1986. *Merambah Jalan Baru Islam: Recontruksi Pemikiran Islam Indonesia Masa Orde Baru*. Bandung: Penerbit Mizan, First Edition.

<sup>35</sup> Glasse, C. 1991. *Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*. San Francisco: Harper: *Taqlid*, the reliance on decisions and precedents set in the past; *Ijtihad*, the pursuit of original solutions to questions.

religious matters) argues that the project of Islam is transformative and radical, yet in Effendi's view the radicalism is not focused on politics but on personal development. Effendi argued that in Islam the meaning of education is to create humans who are worthy to be Allah's vice-regents on earth. Education is thus not a utilitarian enterprise of acquiring skills to make a living, or of acquiring knowledge in order to claim the right not only to be master of oneself, but also to claim the right to have mastery over others. Effendi laments these interpretations saying that the Islamic meaning of education is to come to know how to act responsibly.<sup>36</sup>

The dual impetus for the adoption and articulation of liberal thought, both historical and functional, can be found in the book *Islam and Government System. Teachings, history and reflections* written by Professor Sjadzali<sup>37</sup> and published in Indonesia in 1991.<sup>38</sup> Professor Sjadzali wrote the book as a teaching text for the Indonesian Islamic Universities (IAIN), and in it he surveys the various theories of government, as found in the work of the pre-eminent theorists in Islam.<sup>39</sup> His stated intention was to investigate the competing claims between those who argue that Islam is a comprehensive religion containing – in addition to other things – a system of government or politics, and those who argue that in Islam there is no governmental system, but that there is a set of ethical values for life in a state. In the conclusion to the book, Sjadzali is clear in asserting that there is, in his mind, two conclusions:

in Islam there is no governmental system, but there is a set of ethical values for life in a state ... Islam is not totally similar to other religions, Islam contains a set of principles and moral values for life within a community as can be found in Al-Quran, with flexibility in its implementation and application taking into consideration the different situation and conditions at different periods as well as among cultures.<sup>40</sup>

Sjadzali takes his cue from Ibn Kaldun and Ibn Taymiyyah when he argues that the State is a necessity, humankind not being able to live without an organised community. He argues that in the absence of the state, disorder would create conditions in which the values of Islam – the protection of a private property, and individual purpose – could not be sustained.<sup>41</sup>

Professor Sjadzali argues that some of Islam's most famous jurists and scholars, Ibn Taymiyyah, Al Farabi, and Ibn Kaldun, saw the degeneration of leaders and their improper choice of deputies and assistant, as the cause of social disorder. Therefore it was the primary obligation of a leader to appoint

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<sup>36</sup> Effendi, D. 1984. Jakarta: Mizan. Vol 1.

<sup>37</sup> The Minister of Religion in successive New Order Governments.

<sup>38</sup> Sjadzali, M. 1991. *Islam and Government System: Teachings, history and reflections*. INIS. Jakarta.

<sup>39</sup> Ibn Abi Rabi, Al Farabi, Al Mawardi, Al Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Kaldun.

<sup>40</sup> Sjadzali, M. *ibid.* 1991:162.

<sup>41</sup> Sjadzali, M. *ibid.* 1991:163.



the most capable person to any position of authority, the main qualities considered essential being those of strength and integrity.<sup>42</sup> Sjadzali concludes his discussion of Ibn Taymiyyah by writing “a just head of state, even if an unbeliever, is better than an unjust head of state, even if he is a Muslim”, adding “Allah supports a just state although it is an infidel state, and Allah does not support an unjust state although Islamic.”<sup>43</sup>

Nurcholish Madjid (noted in the *New York Times* article, 30 April 2002, as the leading liberal voice of Islam in Indonesia) writing in the preface to Sjadzali’s book, argues that the problem of legitimacy in government can be dealt with indirectly by preparing people worthy of Government.<sup>44</sup> Madjid reinforces Sjadzali’s argument supporting the view that democracy is a relative condition, that stability and order must precede any moves to a full democracy in the western sense of the term, that there is a need for an implicit social contract between leaders and followers, and that there is a need for stability. These are also views that can be traced back to Ibn Taymiyya, Al Mawardi and Ibn Kaldun.<sup>45</sup>

### *A Muslim Scholar*

The following section is an account of the life and work of Professor Harun Nasution whom I have chosen as an exemplar of the period. Nasution, deeply critical of weak government, was well educated in many areas of Islamic intellectual life and an avowed modernist who actively supported the New Order Government. He believed it was the best hope for the creation of an Indonesian Islamic citizenry able to operate successfully in the world community.

