

**Sadanand Dhume's *My Friend the Fanatic: Travels with a Radical Islamist***

**Wednesday, June 10, 2009**

*Held Jointly with the Asia Society*

USINDO and the Asia Society recently hosted the launch of Sadanand Dhume's book, *My Friend the Fanatic: Travels with a Radical Islamist*. Dhume began by discussing how he came to write the book, describing how it was born out of the ashes of the first Bali bombing at a particularly trying time in Indonesia. It is an exploration of how the ideas of pluralism in the country are changing, what it means to be an Indonesian, and what pluralism means to a country faced with extremism. The book asks the question – what are the implications of extremism in Indonesia, a country long considered to be immune to extremists?

After introducing the overall theme, Dhume read excerpts from the book, which described his travels around the country and his encounters with the radical Islamists. He then took several questions from the audience.

**Q. This is your first book. Are you seeking more to be a perceptive travel writer, or more to present information about Islam through the travel writing format?**

The intent with the book is to tell the reader about places in a way which is not often told, to relate experiences even though they may make people uncomfortable, and to bring a critical eye to places that are lacking analysis.

**Q. What is the significance of the hierarchy of citations of extremists? (referring to page 117 of the book)?**

Politically, there is a hierarchy; Ahmad Yassin is at the top because he's trying to be a politician. The big thinkers tend to be associated with Hamas or the Islamic Brotherhood. Among the Indonesian Islamists, the Arab militants have the most glamour attached to them.

**Q. What are the divisions between the radical Muslims in Indonesia?**

Dhume said he did not detect a very deep divide when he was there, more a sense of solidarity, even by those who do not condone the use of violence. This has probably changed some, as Indonesia has to be given credit for a credible campaign against extremism following the attacks in 2005. When the terrorists are cut off from extremists, the government is in a better position to classify based on belief, rather than calling all terrorists extremists, which makes everyone else who does not use violence a moderate.

**Q. Is the extremist Islam described in Indonesia monolithic?**

It is far from monolithic. The book is not an attempt to represent all Indonesian Muslims, but rather a description of a movement, while not the majority, that has gathered strength over the past 20 years or so. Moderates remain strong in Indonesia.

**Q. The Chinese in Indonesia have been the victims of several massacres of the past century, is there still an anti-Chinese feeling in the country?**

The sentiment still exists, but the laws that specifically allowed for prohibitions or restrictions on Chinese culture were repealed when Indonesia became a democracy. The Chinese have more cultural autonomy than ever before. However, we do not know whether this will still be true in 10 years.

**Q. There are many Indonesian students currently in Iran. What is the impression Indonesians have of Iran and the revolution?**

Khomeini is included as an “Islamic Hero”, even though most Indonesians are Sunni Muslims. Ahmadinejad received a hero’s welcome when he visited Indonesia. Iran as a symbol of revolution is powerful, as is the idea that a Sharia state.

**Q. The book describes how Indonesia is the quintessential “soft state” in that it did not stand up to extremist forces – are you now more optimistic that Indonesia will do so?**

Dhume stated that, for seven years, he was deeply pessimistic about the possibilities of extremist forces increasing their role. However, he has

recently become somewhat more optimistic about the future of Indonesia in this area. The non-sectarians gained seats and the Islamists lost in the April elections. Also, SBY chose a technocrat as his running mate. On the political front, the role of extremists is not increasing. However, socially and culturally, the future of extremism in Indonesia remains an open question.

**Q. Is there anything to back up the claims that extremism is dominated by a specific ethnic group? For example, the Javanese?**

The battle over extremism can be called the battle for the Javanese soul. Indonesians Muslims are mostly moderate because of the Javanese, with their own language, culture, and practices, have acted as a buffer to another strong cultural force such as extremism.

**Q. What about the tensions that arise from transmigrasi program or residual migrations?**

Transmigrasi definitely had an impact on the Anbar conflict, where Christians used to make up the vast majority of the population. It has had less of an impact in places like South Sulawesi.

**Q. Were you ever in any danger?**

The most dangerous place he went was in Ambon, but while there never felt personally threatened. In the fundamentalist compound in Borneo, Dhume described feeling uncomfortable at the vision the camp painted of Indonesia’s future, but never felt unsafe.

