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**Thinking the Unthinkable: The
Modernization and Reform
of Islamic Higher Education
in Indonesia**

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ABSTRACT

The reform and modernisation of Higher Islamic Education has been an ongoing concern for many a Muslim-majority state since the advent of modern Islamic studies in the postcolonial era.

Fraught with political and ideological controversies and complications, many of the attempts to reform and modernise Islamic Higher education has met with stiff political resistance, particularly from conservative Islamists who see such reform measures as a means for the state to 'weaken', 'contaminate' or 'corrupt' pure Islamic teachings. Furthermore the question of what essentially constitutes an Islamic modernity itself remains a matter of incessant debate among Muslim ideologues, reformers and modernists themselves.

This paper looks at the development of Higher Islamic education in Indonesia, with particular focus on the developments during the Suharto era (1970 - 1998). It argues that the Indonesian state under Suharto was more concerned with the challenge of controlling potential domestic opposition from the Islamists of the country, rather than foregrounding an Islamic reform project per se. Yet ironically as a result of the reforms introduced during this period - which included the introduction of a research-based approach to religious studies - Indonesia has actually pioneered the Islamic educational reform process and may in fact be one of the few Muslim countries in the world where a truly scientific approach to Islamic studies has been established.

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Thinking the Unthinkable: The Modernization and Reform of Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia

I. Introduction: Modernization and the development of Modern Islamic Education in Indonesia and Southeast Asia from the nineteenth century

The state of Islamic education worldwide has become a matter of international concern of late, particularly in the wake of the attacks on the United States of America on 11 September 2001. Since then concerns have been raised about the religious education given at the *madrasahs* and religious seminaries in predominantly Muslim countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia. Following the bombings in Bali in 2002 and the bombings in London and Madrid that came after, other questions were raised about the standard of Islamic education in many of the religious schools in the Muslim world and whether these institutions had become bastions of conservative, reactionary or even violently militant schools of thought that preach hatred and violence against non-Muslims. The governments of Western Europe have grown increasingly suspicious of the activities carried out in the religious schools of countries like Pakistan, particularly after it became known that several of the London bombers had actually travelled to that country and studied at some of the *madrasahs* there.

Thus far much has been written about the *madrasahs* of countries like Pakistan and Indonesia. Indonesia's Muslim colleges in particular have become the focus of international attention following the publication of several reports by bodies such as the International Crisis Group (ICG) alleging involvement between the institutions and underground militant movements such as the nebulous Jama'ah Islamiyah, said to be under the leadership of the *madrasah*-trained and *madrasah*-based teacher Ustaz Abu Bakar Ba'asyir of Pesantren al-Mukmin, Ngruki, Surakarta.¹ Scholars and

¹ For more reports on the alleged links between Indonesia's *madrasahs* and the underground militant movements in the country, see: Noorhaidi Hasan, *Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militancy and the Quest for Identity in Post New-Order Indonesia*, Cornell Southeast Asia Program, Ithica, New York, 2006; Noor Huda Ismail, "Ngruki: Is it a Terrorism School?" *Jakarta Post*, 14 March 2005; Sydney Jones, *Indonesian Backgrounder: How the Jama'ah Islamiyah terrorist network operates*, International Crisis Group (ICG) report, Jakarta, 11 December 2003; Muhamad Sirozi, *Perspectives on Radical Islamic Education in Contemporary Indonesia: Major Themes and Characteristics of Abu Bakar Baasyir's Teachings*, Paper presented for the guest lecture at the Centre for International Studies, Ohio University, 9 January 2004; Muhammad Wildan, *Pondok Ngruki vis-a-vis Modernity*, Paper presented at the Ngruki International Conference organised by IKAPPIM, Surakarta, 20–22 January 2006; John T. Sidel, *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia*, Cornell University Press, London,

researchers like Jones (2003), Sirozi (2004), Hasan (2006), Sidel (2006), Wildan (2006, 2007) and Noor (2007) have alluded to the conservative doctrine that is sometimes inculcated in the curricula of many of the more traditional religious schools of Indonesia (and the rest of Southeast Asia by extension) and have also looked at the possible links between the teachers, curricula of the institutions and the underground movements that have emerged from some of these schools in the recent past (Sidel, 2006, Wildan, 2007 and Noor, 2007).

