

“Gender, Islam, and Indonesia”**Nur Rofiah, Islamic State University, Jakarta****and****Saifullah Kamalie, University of Al Azhar, Jakarta****Washington, DC, April 16, 2007***in cooperation with Legacy International*

Dr. Nur Rofiah began by noting the increased popularity of the *jilbab* (head covering), formerly worn primarily by those in Islamic boarding schools and seen as a symbol of village women. Now, she said, the *jilbab* is popular in cities and in pesantren and is linked to what she sees as an increasing public role of Muslim women in Indonesia.

Some of the evidence for this includes: (1) a 30% quota for female legislators in the national assembly (DPR); (2) a governmental commitment to examine how family law and other laws and policies affect women, including “gender mainstreaming” in government operations at all levels; (3) a national women’s commission to examine and report on violence against women; and (4) a new law that treats all violence against women (including domestic abuse) as criminal. Despite these policies and intentions, Dr. Nur observed that the empowerment of women has not yet been achieved.

However, she said, the discourse on Islamic issues in Indonesia is still dominated by men, and men wrote most of the texts used in religious schools which are primarily written in Arabic by scholars from the Middle East. Muslim women are not included in high religious councils, she observed.

In the reform era in Indonesia, the devolution of power to districts (*kabupaten*) and provinces has allowed some regional governments to institute religious laws—some of which have created problems for Muslim women as well as non-Muslims who sometimes are forced to follow Islamic strictures. For example, laws that require that all (not just Muslim) women wear *jilbabs* do not respect the rights of non-Muslim women. Other laws, for example formalizing Islamic statutes on rape and sexual behavior, impose religious norms from one religion on those who follow another religion having different norms.

Women’s groups are trying to address these issues by putting forward interpretations of Islamic law that empower women and lead to equality. Women’s groups are also inviting male leaders to discuss women’s problems with them. This has proven somewhat difficult, however, as some male leaders believe that women’s issues are simply less important and should be left to women only.

Ms. Nur has found that humanizing the problems sometimes overcomes male reluctance to recognize the problem. For example, polygamy clearly is recognized in Islam. Some women’s groups have led

discussions with women and children who have suffered from polygamous practices, helping male religious leaders think about the issue in a new light. It is also necessary to develop “religious discourse” regarding interpretations of religious texts and to offer alternative interpretations to

achieve “gender justice.” In doing so, religious practitioners should understand the “reality” of social problems before applying religious texts in a normative way; such “contextuality,” she said, would improve the popular acceptance of religious doctrines.

The key to success in these efforts, she said, is to create more opportunities for women to participate in Indonesia’s public and religious life.

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Observing that he primarily is a teacher of Arabic, **Mr. Saifullah** opened with a description of the goals of the most conservative Muslims in Indonesia. They want, he said, strict interpretations of Islamic law. Small numbers of them believe that they are called to fight the West in an ideological confrontation demanded by their interpretation of certain texts. These groups believe that the world is divided into two groups: the followers of Islam and the followers of satan. They want *sharia* law because, they believe, life without it is worth nothing. Finally, they believe that all other beliefs are false.

Saifullah, however, said that Islam does not require adherence to these radical beliefs. Islam requires belief, of course, but true believers can live in peace side by side with non-Muslims as long as the non-Muslims do not attempt to interfere with Islamic laws.

Many Indonesian leaders, including former Minister of Foreign Affairs Alwi Shihab, recognize the importance of interaction between the Muslim world and the West, even though there is frequently tension and even though the West sometimes sees Islam as a threat. This dialogue, he believes, can proceed on the basis of equality between Islam and Christianity. One of the challenges he sees in this dialogue is a lack of expert knowledge of Christianity among some Muslim leaders.

Religious evangelism on both sides presents the greatest difficulty to productive Muslim-Christian interaction. Because conservatives on both sides believe that only their religion holds the truth, neither group of fundamentalists believes that interaction and dialogue can lead to a meaningful end. Proselytization, an article of faith in both Islam and Christianity, has to be managed to “avoid manipulation” for political or non-religious motives. Rather there should be a mutual exchange of views on both sides, not “conversion by force.” In this context, it is important not to think only of a dichotomy between the Islamic community and western civilization, but rather to “lift the dialogue above old history and hostility.”

Saifullah closed by stating that both sides must engage with respect, working together to create a common code of conduct and principles regarding evangelistic activities. Their common goal should be to bring people to faith and to overcome the barriers that separate believers. For Indonesia, the objective should be to achieve “freedom in religion” and a better understanding of universal teachings.

Q: What can you do to alleviate religious conflict in Indonesia?

A: Our rules only allow proselytizing among those with no religion—neither Christians nor Muslims should be the targets of missionaries.

Q: Without a supreme religious authority (like the pope), how does Islam settle religious disputes?

A: Interpretation continues and evolves (though perhaps not officially). We are actually fortunate that there is no higher authority because that allows continuing evaluation and interpretation.

Q: Is the pressure to act more religiously really Arabization of Islam in Indonesia?

A: We also ask this. Why can regions implement sharia laws (when officially only the central government may act on religious issues, with the exception of Aceh)? Indonesia needs to develop a functioning system of decentralization. We hope that the issue of religious laws does not become a political one used to further the interests of one political party.

Muslim women need to stress that sharia laws should respect equality and justice for all. A merely textual application of some religious laws would lead to the Arabization of Indonesian society.