One of the leaders of Islam in Indonesia in the period 1970 until 1996 when he finally retired from public life at the age of seventy eight, Professor Harun Nasution almost single handedly transformed the teaching curriculum in the Islamic Universities scattered throughout Indonesia. He was a generation older than men familiar in recent Indonesian political history such as Amien Rias, the speaker in the Indonesian Parliament and Abdurachman Wahid until the middle of 2000, the President of Indonesia, who along with Nurcholish Madjid, Djohan Effendi and Ahmad Wahib were regarded as the key spokespersons for Islamic liberalism in the period 1980-1996. It is not unreasonable to suggest that Nasution was a pioneer who, in important ways along with Sjadzali and Mukti Ali, made the later prominence of the above scholars possible.

Nasution was not involved in the establishment of the Islamic Universities in Indonesia but soon after they were established he was invited back to Indonesia from Canada, where he had been studying, to assume a

<sup>42</sup> Sjadzali, M. *ibid.* 1991:55-63.

<sup>43</sup> Sjadzali, M. *ibid.* 1991:63.

<sup>44</sup> Madjid N. 1991. preface in Sjadzali, M. *Islam and Government System: Teachings, history and reflections*. Jakarta: INIS.

<sup>45</sup> Sjadzali, M. *ibid.*:70.

central role in modernizing their curriculum. Nasution notes in his autobiography that his background as a student at Al Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, then his study at graduate school at McGill University in Canada, allowed him to discover for the first time Islam as it is taught in Western universities, an Islam that he was newly impressed by for its intellectual breadth and rationality.<sup>46</sup> For his Masters thesis<sup>47</sup> at McGill University he studied the approach of *Masjumi* (the official political vehicle for Muslims in Indonesia in the 1950s and 1960s) to the formation of an Islamic state in Indonesia. In his thesis he reached the conclusion that sectarian squabbles prevented a unanimity from being achieved among Muslim politicians in post-independence Indonesia, thus thwarting the establishment of an Islamic state by parliamentary means.<sup>48</sup> Following his Masters he went on to complete his doctorate in the theology of Muhammad Abduh, a modernist Islamic Scholar from Egypt.<sup>49</sup>

Nasution returned to Indonesia in the late 1960s and was offered teaching posts at the University of Indonesia and also the Islamic University (IAIN) in the district of Ciputat in Jakarta. He chose the Ciputat IAIN and set about introducing an approach to Islamic studies that he felt was better suited to modernisation, stressing understanding and analysis, rather than the rote learning of Islamic texts. Despite early opposition from other teaching staff, Nasution persisted and in 1973, at the national meeting of IAIN Rectors, he succeeded in getting a new curriculum introduced into the IAINs to consolidate the new approach. This new curriculum, called an 'Introduction to Islamic studies', covered all aspects of Islam – philosophy, mysticism, theology, sociology and research methods. For this initiative he had the support of Mukti Ali, the Minister of Religious Affairs at the time and a former student at McGill University, and Muljanto Sumardi, for a time the Director of the Department of Religious Affairs, and a former Columbia University graduate.<sup>50</sup>

Nasution was concerned to expose students to the widest possible range of Islamic thought so that they had an holistic understanding. He felt that Indonesian students of Islam in the IAINs were denied an understanding of Islam as an integrated system of culture and civilisation, which left them with only a fragmentary knowledge of Islam.<sup>51</sup> As with Ali and Effendi (noted earlier), Nasution divided Islam into the absolute and the relative. The absolute for him was the Quran, whilst the Sunnah – the interpretations that developed

<sup>46</sup> Nasution, Harun. 1989:31. *Refleksi Pembarun Pemikiran Islam, 70 Tahun*. Jakarta: Lembaga Studi Agama dan Filsafat.

<sup>47</sup> *The Islamic State in Indonesia: the Rise of the Ideology, the Movement for its Creation and the Theory of Masjumi*. McGill University. 1965.

<sup>48</sup> Feith, H.1962. *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

<sup>49</sup> Nasution, H. 1968. *The Place of Reason in Abduh's Theology: Its Impact on his Theological System and Views*. McGill University: Phd Thesis.

<sup>50</sup> Muzani, S. 1994:91-131. Mutazilah Theology. *Studia Islamika*. Vol. 1(1), April-June.

<sup>51</sup> Nasution, H.1977:6. *Islam Ditinjau dari Berbagai Aspeknya*. Jakarta: Bulan Bintang. Vol 1.

in Islamic history – was the relative.<sup>52</sup> He felt that many Muslims confused these two categories of knowledge, tending to classify the whole of the Islamic canon as absolute and therefore unchanging the natural law of Allah, and so they lacked any basis on which to make changes to either institutions or practices.