However it is important to note that Islamic education in countries like Indonesia, Pakistan and Malaysia is not solely confined to the more traditional sector of the educational system and should not be associated exclusively with the *madrasahs* of these countries. It is important to note that in many of the Muslim countries in Asia there has already been a long tradition of modern Islamic education that was aimed at creating a new generation of Muslim students and scholars who are adept at the norms of modernity and capable of meeting the challenges of the modern age. Muslim educational reform has always been a component of Islamic education from the beginning, and across Asia there has been a long-established process of integrating modern ideas and values into the sphere of traditional Islamic education.

Though the focus of this paper will be on the modernization of Islamic higher education in Indonesia, we begin with a brief overview of the modernization process as it spread across Asia from the mid nineteenth century onwards.

One obvious factor that accounts for the impulse towards reform and modernization has been the encounter between the Muslim world and the West, particularly from the late eighteenth century when practically the entire Muslim world was slowly but surely coming under Western colonial rule. The encounter with Western imperialism and colonialism sent shock waves across the Muslim world and was a matter of grave concern for Muslim elites, particularly those among the political, economic and cultural leadership of their respective societies. As Aslam Syed (1988) has noted, Muslim leaders and theologians alike were faced with the stark question that had to be answered: How could Muslim civilization have collapsed

2006; Muhammad Wildan, “Ngruki dan Radikalisme Agama di Indonesia”, in *The Ngruki Observer*, (<http://www.ngruki.com/>), 9 June 2007, and Farish A. Noor, *Jihad Revisited? Shifting Dynamics of Radical Movements in Indonesia Today*. Institute for Strategic and International Studies (ISIS)-Malaysia, ISIS Working Papers Series, Kuala Lumpur, 2007.

so easily before the might of Western military power, if Islam was indeed the last and final revelation and the religion revealed by God to men?²

It was in the face of this conundrum that an entire generation of Muslim reformist thinkers like Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and others began to grapple with the question of Modernity and the impact of Western enlightenment on the Muslim world.

In Asia, the collapse of Muslim power in countries like India led to a reaction among conservatives and reformists alike. Following the final defeat of the Moghuls in 1857, conservative Indian Muslim theologians and scholars like Maulana Muhammad Qassim Nanotawi and Maulana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi founded the Dar'ul Uloom *madrasah* of Deoband in Uttar Pradesh, which would later become one of the bastions of conservative Indian Muslim education, thought and culture.³ Not all Muslim scholars reacted to the growing power of Britain in India by returning to the fundamentals of Islam however: While the Dar'ul Uloom school in Deoband promoted its brand of conservative religion with the hope of conserving the lingering traces of the Moghul past and the Muslim legacy of India, other modern Muslim scholars like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan opted for a radical overhaul of Muslim education and the promotion of modern science instead. To this end, he created the first modern Muslim college of India at the town of Aligarh, which was called the Muhammadan Anglo-Indian College of Aligarh.

² Muhammad Aslam Syed, *The Muslim Response to the West: Muslim Historiography in India from 1857 to 1914*, Islamabad: National Institute for Historical and Cultural Research, 1988.

³ The Dar'ul Uloom Deoband (sometimes referred to as the Deoband college), was founded in the town of Deoband to the northeast of Delhi. It was formed in the year 1866, one decade after the failed Indian Mutiny of 1857. The two major figures behind the founding of the Deoband college, Maulana Muhammad Qassim Nanotawi and Maulana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, both came from prominent *ulama* families and both had experienced traditional conservative as well as Sufi-inspired forms of education. The two other co-founders of the Deobandi college were Maulana Zulfiqar Ali and Maulana Fazl-ul Rahman. Nanotawi and Gangohi had played a part in the anti-British uprising of 1857, as commanders of Indian forces based at Shamli near Delhi. In 1867 they chose to settle at the town of Doodah and they opened a *madrasah* at the Chattah Masjid. The Deobandi school became famous for its strict adherence to the Qur'an, Hadith and Sunnah, and its zeal to purify Islam of Hindu, Hellenic, Persian and pre-Islamic elements. The students were kept at the *madrasah* and the teaching periods ranged between six to ten years. During this time, the students developed close bonds and ultimately the school produced a network of Deobandi Ulama who shared a similar outlook and approach to Islam. The Deobandi *ulamas* were known for their uncompromising and confrontational approach towards outsiders. The school issued 269,215 *fatawa* in its first hundred years, and its *ulamas* engaged in many polemics against Hindus and Christian missionary movements. See: Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband 1860–1900*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, , 1982 and *Traditionalist Islamic Activism: Deoband, Tablighis and Talibs*. ISIM Papers IV, International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), Leiden, 2002. Kenneth W Jones, “Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India”, in *The New Cambridge History of India*, III(1) (pp. 48–60) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1989.

