

**Roundtable Briefing with  
Dr. Mohammad Syafi'i Anwar  
Executive Director of the International Center for Islam and Pluralism**

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At a breakfast roundtable, Dr. Mohammad Shafi'i Anwar, Executive Director of the International Center for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP), discussed the development of political Islam and the prospects for democracy in Indonesia. Dr. Anwar highlighted the main challenge facing Indonesia—a number of radical, and sometimes violent, groups—but argued that the majority of Indonesians would ensure that Indonesian traditions of tolerance and respect would remain strong.

Dr. Shafi'i began by noting that Indonesia is not an Islamic state based on sharia, but is a pluralist society guided by Pancasila. The vast majority of Indonesia's 225 million Muslims are, he argued, followers of "moderate Islam, smiling Islam." The bombings in Indonesia after 9/11 (Bali, JW Marriott, Australian Embassy) frightened some people, leading them to believe that Indonesians might be turning to a more radical Islamic sensibility. However, these fears are exaggerated. While the mainstream Muslim organizations have 70 million members (Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has 40 million and Muhammadiyah has 30 million), he estimates that there are no more than 15,000 followers of radical Islamic theology in all of Indonesia.

Indonesian radicals differ, he said, from more traditional Indonesian Muslims in four ways: a desire to impose sharia laws, an opposition to pluralism and tolerance of other religions, a belief that women should return to traditional social roles, and a belief in conspiracy theories (for example, that there is a Western agenda to destroy Islamic civilization). Many radicals also believe that violence is an acceptable way to spread their ideas and influence.

The popularity of Islamist parties can be easily gauged at the ballot box: Islamic parties attracted only 12.5% of the Indonesian electorate in the last elections.

However, since many moderate Islamic leaders are not willing to challenge radicals for fear of attack, Dr. Shafi'i believes that institutions are required to oppose radical theology in an organized way. ICIP works to promote pluralism and tolerance, gender equality, and to fight conspiracy theories. Radical Islamists have called Dr. Shafi'i and his colleagues "enemies of Islam" and have written articles condemning them.

Dr. Shafi'i acknowledged a "creeping sharia" in Indonesia, marked by local governments imposing laws on behavior, female clothing, and marriage (as well as some Arabization of Indonesian names), but said that these efforts are "not in the spirit of our constitution." Moreover, local laws are not supposed to address religious issues: religious issues are the province of the central government.

Finally, he expressed confidence in the future of Indonesia, stating that a recent poll had found that 69% of Indonesians remain committed to Pancasila, while fewer than 10% favor the establishment of sharia.

**Q: Is there foreign funding supporting radicals and Arabization?**

A: It is difficult to prove. What we know is that radicals are well funded and organized, sermons are dominated by conservative thought, and there are many inexpensive translations of Arabic publications available. We publish our own materials to counter this.

**Q: Does the curriculum of Indonesian schools include materials on pluralism?**

A: No, but we are working on that. This year our organization led programs for pesantren leaders on pluralism and human rights. At the first program, people were suspicious; by the fourth program, people were open—we even invited a priest. We have had training sessions for 152 pesantrens, but there are about 2250 members in the Indonesian Pesantren Association. We are working to spread our training and to convince the government that teaching pluralism is important.

**Q: Is someone working to train more moderate preachers?**

A: Many of the people in our training are quite conservative at the start but become more open-minded because of our training. We want to professionalize pesantren teachers and leaders so that they can create materials on pluralism and tolerance themselves. We have also found that many prayer rooms are stocked with Koranic materials only—we are working to create materials on pluralism and tolerance for a broad audience.

**Q: What is the religious situation in Papua?**

A: We have yet to program in Papua. There are organizations such as Laskar Jihad that have send groups to Papua and underground movements have sent people as well. The police are now reacting to this (as in Poso).

**Q: What are these groups' objectives?**

A: I'm not sure. They try to develop an "us versus them" mentality to encourage people to fight in, for example, Ambon. We challenge them intellectually.

**Q: How do you explain the inability of the Indonesian Government to take action against groups that intimidate others? Does the government fear a backlash?**

A: Our government is focusing on economic recovery, law enforcement, political reforms, and good governance. The president has not taken any significant action on religious and tolerance issues. We have asked the government to act against radical groups in order to protect moderates. The police have taken some action, but in Poso and Ambon they found it very difficult to investigate violence because the groups were underground.

**Q: Can you comment on the anti-pornography bill?**

A: We opposed the bill. The GOI postponed the bill—although some political opportunists promoted it—and there is no indication that it will come up again soon.

**Q: Why has peace returned to Ambon but not Poso?**

A: I don't know--it is unpredictable. The police can't explain it, either. Who benefits from the unrest? Who is the main actor?

**Q: What are your most and least successful programs?**

A: We have had success in promoting pluralism at pesantrens—we know this because demand for the programs is increasing. One of our challenges is to train preachers so that they can preach from a more moderate perspective. Right now, no one is doing this.

**Q: Do you work through NU or Muhammadiyah when you work with pesantrens?**

A: So far, we have concentrated in West Java, on the more conservative pesantrens. NU is concentrated in East Java and NU members are more moderate. We are working with the Ford Foundation to create a distance learning program on pluralism.