The New York Times

Indonesians Seek to Export a Modernized Vision of Islam

The youth wing of Nahdlatul Ulama, an Indonesian Islamic group, is pressing governments around the world to bring Islamic law into line with 21st-century norms.

By JOE COCHRANE MAY 1, 2017

Members of Nahdlatul Ulama in Jakarta in 2011, during a commemoration of the group's founding in Indonesia in 1926. Its youth wing is making a global push to bring Islamic law into line with modern norms.
Supri/Reuters

JAKARTA, Indonesia — The imposing, six-foot-tall painting is a potent symbol of modern Indonesian history: the country's founding father, Sukarno, cradling a dead, barefoot rebel killed by Dutch colonial forces amid rice fields and smoldering volcanoes in late-1940s Java.

The fighter's bloodied shirt draws immediate attention — but so does a necklace dangling from the body: a Christian cross, worn by the independence martyr for the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation.

A 2006 painting by the Dutch artist John van der Sterren depicts Indonesia's founding leader, Sukarno, cradling an independence fighter in the 1940s. The rebel's Christian cross has made the image a symbol of the drive to reinterpret Islamic law. Nahdlatul Ulama

The 2006 painting has become the symbol of a global initiative by the Indonesian youth wing of Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest mass Islamic organization in the world, that seeks to reinterpret Islamic law dating from the Middle Ages in ways that conform to 21st-century norms.

Among other things, it calls for a re-examination of elements of Islamic law that dictate relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, the structure of government and the proper aims and conduct of warfare.

Leaders of Nahdlatul Ulama's youth wing, known as Ansor, say that elements of Shariah, which Muslims consider divine law, are being manipulated by groups like the Islamic State and Al Qaeda to justify terrorist attacks around the world, invoked to rally fighters to battle in the Middle East and elsewhere, and distorted by movements that seek to turn Islam into a political weapon.

"The classical Islamic perspective is dominated by views that position non-Muslims as enemies or, at best, as suspicious figures not worthy of trust," H. Yaqut Qoumas, Ansor's chairman, said in an interview.

"Fiqh," or the body of jurisprudence that applies Shariah to everyday life, "explicitly rejects the possibility of non-Muslims enjoying equal rights with Muslims in the public sphere, including the right to occupy certain positions," he said. "This classical Islamic perspective continues to possess an extraordinarily powerful authority in the eyes of most Muslims, and is regarded as standard, orthodox Islam."

Some interpretations of classical Islamic law teach that Muslims have a duty to seek out and fight Christians, Jews and followers of Zoroastrianism until they either convert to Islam or submit to its rule and pay a head tax.

These interpretations have been enthusiastically adopted by the Islamic State.

Also, some interpretations of classical Islamic law, and of certain passages in the Quran, forbid Muslims from having non-Muslim political leaders. Medieval Islamic jurisprudence, still regarded as valid by some, is used to justify slavery and the execution of prisoners.

Some predominantly Muslim countries have been moving to reinterpret Islamic law within their borders, with some sending delegations to a 2016 international conference of scholars, religious leaders and clergy members in Morocco on protecting the legal rights of religious minorities living among them.

The Indonesian initiative, however, aims to directly approach governments around the world, both Muslim-majority and otherwise, as well as at the United Nations, to achieve a global consensus on reforming what it views as archaic interpretations of Islam.

"The challenge we face is not confined to religious views that emerged through an intellectual process conducted a thousand years ago. We are also confronted by religious and political authorities whose institutions are deeply intertwined with these views, and thus continue to inculcate such teachings among each new generation of Muslims," Mr. Yaqut said.

Nonetheless, some Islamic scholars and experts note that because there are so many diverging interpretations of Islamic law and the Quran, it would be difficult to reach an international consensus on reforms.

"There's a whole library of interpretations of jihad — Muslims must fight non-Muslim states to expand territory, for example," said Ruud Peters, an emeritus professor of Islamic law at the University of Amsterdam. "But since the 19th century, there have been interpretations followed by many Muslim states to only defend against attack from non-Muslim states."

Another problem, scholars and experts said, is the cultural differences among predominantly Muslim countries in interpreting Islamic law. Indonesia, in Southeast Asia, for example, practices one of the most liberal forms of Islam in the world, while simultaneously having a secular government and Constitution, with full rights for Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and other religious minorities.

Saudi Arabia, in the Middle East, however, practices the conservative Wahhabi Islam, and its government does not officially recognize any of its citizens as being Christian.

"If you want to have only one universal interpretation, you have to deal with the cultural differences and also find an international central authority. This is impossible," said Abdel Rahman El Haj, a professor at Ankara Social Sciences University in Turkey.

He added that while Indonesian Islamic leaders had good intentions, substantive changes would be successful only if support for them emerged within the Arab world.

The Ansor initiative is seen as another move by young Muslims in Indonesia, as well as Islamic clerics and other Muslim organizations in Europe and the Middle East, to push back against extreme, conservative interpretations of Islam.

"The general impression we sometimes get in the West about Islam is one of radicalization," said Raphaël Lefèvre, a nonresident political Islam scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center, "while an equally if not more important trend is the ongoing struggle by Muslim clerics to redefine what Islamic law has to say about society and politics in ways deemed more compatible with modern life."

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