Set up by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in 1875, the Muhammadan Anglo-Indian College (*Madrasat ul-U'lum Musalmanan*) of Aligarh's aim was to create a pool of Muslim reformers to become the future leaders of the Muslim *ummah*.⁴ For this reason, Aligarh borrowed extensively from the practices and methods of the established colonial schools and Anglo-Indian colleges. It sought to improve upon the traditional mode of education provided at the conservative *madrasahs* elsewhere in India. Over time, though, the Aligarh and Deobandi schools began to differ in their respective approaches. While the Deoband concentrated on the task of creating a network of orthodox and conservative-minded *ulamas*, Aligarh focused on the need to create a modernist and progressive Muslim political élite to penetrate the colonial machinery of state and the worlds of commerce and administration. The élitist approach of Aligarh was reflected in the manners and values of its founder, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, who was noted to have said that "my university's seminars are not for the sons of peasants and weavers".

To this end, Syed Ahmad Khan and his followers such as Sayyid Mahdi Ali favoured and promoted the ideas and teachings of Muslim philosophers of the Mutazilite school, who had argued that human beings were the primary agents and actors in the process of social development.⁵ Not all of Syed Ahmad Khan's ideas were well accepted at first. The man was a highly controversial figure who incurred the wrath of the traditionalist *ulamas* when he openly questioned the existence of *djinn* and spirits, expressed his scepticism over the validity of some sections of the Hadith, and insisted on the unalienable right of *ijtihad* (rational enquiry) for all Muslims. After he established his scientific society in 1864 and began to translate Western books on physics, logic and mathematics into Urdu, some *ulamas* began to condemn him on the grounds that he was corrupting the minds of Muslim youth.

⁴ Re: David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996 and Kenneth W. Jones, "Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India", in *The New Cambridge History of India*, III(1), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; Muhammad Aslam Syed, *The Muslim Response to the West: Muslim Historiography in India from 1857 to 1914*, Islamabad: National Institute for Historical and Cultural Research, 1988.

⁵ Among the subjects taught at Aligarh were geography, geology, physics, chemistry, philosophy, logic, European languages as well as religious studies. The teachers at Aligarh also encouraged their students to engage in debates with one another, in the hope that it would broaden their minds and prepare them for the struggles that lay ahead of them. Aligarh instilled in the hearts and minds of its students the belief that Islam was a rational, scientific and universal creed and that the Muslim *ummah* was an integrated whole. Thus the problems faced by contemporary Muslims could only be solved if and when they learned to unite and to live as true Muslims in the here-and-now. The modernist approach of pioneers such as Syed Ahmad Khan, Sayyid Mahdi Ali and Syed Ameer Ali lay in their interpretation of Islam in a contemporary rather than historical context.

Despite the resistance that he faced from the *ulamas*, Syed Ahmad Khan persisted in his efforts. He maintained that his intentions were: “To dispel those illusory traditions of the past which have hindered our progress, (and) to reconcile Oriental learning with Western literature and science (so as to) inspire in the dreamy minds of our people of the East the practical energy which belongs to the people of the West.”

Across the Indian Ocean in Southeast Asia similar attempts were being made by a younger generation of Muslim scholars and theologians in British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies (later Indonesia) to improve and update the standards of Islamic education by creating a new form of modern *madrasah* that was capable of teaching their students disciplines and skills—such as printing, mass communication and political mobilization—that would equip them with the needs of the twentieth century.