Nasution saw this confusion as leading to an exoteric application of not only ethical values but also rules and codes of practice in the daily life of every Muslim. In other words, the result was a literalist understanding of Islam opposed to an understanding of the historical aspects of Islam as being open to interpretation (*ijtihad*).<sup>53</sup> Nasution did not disagree with the ethics and rules to guide daily practice, for they were, after all, the root and branch of Islam, but he was concerned that the humanist tradition in Islam (*adab al Islam*) be kept alive so that Muslims did not become marginalized by the discourses of modernity.

His critique also had theological and historical roots. As with the need to educate the leaders in order to produce an ethical leadership, Nasution believed that the ethic of worldly asceticism needed to be developed in order to create a community that was made up of hardworking individuals with low consumption and high productivity. He believed that such attitudes could only be produced in a climate of rational and liberal theology. Nasution referred back to an early period in Islamic history when Sufism was an intellectual tradition that provided the teachings and direction responsible for the efflorescence of Islamic thought that spanned the centuries 700 to 1300AD, not coincidentally beginning to fall away during and after the Crusades. He argued that mysticism, as it was practiced in the early Islamic centuries was an individual affair, stressing the individual pursuit of exoteric knowledge. Such an approach, he felt, provided the basis for the construction of the economically rational, self-directed, follower of Islam.<sup>54</sup> This was in contrast to the situation in what he called the decadent age of Islam beginning in the thirteenth century. Nasution saw education as the key to the dissemination of rational theology and the Muslim elite as the primary target. He rejected the notion that this change in the understanding of Islam would mean that Islam would lose its influence in the political sphere. On the contrary he believed that it was more important to Islamise the power elites than to establish an Islamic political party.

With this New Order government, the Muslim community becomes more and more developed. I am often asked if the Muslim community can develop without an Islamic political party. In my opinion, it should not have a political party. The progress of the Muslim community is often very dependent on the power elite, namely leaders with an Islamic spirit, and it is not very dependent on political parties. What has the *Partai Persatuan*

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<sup>52</sup> Nasution, H. 1982. *Akal dan Wahyu*. Jakarta: UI-Press. Chapter 3.

<sup>53</sup> Nasution, H. *Islam dan Fundamentalisme*. Unpublished paper.

<sup>54</sup> Nasution, H. in Muzani, op cit. 1994: 122.

*Pembangunan* (PPP)<sup>55</sup> which was claimed to be Islamic political party, given to the development and progress of the Muslim community? ... It was the Minister of Religious Affairs, Alamsyah Ratu Perwiranegara, who struggled to eliminate the Aliran Kepercayaan (Javanese Mysticism) from being officially recognised as the religion of Indonesia. Where was the PPP? The Minister took the case to the President of Indonesia, and this controversial issue was finally resolved with the official elimination of the Aliran Kepercayaan (from being a mainstream religion). How long did the PPP and our preachers struggle for that? It was obvious that the solution lay with the political elite. If the elite had said no, it would not have been resolved.<sup>56</sup>

In expressing these sentiments Nasution seemed to be condoning a particular understanding of power and the responsible exercise of power that was widely accepted in Indonesia.<sup>57</sup> This can be understood in reference to the conclusions of Nasution's MA thesis (discussed earlier) and to the discussion on the role of the state and the nature of political leadership discussed in the earlier section of this paper's discussion of Sjadzali's arguments for strong government. It is also interesting to note that the role of the army in establishing order in 1965-66 impressed him greatly.<sup>58</sup> He shared the widely held view in Indonesia in the mid 1990s that the military was not just a professional military arm of the state, but a part of the fabric of Indonesian society, born out of the role of the military in the fight for independence in the late 1940s.<sup>59</sup>

### Critics of Islamic Liberalism

The new curriculum established in 1973 and used as a basis for teaching in all of the IAINs for the last 20 years has always had its critics. In 1988, after some fifteen years of the new curriculum, critics attempted to force a re-evaluation of it claiming that it was disregarding the moral teachings contained in *Fiqh*. Nasution's reply in his 1989 autobiography<sup>60</sup> was a spirited one and gives a first hand illustration of the contrasting views between those who favour proscriptive rather than hermeneutic attitudes to moral education.

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<sup>55</sup> *The Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* (PPP) United Development Party was formed in 1973 by the New Order Government to amalgamate the four Muslim political parties into one for the sake of national political stability.

