



Indonesia's Muslim Divide: Past and Present

by Charles U. Zenzie

Surveys of Indonesia politics usually mention that there are two basic camps of pious Muslims, the traditionalists and the modernists, and that their rivalry is an essential feature in the history of the nation. As Indonesia prepares to hold its freest parliamentary elections in over 40 years (currently scheduled for mid-1999), concerned outsiders must pursue a nuanced understanding of current Islamic dynamics, because the freer the elections, the more Islam and the modernist-traditionalist rivalries within it will affect the outcome.

The historic modernist-traditionalist debate is primarily about education, the process that allows Muslims to hand down and reproduce their traditions. "Traditionalists" are those rural Muslims, mostly in East and Central Java, who receive their primary education in boarding schools (*pesantren*) featuring an Arabic and Javanese Qur'anic curriculum, supplemented by a set of classical Arabic interpretive readings. The schools are run by venerated *kyai* (religious teachers) as small fiefdoms, ideally handed down genealogically. Learning is not grade and diploma-obsessed, and is conducted in a non-competitive – some call it "democratic" – atmosphere, but one in which the *kyai* represents absolute scriptural authority.

Indonesian "modernists" (or "reformists") established the Muhammadiyah social and educational organization in 1912 because they saw the *pesantren* tradition as detrimental to Muslims' participation in a rapidly changing world. They advocated a stricter return to the Qur'an and *hadith* commentaries -- frowning upon the *kyais'* summoning of local spirits and use of earthy rituals as "un-Islamic" -- and strove by way of scriptural interpretation to incorporate the study of Western languages, science and philosophy in a manner resisted by traditionalists. To deny the Western advances was to relegate one's people to the backwaters of history; the modernists have been preaching to the *pesantren* to change their ways ever since.

Modernists began teaching their own students in a more European-style lecture setting, and in the national language, Bahasa Indonesia -- eschewing the indoctrination of the medieval Arabic texts -- which has allowed them over time to gain the upper hand in the articulation and management of national affairs. The traditionalists began to fight back by forming the Nahdlatul Ulama (Awakening of the Religious Teachers, NU) in 1926. Though organized and resilient, many *pesantren* and their graduates have become increasingly "modernist" in their outlook due to the relentless onslaught of the more worldly modernists and of international modernity itself. In fact, there is much give-and take between the two broad camps. Concerning Indonesia's current situation, these legacies have bequeathed multiple paradoxes:

– While tens of millions of Javanese traditionalists are conservative in protecting their insular heritage and austere piety, they maintain a more liberal worldview and tend to be more tolerant of other religions and ethnicities than their modernists counterparts. The NU and followers are accommodationist to a fault when confronted by external political realities. This is particularly true under the leadership of the current NU chairman, Abdurrahman Wahid, known as Gus Dur: eclectic and ingenious government critic, machine politician, and national man of peace. The extent to which his tradition will survive him is becoming increasingly questionable.

– While Javanese modernists are more conversant in Bahasa Indonesia and European languages, as well as in the disciplines of economics, sciences, politics and international relations, their cosmopolitan outlooks can also provide articulate cover for more exclusivist and intolerant attitudes toward minority religions and ethnicities within Indonesia.

– While the traditionalist Muslims are generally seen as the peaceful backbone of rural Javanese (and Indonesian) society, their fury can erupt if they feel unduly threatened. Meanwhile, the modernists organize and play politics in Jakarta. This was the case during the anti-communist purges of 1965-66, when it was mostly NU activists in the countryside who took up arms against their neighbors. Likewise, the May 1997 parliamentary elections saw fiery attacks on government offices and ruling party Golkar headquarters in Java in retaliation for fraudulent electioneering at the expense of traditionalist voter sentiment.

It is for this last reason – keeping the peace among millions of traditionalist voters – that former President Suharto was at great pains to make sure that the modernist activists did not ride completely roughshod over the traditionalists in their enthusiastic commandeering of Indonesia's Islamic renewal. Suharto knew that he went too far in courting the modernists, and late in the game began to make amends with his old Javanese friend, Gus Dur, convincing him to support Golkar – a move that confused traditionalist voters – in exchange for bureaucratic protection of NU interests.

When Suharto stepped down, and particularly when Habibie successfully installed his modernist henchman and powerful State Secretary, Akbar Tanjung, as Golkar Chairman, Gus Dur's support for the ruling group came to an abrupt end. Golkar will strive to adapt and remain a powerful electoral force, trying to take advantage of at least five years of its own modernist Islamization, and will most likely subsume, coopt or form coalitions with smaller modernist parties now forming. Even the nascent party of Muhammadiyah Chairman Amien Rais may reach such an accommodation. The government/modernist forces will then be up against the NU-linked parties, the more secular

nationalist parties, and any coalitions that arise between them. These overlapping societal forces are now in an astounding tumult. What results will say much about Indonesia's political future. Meanwhile, Indonesia's economic future is also grasping for toeholds.

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