In British-ruled Malaya, the younger generation of Malay-Muslim modernists were known as the “*Kaum Muda*” (Younger Generation) faction that was made up of younger theologians and scholars with a clear political agenda towards reform and political emancipation for the Muslims of the colony. The *Kaum Muda* reformers were mostly Malay and *Peranakan* (mixed-race) Muslims who had grown up in the British colonial settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore. They were shaped by the values and lifestyle of a modern, cosmopolitan mercantile community where economic and political success was the key to survival. Among the influential figures of the *Kaum Muda* were Sumatra-born Sheikh Mohamad Tahir Jalaludin al-Azhari and Malacca-born Syed Sheikh Ahmad al-Hadi. Both were regarded as representatives of the *Kaum Muda* generation and they were very attracted to the reformist and modernist ideas then in vogue in the Muslim world. Like other important reformers of the Malay world, men like Sheikh Mohamad Tahir had travelled to the Arab lands and studied in Mecca and at al-Azhar University in Cairo. The spread of modernist ideas was facilitated by the advances in modern transport and communications made possible by the opening of the Suez Canal. Malay and Indonesian Muslims could travel to and from the holy land with greater ease and frequency. With other prominent Malay-Muslim reformers such as Sheikh Muhammad Basyuni Imran of Sambas, these reform-minded Islamists studied with Malay-Muslim *ulamas* and scholars already based in Mecca (such as Sheikh Umar al-Sumbawi, Sheikh Uthman al-Sarawaki and Sheikh Mohammad Khatib al-Minangkabawi) as well as modern reformist thinkers like Egyptian scholar and disciple of Abduh, Rashid Rida.

Through the educational efforts of Sheikh Mohamad Tahir, the modernist ideas and methods of the new generation of Muslim thinkers like Muhammad Abdurrahman and Rashid Rida were introduced to the Malay-Muslims of the peninsula. On 23 July 1906, Sheikh Mohamad Tahir established his own reformist magazine *al-Imam* (The Leader), modelled on the reformist publication *al-Manar* (The Beacon) published in Cairo by Rashid Rida. Sheikh Mohamad Tahir's work was taken up by Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, who was both a prolific writer and founder of numerous modern reformist *madrasahs* all over the peninsula.

Reform of the Islamic educational system meant, for Sheikh al-Hadi, reform of the Muslim mind itself. Along with modern subjects like history and science, he also wanted to create a new generation of young Muslims able to address the social, economic and political challenges they faced with confidence and determination. Among the numerous *madrasahs* he set up were Madrasah al-Iqbal al-Islamiyyah in Singapore, Madrasah al-Hadi in Malacca and Madrasah al-Mashoor al-Islamiyyah in Penang. The reformers' main instruments were their network of reformist *madrasahs* and the progressive journals, magazines and newspapers they published. Among the more popular and influential of the journals were *al-Imam* (published by Sheikh Mohamad Tahir and Syed Sheikh al-Hadi in Singapore), *al-Ikhwan* (published by Syed Sheikh al-Hadi in Penang), *Seruan Azhar* (published by Kesatuan Jamiah al-Khairiah (Malay Students Association of al-Azhar, Cairo), *Pilihan Timur* (published by Indonesian students at al-Azhar, Cairo) and the teachers' magazine, *Majalah Guru*.

II. From outdated texts to Modern *Madrasahs*: Indonesia's experiment with Islamic Modernity Begins

In the Dutch East Indies, the Modernist Muslim intellectuals and scholars of what would later be known as Indonesia, were likewise worried about what they saw as the stagnation of Muslim education that was offered at the *madrasahs* and *pesantrens* (religious schools) of the colony.

Fearful of the future when Indonesia's Muslims were facing stiff competition from the Dutch, other Western and Chinese business enterprises, the Muslim reformers of Indonesia sought to address the problems of backwardness and the feudal-traditionalist mindset of the people by opening new Muslim schools as well as

Muslim-based parties and workers unions. In 1908, the Budi Otomo (Noble Endeavour) movement was formed by Dr. Waidin Sudira Usada and a group of prominent Javanese intellectuals, merchants and community leaders.⁶ In 1911, the Sarekat Dagang Islam (Islamic Co-operative) movement was begun by Haji Omar Said Tjokroaminoto and Haji Agoes Salim.⁷ Sarekat Dagang Islam, from the very beginning, catered exclusively to the interests of Indonesian Muslims. It sought to develop the economic and social well-being of Muslims in the East Indies, and within a few years it opened branches in the Malay Peninsula.⁸ In 1912, Muhamadiyah, a modernist and reformist Muslim organization, was founded by Kyai Haji Dahlan. The conservative traditionalists followed suit by forming their own organization, Nahdatul Ulama (NU), in 1926; the leader was Kyai Hashim Asyari of Surabaya.⁹

⁶ Most of Budi Otomo's members were Javanese officials and intellectuals. The movement's aim was to promote local education to contribute to the social and economic welfare of Indonesians. Its philosophy and tactics were based on the ideas of Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi, but its efforts were hindered as it was mainly a Javanese organization with little appeal for non-Javanese Indonesians. In time, other sectarian groupings emerged to defend and promote the interests of their own ethnic constituencies.