<sup>56</sup> Nasution, H. op cit. 1989:46.

<sup>57</sup> See Introduction for discussion of power, also Benedict Anderson. 1972. In *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*. (ed.) Holt, C. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

<sup>58</sup> Conversation with Nasution at Ciputat IAIN. July 1995.

<sup>59</sup> This is understood in Indonesia as the *Dwifungsi ABRI* (Indonesian military dual function). Said, S.1991. *The Genesis of Power*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

<sup>60</sup> Nasution H. op cit. 1989.

I see the motive behind the critics' wish to change the 1973 curriculum is to abolish the subject of philosophy contained within it ... They simply do not understand the curriculum. They want to introduce morality into the curriculum, but morality is not taught but internalised, not at school but in the family. I also think that they do not understand philosophy and that they think it is responsible for student's moral decadence ... If we go back to the old curriculum, we will only know *Fiqh* ... It will be a set back and Islam will become very *fiqh* orientated. This was the condition of the IAIN when I arrived. Everything was answered and solved by *Fiqh* ... it was dangerous. It would be like returning to 20 years ago. Pak Harto (President Suharto) and the Minister of Religious Affairs hope that the *ummah* are rational and broad minded. But is the proposed alternative curriculum able to accommodate this hope? If we re-apply the old curriculum, we will become peripheral and marginal, and the appeal of some people to integrate the IAIN into the Department of Education and Culture would once again become stronger in order to make it more open minded... even the President would probably think that the IAIN hampers (development) since it would produce only fundamentalist and narrow minded Muslims, and he would consequently have it closed ... we have proclaimed that the IAIN of Jakarta is a centre of the Muslim modernisation. If we want to keep the IAIN on the right track, the curriculum of 1973 must not be changed to that of the old spirit.<sup>61</sup>

Nurcholish Madjid, one of the other Islamic scholars identified in this study, also taught at the IAIN in Ciputat. He has done so on and off for the last 20 years between his sojourns in North America where he was completing his postgraduate studies, which included a Doctorate at Chicago University. Nasution and Madjid have both been called 'orientalists' by their traditional opponents.<sup>62</sup> In discussions with Nurcholish Madjid in 1995, he suggested that this was now changing because the middle class and the intelligentsia saw that they (the neo-modernists) were making a more relevant response to modernisation than were the traditionalists. Nevertheless, he added that this shift in public opinion had not come about without a struggle.<sup>63</sup>

Nasution was seen as an establishment figure in the New Order government of President Suharto. He was quite aware of this perception and when asked if it was an impediment to his acceptance in some quarters, agreed readily enough that it was. He felt, however, that he was on the right track, and that the Government was sympathetic and even favoured Islam in all its activities. To the suggestion that he was seen in some quarters as a traitor to the cause of Islam, he replied that he had put up with such difficulties for most

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<sup>61</sup> Nasution, H. op cit. 1989:41-44.

<sup>62</sup> Muzani, S. 1994: 91-131. Mutazilah Theology. *Studia Islamika*. Vol. 1(1), April-June.

<sup>63</sup> Madjid, N. 1994. *Studia Islamica*. Vol. 1 April-June.

of his life and he was undeterred now. These sentiments, expressed in interviews with the author in July 1994, are given textual credibility in his published work, for example in his discussion of the differences between the Sukarno regime and the New Order of Suharto. The foundations for these sentiments can also be readily discovered in Nasution's Masters thesis.

During the period of the Old Order I chose to live abroad. At that time Indonesia was underdeveloped in almost all sectors ... what was heard about was only poverty and instability ... or conflicts between elite leaders. The New Order is different. When I came to Jakarta from abroad, it looked very busy and dynamic with development programs in almost all sectors. Now Indonesia has become developed compared with Egypt in all sectors. Egypt is left far behind... the New Order government is able to set and maintain national stability, therefore economic development runs smoothly. Now Jakarta is more developed than Cairo... in Egypt it is hard to control national stability, maybe because there are too many political parties. I dislike a country with too many political parties.<sup>64</sup>

Nasution's preference for seeing Islam as a set of humanistic values, rather than as a complete system for living encompassing all life spaces in the legal exoteric prescriptions of Islamic law (*fiqh*), conformed to the objectives of the New Order government which was encouraging consciously or unconsciously, the movement towards privatised religious practice. Any attempts in the last 25 years to form a political party to represent the Muslim view, a view that one assumes would be shared by a great many Muslims, had been stymied. Critics argued, with some justification, that the values Nasution and Madjid espoused played right into the hands of the Indonesian government, that they were, like Hegel, serving as the liberal spokesmen for a repressive regime. When asked this in separate interviews Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid said that they did not feel they were stooges of the Government, kept there to be an apologists for Government policy within the forum of Islamic education.<sup>65</sup> Madjid said that he had been called many things, including an accusation that he was a Zionist, but he knew he had the support of a large number of people who backed *Paramidina*<sup>66</sup> (his Islamic teaching institute, Jakarta) so he was confident that he stood for a good cause.

