

## **Indonesia: Pluralism and the Fatwa Against Pluralism**

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I spent ten days in late August in Indonesia at the invitation of the U.S. State Department, giving lectures and participating in public forums in connection with the translation of *A New Religious America* into Indonesian (*Amerika Baru Yang Religius*, published by Pustaka Sinar Harapan). My visit came at a time of intense public discussion of pluralism in Indonesia and as Director of the Pluralism Project it was a wonderful opportunity both to participate in the discussion and to learn about the shape of these issues in another multireligious democracy. In late July, the Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) issued a *fatwa* denouncing pluralism, secularism, liberal forms of Islam, along with interfaith marriage and interfaith prayer. Yet in mid-August, Indonesia celebrated sixty years of independence as what many would call a pluralist, multireligious, multicultural state. While Indonesia is often referred to as the world's most populous Muslim nation, it is not a Muslim state. It is, rather, a state based on the Panchasila –the basic principles or values of belief in God, common humanity, the Indonesian nation, democracy, and social justice. Ten days in Indonesia gave me another glimpse of the many challenges of a multireligious democracy.

The distinction between religious pluralism as viewed from the standpoint of a particular religious or theological perspective and religious pluralism as viewed from the standpoint of civic life was all too often blurred in the discussion, as it is in the United States. After all, the MUI speaks to the Muslim majority, but not to the Constitutional issues of Indonesia's state. However, in Indonesia (more than 80% Muslim) as in America (more than 80% Christian) there is a strong presumptive normative consciousness of the majority. The issues addressed by the Pluralism Project in the American context made for a timely dialogue connecting our work with that of colleagues in Indonesia.

The three book-launch events in Jakarta and Yogyakarta, in Java and Padang in Sumatra were extremely well organized three hour events that included half hour responses from two Indonesians scholars and then at least an hour of open-mike public discussion. The respondents included some of the public intellectuals most actively engaged in the discussion of pluralism in the Indonesian context, including Azyumardi Azra, the Rector of the State Islamic University in Jakarta, Irwan Abdullah, Director of the Center for Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, and Shofwan Karim of the Muhammadiyah University in Padang. The open discussions were fascinating and lively too. While I found an almost universal anger at American foreign policy, which didn't surprise me, there was also great interest in the American people, in the discussion of religious pluralism, and especially in the development of Islam in America.

In addition to the public forums, I also had the opportunity to meet in smaller seminar settings with students and faculty at Atma Jaya University, a Catholic University in Jakarta; UIN, the State Islamic University in Jakarta, and the Center for Cross-Cultural and Religious Studies at Gadjah Mada, the only graduate program in religious studies in Indonesia <http://www.crcs-ugm.com/index.php?lang=english.php>. I also met with Syafi'i

Anwar of the International Center for Islam and Pluralism [http://www.icipglobal.org/contact\\_us.html](http://www.icipglobal.org/contact_us.html), a research center that shares many of the goals of the Pluralism Project. Indeed, developing a relationship with other university departments and research centers that are working on the issues of religious pluralism is part of the current international initiative of the Pluralism Project.

The motto of the Indonesian nation is, in some respects, like that of the United States: "Bhineka Tunggal Ika," or "Unity in Diversity. The diversity of Indonesia was fully on display in August, as the nation celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence. The diversity of cultures and arts was celebrated the first day I was in Jakarta with an enormous parade of people from all the provinces of Indonesia through the center of the city, past the Sunday crowds at the curb, past the reviewing stands of government officials. They were dancers, musicians, and artists, wearing brilliantly hued traditional dress, body paint, feathers, leaves, and flowers, representing the culture, music, and dance distinctive to their region.