⁷ Sarekat Dagang Islam was founded on 11 November 1911 as an offshoot of Islamic activism among Muslims in Java and Sumatra. Intended to serve as a co-operative venture to organize and mobilize Indonesian Muslims and assist them in economic development, it became a strong force after the economic boycott against the powerful Indonesian Chinese trading community and anti-Chinese riots in Surabaya. However, its main aim was to slowly work towards political independence by first winning economic independence for Indonesians. In this respect, Sarekat (Dagang?) Islam regarded as their main opponents not only the Dutch colonial authorities but also the "priyahi" Indonesian élite whose hold on Islam was judged to be weak. Tjokroaminoto later became the religious "guide" and mentor to Indonesia's nationalist leader and first President, Soekarno. His text *Islam dan Sosialisme* became the guidebook for most "progressive" Indonesian Muslims during the anti-colonial era, and it later inspired those who tried to reconcile the differences between the Islamic and communist camps of the Indonesian nationalist movement. In time, Sarekat (D?) Islam was infiltrated by reformers and leftists and a "merah" (red) faction developed. In 1921, most leftist-radical elements were expelled after a major split in the movement and it lost a considerable degree of support. By 1929, Sarekat (D?) Islam abandoned its goal of Pan-Islamism and changed its name to Partai Sarekat Islam Indonesia.

⁸ By the 1920s, Sarekat (D?) Islam had spread to the Malay Peninsula. In Terengganu, it was led by Syed Abdul Rahman of Siak, whom the Dutch had expelled from the Dutch East Indies. The leader in Pahang was Sayyid Muhammad Hadap, the ex-Qadhi of Johor; in Kelantan the leader was Haji Omar of Bachok. The only Malay state which refused to allow Sarekat Islam to operate was Johor, whose Sultan wished to retain good ties with the British and Dutch and also wanted to maintain the state's status as a sovereign Malay state. See: Abdullah Zakaria Ghazali, "Sarekat Islam di Trengganu", *Malaysia in History*, XX(11), 1972.

⁹ NU was, from the beginning, seen as a traditionalist movement which gained most of its initial support from the rural élite and communities in central and eastern Java. A conservative grouping, its main source of membership and support was rural *pesantren* (religious schools), still functioning as decentralized centres of religious teaching; their attraction lay in the charismatic appeal of their individual *ulamas*. NU's main aim was not to work towards independence or political mobilization of the masses. Instead, it regarded the "threat" of modernization as its primary concern. In the following years, NU adopted an instrumental and pragmatic approach to politics. It later supported the independence movement without engaging directly in political activities. In the post-independence period NU was fervently anti-communist. It later pulled out of political involvement altogether and only re-entered the political arena in the 1990s.

The rapid emergence and rise of these Islamist movements reflected the growing concern among Muslims of the Dutch East Indies that they were being marginalized in the economic, political and cultural fields in their own homeland. The fear of being swamped and overtaken by both European and Chinese political and business interests was a key factor in the mobilization of Indonesian Muslims in the early 20th century. Organizations like Sarekat (D?) Islam and Muhamadiyah played a vital role in generating awareness among Indonesian Muslims of their economic and political condition, and harnessing the meagre resources at their disposal to form a cohesive bloc against both European and Chinese dominance in the East Indies.

Among all these organizations, the one that was largely responsible for the development of modern Muslim schools and colleges was the Muhamadiyah movement that was based in the Central Javanese city of Jogjakarta. Muhamadiyah's primary goal and political objective was education. It sought to modernize the standard of Islamic education in Indonesia. It formed a women's section under the name Aisyah. Muhamadiyah's followers were keen to develop a modern, progressive outlook towards Islam which would help Muslims cope with the challenges of living under modern colonial rule. They opposed the syncretic and dogmatic trends within Indonesian Islam, and hoped to renew the spirit of Islam by encouraging a return to the fundamental principles of Islam found in the Qur'an and Hadith.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s Indonesian modernist Muslim movements like Muhamadiyah paved the way for the creation of new *madrasahs* and Muslim colleges which also doubled as recruitment centres for the organization as well as printing houses for their publications. The Dutch colonial powers were wary of the rise of political Islam in Indonesia and attempts were made to stop the momentum of reform, but in 1941 the arrival of the Japanese army at the onset of the Second World War ended Dutch attempts to contain the rise of Indonesian political Islam and opened the way for the rise of the modernist Muslims. The Japanese authorities realized the potential of the forces of Islam which were well entrenched in the country. During the Japanese occupation of Indonesia (1941–1945) the Japanese military establishment courted the support of both the traditionalists (from movements like the Nahdatul Ulama) and reformists (from movements such as the Muhamadiyah). During the period of Japanese rule, the Majlis Shura Muslimin (Masjumi) was formed to bring together the diverse traditionalist and modernist-reformist strands of Islam in the country. Masjumi eventually came under the leadership of prominent Islamist thinker