Nasution was equally forthright in his autobiography where he wrote:

Islamic institutions have nothing to do with political parties but are about the spirit or soul of the rule. If the ruler has an Islamic spirit, the Muslim *ummah* will develop ... Islam will develop in a country if her leader or power elite is mentally Islamic ... therefore

<sup>64</sup> Nasution, H. op cit. 1989:46.

<sup>65</sup> Interview in Ciputat. July 1994.

<sup>66</sup> *Paramidina* had as its Chairman of the Board of Governors, Abruzal Bakrie who was in period 1993-1998 a close friend of the Vice President of Indonesia Tri Sutrisno and Chairman of KADIN the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce.

be close to the power elite. Bring him or her the spirit of Islam. So men and women who are anti-Islam will regress. The President keeps us from destruction and underdevelopment. So just follow him.<sup>67</sup>

This ‘cultural approach’, as it has been called, to realising the objectives of the Indonesian Government has been criticised by a number of commentators including Kamal Hasan who argued that Islamic renewal fell within the government strategy for development.<sup>68</sup> The statements by Nurcholish Madjid “Islam yes, political party no”<sup>69</sup>, Munawir Sjadzali “the aspiration of the Ummah is fulfilled without a political party”<sup>70</sup>, and Harun Nasution “the progress of Islam often depends not on political parties, but on the ruling elite that has an Islamic spirit”<sup>71</sup> tend to suggest that this criticism has some weight. The institutional links between Nurcholish Madjid via *Paramidina* to the political elite (see footnote 66) and Nasution’s support for and support by the New Order Government in its approach to religious education suggest that there is a continuity of practice that is not easy to overlook. There is a complex link between State, Nation and Islam, which supports the foundational position of Islamic practice, that Islam permeates all aspects of life and one cannot be separated from the other.

However, to then project some kind of conspiracy theory, a state plot to turn Islam into a bourgeois ideology seems excessive. What seem much more likely to be the case is that the conditions of modernity have produced an environment that is hospitable to such an approach, and that in another place and another time the voices of Nasution, Madjid and Sjadzali would be without a receptive forum. These spokesmen were just that, articulators of a long established tradition in Islam in general, and late 20<sup>th</sup> century Indonesian Islam in particular, to seek advancement via education and to cultivate individuals capable of leading by protecting and supporting the ‘good’ within the humanist traditions of Muslim philosophy and theology.

## Conclusion

As already noted, this period of history has two possible readings: the cooption and domestication of Islam in Indonesia to serve the purposes of an authoritarian government, or the emergence – in a period of economic and political stability – of a liberal humanist philosophical and ethical Islam that has existed since the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The latter is the reading preferred here, for I argue that the liberal Islam discussed in this study is profoundly suited to

<sup>67</sup> Nasution. Refleksi. op cit.:47.

<sup>68</sup> Hassan, M.K 1980. *Muslim Intellectual Responses to New Order Indonesia*. Kuala Lumpur: Bahasa dan Pustaka.

<sup>69</sup> Madjid, N.1987:205. *Islam, Kemoderenan dan Keindonesian*. Bandung: Mizan.

<sup>70</sup> Sjadzali, M. 1993:62. *Islam Realitas Baru dan Orientasi Masa Depan Bangsa*. Jakarta: University Indonesia Press.

<sup>71</sup> Nasution, H. op cit.:47.

engage in a dialogue with the often corrosive forces of late modernity. Yet I argue that Indonesia and the community of South East Asia may have missed an opportunity to engage with a bold and humane attempt to articulate the vision of humanist Islam in the world's largest Muslim community. The geopolitical machinations behind the Asian economic crisis and its impact on Indonesian political and economic circumstances may have snuffed out (one hopes only temporarily) a real account of the 'good' in South East Asia. Increasingly the comments of Siddique earlier in reference to Malaysian politics may also be the future in Indonesia, where there exists fresh energy for a shift towards the doctrinaire and polemical, made necessary by the continued incomprehension and disregard for a rich and fruitful account of Islam that was nurtured (some would say paradoxically) under the authoritarian government of Suharto's New Order.