

## Indonesian Islam and Attitudes towards the United States

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**Dr. Syafi'i Anwar** started out by saying that as an Indonesian Muslim, he sees himself “as a friend of America.” His first introduction to American culture was through listening to Voice of America, which is how he also learned English. He sees himself as a “loyal critic” of the US.

While Indonesia is a Muslim-majority country, it is neither an Islamic nor a secular state, though the constitution is based on *sharia*. Indonesia has *Pancasila*, or the Five Principles, as a state ideology. The five principles are the belief in:

- One Supreme God
- Humanity
- Unity of Indonesia
- Democracy
- Social Justice

The post-Soeharto era saw a rise of “radical conservative Islam (RCI).” The problem is that RCI is not something new if Indonesian history is examined. Indonesian Muslims are mainly Sunni. There are a few Shiites, but there is no political power within their small number. Radical conservative Islam brings with it an anti-pluralism agenda, a sense of “us” versus “them,” or *minna* and *minhum*. This can lead to a gender bias and discrimination against women, because of this lack of respect due to “the others.” Also, radical conservative Islam is generally

committed to anti-Americanism. The West is often perceived as having a hidden agenda to destroy Islam.

Dr. Anwar prefers to use the term “progressive liberal Islam (PLI),” as distinct from simply “liberal Islam,” to define the other end of the Islamic religious spectrum. Progressive liberal Islam respects America and the war against terrorism, though it is now difficult to defend President Bush’s policy in the Middle East. There is criticism, but it should not be read as an “anti-America” ideology. The two leading organizations representing moderate Muslims in Indonesia are the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, with about 70 million members combined. The moderate Muslim critique of the US is that the US is a great nation, and they respect it as a super power and a “center of knowledge and technology,” but that US policy in the Middle East is a great failure and they express disappointment with the Bush administration.

The magnitude of anti-American demonstrations has been exaggerated by the media. Dr. Anwar says that in actuality anti-US demonstrations are few and only 15% of the Indonesian population support these protests. Most of the people who do participate are radical conservative Islamists. Thus the claim cannot seem to be made that Indonesian society is anti-American.

The government to government relationship between the US and Indonesia is better. President Bush has said that Indonesia is a friend of the United States, and President SBY has said that “we are pleased with our relationship and cooperation.” This reflects not only the current state of bilateral relations, but extends to previous presidents. Dr. Anwar appeared confident that Indonesian Muslims will remain moderate and those from radical conservative Islam groups “will not be able to dictate Indonesian politics.”

Indonesian society is not aware of the success stories of American Muslims and is vulnerable to anti-American propaganda. But the younger generation does have an affinity towards American pop culture, and Dr. Anwar repeatedly stressed the importance of such institutions as the American Cultural Center (ACC) and the United States Information Service (USIS). There is also a limited understanding of American politics.

Dr. Anwar said that he hopes SBY wins the election in 2009 as that would guarantee the current stability. As it is, Indonesia is more stable under SBY than it has been in recent years, and progressive ideas are being implemented. His administration is also committed to the fight against terrorism, and this is a good sign in strengthening the bilateral relationship.

**Q: Do Indonesian leaders believe US policies are the beginning of a trend or only reflect the current administration? What would be a good way to get the success stories of American Muslims across?**

**A:** This is not a trend, but it is up and down and dependent upon Washington’s Middle East policy. When US troops helped Aceh, positive opinion greatly increased. Educated

Indonesians and moderate Muslims are not anti-American or anti-Bush Administration *per se*. They’re just critical, generally speaking, of wrongful actions taken in the Middle East. Returning Indonesians are very proud to be educated in America.

Reconstituting the role of USIS would be a good way to start to explain America. More information, more contacts and more exchanges are needed. There are important information gaps now that the American Cultural Centers are closed. There are now American Corners in universities, but who goes to the university and who are you trying to reach out to?

**Q: What are elements right now that the Muslims object to?**

**A:** Use of the word “Crusade” is a sensitive issue, and that was capitalized on, to mean that America will destroy Islam. In Bali, Bush acknowledged that this was misinterpreted. It is a matter of how to handle to exploitation of these issues. For example, Bush’s visit to a mosque – a positive development - received limited coverage. I again strongly suggest reestablishing USIS.

**Q: The 1990s saw the rise of the Islamic party, PKS. What do you see as the implications of the party’s rise?**

**A:** Young, devout and educated Muslims make up the party. As long as PKS is committed to Pancasila and not *sharia*, we’ll be okay. I oppose *sharia* that is imposed by law and I am pleased that the results of the Jakarta gubernatorial election in August showed that the people are still committed to Pancasila.

**Q: In Australia, Indonesia experts seem to be focused on the revival of Sufism.**

**Looking at the NU, which emerged as the most dynamic organization in Indonesian Islam, its emphasis on Islam as a personal faith and softer approach on cultural influences on Islam have grassroots appeal. The need for personal belief systems seems to be a global trend. Do you agree?**

**A:** Yes, Sufism is significant, but this is not the solution. Sufism is now undergoing a small revival in Indonesia in reaction to radical conservative Islam. But the number of those committed to Sufism is limited.

**Q: One change is a greater tendency to turn to the Middle East to determine the “correct” form of Islam. But there are a quarter of a billion Muslims in Southeast Asia. Sharia is not an option in the West. Indonesians have a unique perspective. How do they speak to the Islamic community in the Middle East?**

**A:** Simple. Translate works into English, and translate books from Arabic to Indonesian. It’s a step and a necessary step. There are good linkages with organizations in Jordan, Egypt, etc. These are good for the future.

**Q: What’s happening in the NU and the independent small pesantrens? Do the extremists have links to these?**

**A:** Extremists are not linked to the main pesantrens. They are linked to narrow-minded small schools and this cannot be controlled. The majority of the pesantrens, I strongly believe, are not radical. A pluralistic education is necessary. Distance learning is being employed in pesantrens in small villages which is being done with help of the Ford

Foundation. At this point, the introduction of these techniques is very successful.

**Q: Teaching journalism is a good way to teach pesantren students an open-minded and thoughtful way about the world. Might it be a good idea to link up these organizations and fields?**

**A:** Pesantrens have a strong oral tradition, not print. My institute is training students themselves to write articles and to learn journalism. We teach them how to write eloquently to counter radical Islam. It is also important to train them in the English language.

**Q: There are concerns about Din Syamsuddin as chairman of the Muhammadiyah. He directed that Muhammadiyah should not be involved in politics as a response to reported PKS attempts to infiltrate his organization.**

**A:** Din is committed to improving the Muhammadiyah community. PKS is trying to recruit Muhammadiyah followers because they have an appeal on university campuses, including those run by the Muhammadiyah. Other conservative groups such as Hizbut Tahrir are also active among university students. I respect Din’s effort to protect his organization.

**Q: Is there cooperation between Din Syamsuddin and the NU?**

**A:** Both are committed to fighting radicalism. They need a good relationship to do this. It’s important to protect the organizations so they won’t be infiltrated by radical Islam.