An Independence Day supplement to *The Jakarta Post* was titled "Living Diversity" and included articles on the ongoing struggle to discover what "Unity in Diversity" really means in Indonesia. One of the lead articles was by Azyumardi Azra, the Rector of the State Islamic University, calling for a rethinking of religious pluralism from the Islamic point of view, looking closely at the Qur'an as a text that "establishes the legitimacy of differences, diversity, and pluralism." There were also personal stories of pluralism, written in the real lives of Indonesians, such as the story of a woman whose mother is Balinese Hindu and father is Muslim who is married to a man who is Chinese Indonesian Catholic. Their child, little Nayanda, was born with a Muslim prayer whispered in her ear and Hindu, Catholic, and Muslim grandparents looking on. And there were heart-breaking stories of the devastating communal violence between Muslims and Christians in Poso in Central Sulawesi and in Ambon in the province of Maluku, stories in which neighbors have become enemies overnight. The editors entitled their own comment "Pluralism: Beyond Unity in Diversity." "We all need to build the bridges that somehow connect us in spite of our differences," they wrote, "If we want to go one step beyond unity in diversity, pluralism is the way forward."

While the *fatwa* condemns "pluralism," it also seems to have an understanding of pluralism which views all religions as essentially the same, equally valid and with relative truths. The Fatwa Commission chairman Ma'ruf Amin, was quoted in *The Jakarta Post* (July 29) as saying, "Pluralism in that sense is *haram* (forbidden under Islamic law), because it justifies other religions." Maruf added that people should be allowed to claim that their religion is the true one and that other faiths are wrong. However, he stressed that the council accepted the fact that Indonesia was home to different religions and that their followers could live side by side. "Plurality in the sense that people believe in different religions is allowed," Ma'ruf explained. "As such, we have to respect each other and coexist peacefully." In one sense, then, the *fatwa* condemns attitudes and ways of thinking it defines only vaguely and negatively --such as pluralism, secularism, and liberalism. It is not surprising that many respected Indonesian leaders have responded with stinging critique to the *fatwa*, including former president

Abdurrahman Wahid, Azyumardi Azra of the State Islamic University, and Ulil Abshar Abdalla of the Liberal Islamic Network <http://islamlib.com/en/page.php>.

In my own view, of course, pluralism is not at all premised on the equal truth or validity of all religious perspectives and traditions. It is not premised on the idea that all religions are the same, not at all. The language of pluralism is not the language of sameness, nor is it simply the language of difference, but it is the language of dialogue. Pluralism is not about erasing differences, but about engaging differences in the creating of a common society. The language of pluralism is the language of traffic, exchange, dialogue, and debate. From a civic standpoint, it is the language any democracy needs in order to survive. From a religious or theological standpoint, it is the language of faith, held not in isolation from those of other faiths, but in relation to them.

Another set of discussions and conversations focused on the ways in which “religion” is recognized by the state in Indonesia and in the U.S. In the U.S., there is no officially recognized religion, aside from the recognition of the Internal Revenue Service for tax purposes and the multitude of ways in which ceremonial civic recognition has become more complex and inclusive –such as Muslim invocations in legislatures and Iftar fast-breaking meals in the White House and on Capitol Hill. Indonesia, in the compromises worked out at the time of its independence, recognized five religions -- Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Protestant Christianity, and Catholic Christianity. This arrangement has led to countless issues that even a government Department of Religious Affairs (Agama is the term used) has not been able to solve. Is Confucianism a “religion?” Javanese traditional practice? Must a Sikh be officially a Hindu? What about the Ahmadiyyas who call themselves Muslim but are the focus of another *fatwa* of the MUI, which insists they are not? What happens when a Muslim marries a Catholic? What “religion” is listed on the child’s national identity card? Is it possible not to have a “religion?” As I often told Indonesian audiences, we have no Department of Religion in the United States government, but we do have Departments of Religion in virtually every college and university.

It is not only, of course, that religion can be, and should be, a subject of study, but religious pluralism is also an important subject of study. How is it that complex, multireligious societies negotiate the issues of religious difference? This brief and very stimulating visit to Indonesia made clear to me that the issues of religious pluralism can benefit from comparative study.