Muhammad Natsir. The Japanese also sponsored the creation of Islamist militias such as Hizbullah in their attempt to build up a local defence force to help them in the event of a Western counter-attack in Indonesia. At the end of the war, the Japanese left behind a number of organized Islamist bodies and militias that later took part in the anti-Dutch war of Indonesian independence of 1945.¹⁰ Movements like Masjumi, Nahdatul Ulama and Muhamadiyah played a greater role in the independence struggle. Thus by the time that Indonesia declared her independence in 1945, several important developments had occurred.

Firstly, the rise of modernist Muslim thought in Indonesia had been aided and abetted by similar developments in other Muslim countries like Malaya and was also inspired by the reformist-modernist projects that had been undertaken further away such as the Muhammadan Anglo-Indian College of Aligarh in India. Indonesian Muslim intellectuals therefore realized that they were not alone in their efforts to modernize Islamic education in their country.

Secondly, the rapid mobilization of Muslims across the Indonesian colony was also aided by the use of modern technologies such as mass transport, the creation of communicative infrastructure ranging from better roads, railway links and telegram services across the archipelago. It was these tools of modernity that led to the rise of literacy and the emerging reading public (albeit a small one confined to elites) that made up the fledgling “imagined community” of the new Indonesian nation and its politically conscious Islamist actors and agents.

Thirdly, the empowerment of Muslim intellectuals and leaders by the Japanese during the Second World War also meant that they had tasted power and had had their first experience in the process of nation building and governance. During this crucial period Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia were given the chance to take active part in the governing of their country, and were therefore confident that they would be able to govern Indonesia following the declaration of independence. Hence the Indonesian Islamists were actively involved in the independence war of 1945 to ensure that the Dutch could not re-colonize their former colony, and they also demanded key positions in governance including the portfolio for education.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive account of the role played by the various Islamist movements of Indonesia in the lead-up to the war of independence and beyond, see Harry J. Benda, *The Crescent and the Rising Sun: Indonesian Islam under Japanese Occupation 1942–1945*, Leiden: Fouris, 1983 (originally published in 1958).

When Indonesia finally emerged on the global stage of the world as an independent nation-state, the modernist Muslims were among those at the forefront. Education was one of the key concerns of the Indonesian Islamists then. As early as 1930 the calls for higher Islamic education in the country (when it was still a Dutch colony) had been mooted by Islamist leaders like Satiman Wirjosandjojo, who had created the Yayasan Pesantren Luhur (Higher Pesantren Foundation) and who was one of the leaders of the Masjumi movement. The 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia had clearly stated that education was one of the fundamental rights of each and every citizen of the country, and by extension this also included Islamic education for all Muslim citizens.¹¹ However as religious education was considered part and parcel of the fundamental right to practise one's religion, Muslim religious education (as well as religious education for Christians and other non-Muslims in the country) did not come under the purview of the Ministry of Education but rather the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Department of Religion (Departemen Agama) instead. Thus, as Ichwan (2006) has noted from the outset, a dichotomous relationship had developed between Muslim religious education and the mainstream secular educational system of the country.¹²

In an attempt to keep the Indonesian Muslims close to him, President Sukarno made several concessions to the Islamist movements. In 1951 he formally elevated the Islamic Studies faculty of the Islamic University of Indonesia to the level of a state-funded research centre, the Perguruan Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri (PTAIN, State College of Islamic Studies). Later in 1957 the Ministry of Religious Affairs created the State Academy for Islamic Studies (Akademi Dinas Ilmu Agama, ADIA) in Jakarta. Three years later the PTAIN was elevated further to the level of a National Islamic Studies Academy (Institut Agama Islam Negeri, IAIN) and other IAINs were established outside Jakarta such as IAIN Sunan Kalijaga in Jogjakarta, Central Java. Over the next ten years IAINs were created all over Indonesia, from Aceh (1963), Palembang (1964), Banjarmasin (1964), Surabaya (1965), Ujung Padang (1965), Padang (1966), Jambi (1967), Bandung (1968), Tanjungkarang (1968), Semarang (1970), Pekanbaru (1970) and Medan (1973).¹³

¹¹ See: Mochamad Nur Ichwan, "Official Reform of Islam: State Islam and the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Contemporary Indonesia 1966–2004", p. 137, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Tilburg, Jogjakarta, 2006.

