

**American-Indonesian Chamber of Commerce
in conjunction with USINDO**

Syariah or Secularism

**Dr. Greg Fealy
Australian National University
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Dr. Greg Fealy, author of *Joining the Caravan? The Middle East, Islamism and Indonesia* and other writings on Indonesia, discussed the “threat” of Islamicization in the context of Indonesia’s political history and social system. At the outset, Dr. Fealy averred that the dichotomy is really not between the imposition of Islamic law in Indonesia and the country’s status as a “secular” state because its national ideology, *Pancasila*, and constitution provide for a belief in God as a basic tenet. Islam, albeit the largest faith, is but one of six recognized religions, along with Christianity (Protestantism), Roman Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism.

Nonetheless, Fealy continued, the images of Indonesia in the popular media are ones of popular demonstrations by right-wing Islamic organizations with attendant general disorder, religious gangs, schoolgirls being beheaded, the jailing of radical preachers, and the *Playboy* trial instigated by conservative Muslim critics. The impression is that Indonesia is being rapidly Islamicized and is becoming more radical. Is Indonesia under threat from “rampant” *syariahization*, the implementation of Islamic law in all areas of personal life and society, and what are the implications for foreigners?

Fealy maintained that *Pancasila*, including belief in a supreme deity, is central to Indonesian national identity and the constitution provides for freedom of religion. Nevertheless, over the years many laws and regulations affecting the exercise of religion have been implemented and the national Ministry of Religious Affairs is responsible for regulating religious practice.

Regarding Islamicization, Fealy observed that it has been going on for several decades as Indonesian society has become more overtly religious as seen in the increased use of religious symbols in politics and everyday life, mosque building, rising attendance at prayer time, the popularity of Muslim dress in the fashion industry, the growth of Islamic banking and other attributes. The growth of religious observance in middle class urban society has been most noticeable, echoing in part the increased influence of conservative religious leaders and sects in the United State and Australia, for example.

Dr. Fealy then discussed what he called the “flow through” to politics where the impact of Islam has “not necessarily” increased. Polling data, on one hand, reflects high levels of piety among the population and, depending on the poll, 66 to 80% say they want *syariah* to be the basis of public life. However, “wanting to be pious” is often exaggerated, although Muslims believe that religious values have a positive impact on public life. Despite this strong response to moral values arguments, there are clear reservations about the imposition of corporal punishment (*hudud*) and there is ambivalence about an excessively normative approach to imposing Islamic practice on society. The low percentage (2-3%) of Indonesians who express admiration for Muslim figures such as Osama bin Laden and the formerly jailed cleric Abu Bakar Basyir indicates that popular receptivity of violent extremism is small.

Regarding “creeping *syariahization*,” Fealy noted that Islamic law has been implemented in only one province, Aceh and 42 districts (*kabupaten*) sprinkled throughout the country. Additional districts can implement Islamic law provisions unless the central government intervenes, and there is an uneven pattern of what religious strictures are applied. Some impose restrictions on dress, require candidates for public office to be able to recite the Koran, and prohibit gambling and the sale of alcohol, including in Jakarta where a local ordinance has removed alcoholic beverages from supermarket shelves. Dr. Fealy observed that there is political manipulation as some public officials want to appear more Islamic for vote-getting purposes.

In the case of Aceh, Fealy continued, the Habibie administration wanted to improve relations with this conservative religious region and thought that it would be popular to implement *syariah* on a uniform basis. A province-wide body and religious police are charged with implementing Islamic legal tenets and there is now legislation in the regional assembly to provide for the surgical severing of hands in cases of major theft. Fealy’s conclusion was that Aceh seems to be going down the path of Malaysia by building up institutions that ratchet up the implementation of Islamic law.

As for political Islam, Fealy believes that the impact of Islam on a national basis has been greatly exaggerated. Election results show a high-water mark of 44% of voters favoring Muslim parties in 1955 compared to 16% in 1999 and a slight rebound to 22% in 2004. The pro-Muslim vote in 2004 largely went to one party, the Prosperous Justice Party or PKS, which campaigned strongly in Jakarta and other urban areas on a platform of anti-corruption and good governance, not the implementation of Islamic law. However, the identity of the PKS is split, with one faction favoring an Islamic state and the other being more “values oriented.” PKS popularity is slipping as a result and it is attracting only 2-3% support in recent polls, down from 7%.

Fealy also believes that Islamic political movements have lost ground in the rousing public debate over the anti-pornography law that has been under consideration in Parliament for several years. Generally, the Islamic activists suffered a defeat as most social control elements have been removed from the draft legislation. Likewise, in local election campaigns in over 200 jurisdictions during the past two years, sectarian candidates generally have not prevailed. One reason for this is that public support for radical groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), *Laskar Jihad*, and the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI) has decreased as a result of terrorist acts and continuing inter-religious strife in central Sulawesi and other areas. In brief, Fealy believes, these extreme movements represent a tiny proportion of the Muslim community but receive exaggerated attention in the press.

Overall, Islamic political activism has resulted in a higher standard of public morality and religious observance, Fealy concluded. There has been a turn toward *syariah* as an alternative when public law enforcement has been lacking or is corrupt, and there is a “booming business” in Islamic business, banking and tourism because of the association with moral values. Dr. Fealy concluded that the public morality campaign does not necessarily lead to what some might desire as the implementation of an Islamic state. His advice to business people and others in Indonesia at this time of heightened religious awareness is to become familiar with the local environment and to take advantages of the opportunities as the overwhelming majority of Indonesians basically want prosperity and a prospect for a better life.

The following points emerged during the discussion period:

- To a great extent *syariah* has been “hijacked by the politicians.” Whereas Islamic legal principles should be a guide for moral behavior, the implementation of *syariah* has been uneven and in some cases culturally inappropriate. Social pressure now has resulted in fear to speak about *syariah* in some localities.

- Islamic banking is highly successful, has been largely insulated from bank crises and has tended to bring banking and credit services closer to the grassroots of society.
- Australian and other foreign support of “counter-radicalization” has resulted in an improvement in anti-terrorist enforcement and tries to focus on the “war of ideas.” Most Indonesians are moderate and anti-radical but the campaign really does not reach the true religious radicals who are beyond influencing. To a certain extent, foreign governments want to show they are “doing something” by supporting counter-radical measures.
- On the philosophical level, liberal Islam groups have been getting some exposure for blending western thought with Islam. The debate has narrowed in the past five years, due to the increased impact of radical thought from the Middle East, and the prevailing mood has turned in the conservative direction. The more conservative mood has been affected by perceived western arbitrariness in the Asian financial crisis, the “global war on terror,” and developments in the Middle East.
- The impact of Islam on society has been much less marked in rural areas as the effects of increased religious observance are mostly to be seen in the urbanized, middle class society. Neo-Sufism (mysticism) has grown in some cities and the “globalization of Islam” through the internet and media have had more impact in the urban areas rather than in rural areas. Today Islamic preachers on TV are tending to have more influence on urbanized Indonesians than do scholars and preachers in their neighborhood mosques.
- *Abangan* belief or traditional Javanese mysticism is still there but in urban areas the desire of an individual is to be seen to be a pious Muslim.
- “*Syariahization*” has also had a strong impact on consumerism and the urban lifestyle as sales of books and DVD’s on Islam have boomed, Islamic fashions are popular and can be expensive, there has been a growth in products imported from the Middle East, alcohol is not sold in some localities, and the voices of “more puritanical” Muslims increasingly are heard.