

Struggle for the Soul of Islam: Inside Indonesia
Film and Panel Discussion
Washington, DC
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*Co-hosted by USINDO, the Asia Society, and the Southeast Asia Studies Program at the
Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies
Sponsored in part by Terror Free Tomorrow*

Panel Participants

Ken Ballen, Terror Free Tomorrow
Ken Levis, Producer, *Struggle for the Soul of Islam: Inside Indonesia*
Angel Rabasa, RAND Corporation
Sadanand Dhume, Asia Society (moderator)

Panel Discussion

Ken Levis started the discussion by mentioning how difficult it was to explain the complexity of Indonesia and Indonesian Islam without being too reductive. The primary challenges were how to cover the topic and what angle to take. He admitted he knew very little about Indonesia at the start of filming in the summer of 2005. The primary message of the film is that Islam is not the stereotype that most people have, and that Islam is not simply about the Middle East, Wahhabism and radicalism.

Angel Rabasa complimented the film, offering that perhaps it takes a non-expert to create clarity on a topic. He noted that the film managed to cover all the disparate streams of Indonesian Islam. Rabasa noted that Indonesia is a microcosm of a larger issue in Islam, namely the interaction of radicalism and the pre-Islamic forms that exist in some Muslim countries. This has become a struggle between radical militant Islam and more traditional and tolerant forms of Islam. While this struggle is occurring all over the Islamic world, it is particularly evident in Indonesia.

Ken Ballen noted that polling had shown a marked decrease in Indonesia of support for terrorism. In 2003, 70% of Indonesian Muslims felt that terrorism was unjust. This figure now stands at 86%. Ballen also noted that support for Osama bin Laden primarily was rooted in protest. He said that 71% of those who supported Osama bin Laden also supported the US, especially after the large US relief effort in response to the Aceh tsunami.

Rabasa observed that terrorism is the manifestation of a radical ideology and that there is also a war of ideas at play between moderates and radicals. Indonesia has a lot to build on, with the Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah as large moderate Islamic organizations that can be empowered.

Responding to a question as to whether he was optimistic or pessimistic about Indonesia, Levis said he was most optimistic, but that the quality of democracy there was the real question. He noted conversations with the Ministers of Justice and Religious Affairs, who underscored that Indonesia is

not a secular democracy. A core tenet of Pancasila, the official ideology, is that Indonesia is grounded in a belief in one God, and that it was the public duty of the government to promote religion (six are now recognized). Thus there is no clear separation between church and state as in Turkey. Levis agreed that moderates in Indonesia should be empowered, but he cited the lack of support for the Liberal Islam Network (JIL) from even such moderate organizations as the Muhammadiyah, which felt JIL had “gone too far.”

Ballen said that moderate leaders in Indonesia had not condemned radical elements, and that where political advantages to being quiet and also to being against pornography and other vices. Ballen added that there wasn’t “a lot of courage” among the moderates.

Rabasa noted that Din Syamsuddin, leader of the Muhammadiyah, was not a good example of moderate leadership, rather he is a political “chameleon.” Rabasa went on to say that the Muhammadiyah was close to Salafi Islam, a radical version of “pure” Islam that favors doing away with traditions that have built up over the centuries. While the Muhammadiyah wants to make this vision compatible with modernity, Levis responded that the Muhammadiyah was trending toward the conservative side of Islam. Rabasa added that the Muhammadiyah youth wing was very moderate, creating a divergence. He added that Din Syamsuddin, while on the Islamist side, was a political animal at heart.

Rabasa went on to discuss the Prosperous Justice party (PKS), saying that it was in the same basket as the Islamist wing of the Muhammadiyah. It is not violent and is not radical in the sense that it wants to do away with Pancasila which recognizes other faiths. Rabasa compared the PKS to the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, observing that it did well in the 2004 elections because it de-

emphasized Islam to focus on good governance and anti-corruption. He noted that there is a split in the PKS between younger, moderate and primarily urban middle-class members and the more ideological old guard. Also, the party is losing its appeal somewhat, mainly because of its association with government ineffectiveness and corruption by controlling majorities in several local legislative bodies. Rabasa contended that the PKS was “under siege” from Hizbut Tahrir from the more radical side.

Discussion

Q: What sense do you have of what the followers of Abu Bakar Bashir, leader of Jemmah Islamiyah, believe when they hear that democracy and Islam are incompatible and that Allah decides – meaning that they have no say. Who decides, Bashir or Allah?

Levis: Fervent followers believe that democracy and Islam are incompatible, but they have a very shallow understanding of true Islam – that’s the consensus of analysts.

Ballen: Don’t neglect the role of US foreign policy in this radicalization.

Rabasa: The answer is Bashir – their interpretation is only what Bashir teaches them about what’s in the Koran.

Q: What is the role of Saudi Arabian funding (\$8 billion) for Wahhabist missionary and educational activities in Indonesia? And are the US and the Europeans effectively countering that?

Levis: The big problem of overt US funding is that it makes the recipient immediately suspect. That doesn’t exist with Saudi funding. It’s hard to find anyone willing to say anything positive about US foreign policy.

Q: Does Indonesia need better enforcement of current laws or new laws to protect religious freedom?

Levis: The religious laws in Tangerang, where excesses have been committed in the enforcement of Islamic law, are clearly unconstitutional because only the central government has the power to implement laws like that. The Justice Minister told us the central government was responding slowly because it does not want a backlash. The politicians are intimidated.

Q: Is the attractiveness of the radical *pesantren* rooted in the availability of funding and their availability to poor students?

Dhume: The *pesantren* are attractive to people because they represent education grounded in religion and morality.

Q: Comparing the Cold War and the war on terror, is Indonesia a linchpin for US policy in Southeast Asia?

Rabasa: Indonesia is important in global terms. While radical ideas have their basis in the Middle East, especially in Egypt and Pakistan, moderate ideas prevail outside the Middle East as in Indonesia. We need to reverse the flow of ideas back to the Middle East from the moderate countries.

Levis: The US could promote the translation of moderate teachings and religious opinion into Arabic for “export” back to the Middle East.

Dhume: Unfortunately, there is not really a big appetite for Indonesian ideas in the Middle East.

Q: Is there space within conservative Islam in Indonesia for a big minority like the Hindus in Bali?

Levis: Yes.

Dhume: It’s not clear that conservative Islam is dominant in Indonesia.

Q: Are liberal Islam and liberal democracy the same?

Rabasa: The Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda have the same goal, namely the establishment of an Islamic state, but their methods are different. *Sharia*, though, is really incompatible with democracy.

Q: Are there distinct differences between rural and urban Muslims in Indonesia?

Levis: Rural Muslims tend to be very tolerant and remain committed to cultural traditions.

Note: The PBS documentary, *Struggle for the Soul of Islam: Inside Indonesia*, is available on DVD. USINDO plans further programs on this theme.