¹² Ibid, p. 137.

¹³ Ichwan, 2006, p. 161.

But when Sukarno attempted to create a loose coalition of Muslim, nationalist and communist groups and parties in his NASAKOM (Nasionalisme-Komunisme-Agama) alliance, that project soon unravelled as the parties began to bicker over key positions in government. By the 1950s Indonesia was rocked by several anti-governmental revolts that were led by Muslims in the provinces of Sulawesi, Kalimantan and Sumatra. By then the Muslim activists of Indonesia were keen to assert a stronger role and presence in national politics and were demanding things such as the declaration of Indonesia as an Islamic state.

During this period there were several attempts at trying to reform the Islamic educational system in the country, notably via a reform and modernization programme designed to introduce secular (i.e. non-religious) subjects to the curriculum of the *madrasahs* and *pesantrens* of the country. These reform measures were given the status of law via several Constitutional amendments and new laws that were introduced such as the Joint Decree of January 1950 (Law no. 4/1950), which was later revised in 1951; and later supplemented by other laws such as Law no. 12/1954—all of which tried to introduce subjects like mathematics and science to the *madrasahs* in the country.¹⁴ Many of these reform measures had failed however, for they were unevenly implemented in a country that was, at the time, poised on the brink of civil war and sectarian conflict. Moreover the Islamists of Indonesia were reluctant to enter into any bargaining process over Islamic education reform with the Sukarno administration, which was then seen as “weak” on communism and too heavily influenced by the communist Ministers and governmental advisors from the PKI. These reform measures were thus dismissed by conservative *madrasah* teachers as being part of the “communist plot” to weaken Islam in Indonesia and received little support from the *madrasah* network of the country.

When President Sukarno attempted to disband the political parties in Indonesia and introduce his own version of “guided democracy”, the Islamist intellectual Muhammad Natsir was one of the first to attack the President and declare that “guided democracy” was nothing more than legalized dictatorship. Natsir then transferred his loyalties to the leaders of the armed forces in Sumatra, and supported the Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia (PRRI) revolt that began in the late 1950s. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, the tension finally led to the eruption of a number of

¹⁴ Ichwan, 2006, p. 139.

popular Muslim revolts such as the PRRI revolt in Sumatra (1958) and the Darul Islam rebellion in Sulawesi (1950–1965). Sukarno's response was to come down hard on these Islamist movements, and Masjumi was banned in 1959.

The climax was reached in 1965 when the open hostility between the Islamists and communists of Indonesia led to all-out conflict and a failed coup attempt. In the debacle that followed, the Indonesian communist party was all but wiped out by the nationalists and Islamists, and Sukarno fell from power to be replaced by the General-turned-President Suharto. By then the Indonesian government, dominated as it was by the secular generals of the army and backed by Indonesian Christian business interests, were deeply concerned about the radical potential of political Islam in Indonesia. Ironically it was from this period that the modernization of Indonesia's Islamic educational system really began as well.

III. Modernization at Gunpoint: The reform of Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia during the dictatorship of Suharto, 1965–1998

Following the fall of General-turned-President Suharto in May 1998, Indonesian society has experienced many painful and traumatic changes. The collapse of the Indonesian economy with the onset of the 1998 economic and financial crises that swept across Asia left ruined cities in its wake, with the economies of Southeast Asia being particularly badly hurt. Decades of corrupt and ineffective mismanagement, coupled with indiscriminate credit expansion, cronyism, corruption and the robbing of the local economy had left Indonesia almost entirely bereft of foreign reserves. The Indonesia Rupiah dropped to less than half of its value in less than eight months, civil society structures broke down and massive racial pogroms against the Chinese minority community took place in cities like Jakarta.

Following Suharto's exit from power a succession of weak and ineffective leaders—B. J. Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Sukarnoputri—took over the helm of the state but were unable to stem the tide of religious and racial sectarian violence; until the Presidency was finally won by the current President, Bambang Susilo Yudhoyono.

Between 2002 to 2005, Indonesia also bore witness to some of the worst instances of religiously-inspired violence in its history, first with the Bali bombing in

2002 and then with the flaring of religious and communal tension in the Moluccas between 2002 to 2004. Religious militant groups like *Laskar Jihad*, *Fron Pembela Islam* and the *Jama'ah Islamiyah* made the headlines and seemed on the brink of determining the future development of Indonesia. (Hassan, 2006 and Sidel, 2006). Yet as has been noted by some scholars (Hassan, 2006), some of the more active militant groups like the *Laskar Jihad* were unable to penetrate the Islamic Universities of Indonesia (UIN, Universitas Islam Negeri) such as UIN Sharif Hidayatullah in Jakarta and UIN Sunan Kalijaga in Jogjakarta. Why?

Indonesia's experiment with the modernization of Islamic Higher education really took off during the era of President Suharto, and despite the deterioration of human rights and the routine abuse of civil liberties during his time in power, the reform of Islamic education remains one of the few success stories of the Suharto years. Ironically, these reforms took place against the backdrop of a state that was deeply suspicious of Islam in general and political Islam in particular. To understand how and why the Islamic educational reform process took off in Indonesia the way it did, it would pay to revisit the Suharto years again.

As Ichwan (2006) has noted, the regime of President Suharto regarded Islamic religious education as "a vehicle by which to disseminate the state ideology and its development agenda".¹⁵ This was deemed necessarily to ensure that the Islamists of the country would not pose a threat to the state and its developmental objectives, and to ensure stability in the country after the traumatic decade of the 1960s. Following the failed communist coup of 1965 the Indonesian Communist party (PKI) was effectively wiped off the map after a series of nationwide crackdowns that led to the massacre of hundreds of thousands of communists and the arrest and detention of thousands of others who were thought to be sympathizers with the PKI. In the anti-PKI pogroms that were instigated by the Indonesian nationalists and army, many Islamist groups such as the NU and its Ansor Youth wing took active part in the persecution and elimination of the PKI. It has to be remembered that by the mid 1960s Indonesian society had also been radically transformed as a result of the development that took place since independence in 1945: The cities of Java and the outer islands were then home to dozens of new universities and rural migration to the urban centres meant that cities like Jakarta, Bandung, Jogjakarta, Surabaya etc were now teeming

¹⁵ Ichwan, 2006, pp. 138–141.

with alienated urban youth who were keenly involved in politics. In the same way that the PKI had recruited heavily among the university students on the campuses of the country, so had the Islamist movements like NU and Muhamadiyah.

By 1970 Suharto was firmly established in power with the backing of the West and the other governments of ASEAN that were relieved to see the end of the communist “threat” in Indonesia. But the 1970s was a time when Islamist movements and governments all over the world were embarking on a number of grand projects and programmes directly or indirectly shaped by the worldview and values of Islam. From Egypt to Pakistan to Malaysia, Islamist organizations, parties and NGOs were mobilizing against their respective governments and adopting a more radical tenor to their ideologies and discourses. In Indonesia, the Orde Baru (New Order) regime of President Suharto was faced with the demands of the Islamist parties and movements that played such a crucial role in the elimination of the PKI communists in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt in 1965.

The Suharto government was deeply worried about the imminent rise of the Islamists in the country, and were keen to keep the forces of political Islam at bay. To this end, attempts were made to domesticate the Islamist opposition by banning the use of Islam in politics, putting an end to the multi-party system (by collapsing the many political parties of Indonesia into three main political coalitions), persecuting those deemed having militant Islamist ambitions and dividing the Islamist camp by using the tools of state patronage and coercion. To complicate things further, elements within the Indonesian army and intelligence community were also known to be actively involved in forming instrumental links with some radical Islamist groups, both to penetrate them further and also to mobilize them for specific political ends when necessary. It was during this murky decade that one of Indonesia’s first clandestine Islamist radical groups like the Komando Jihad first appeared on the scene, with dubious links to the Indonesian state itself.¹⁶

¹⁶ The shadowy Komando Jihad militia emerged in Indonesia in 1977 and was under the leadership of the young Indonesian cleric Imran bin Zein. An underground paramilitary movement, it was based mainly in Jakarta and Bandung, West Java, and its members were mainly young disaffected Muslims from the cities. Between 1977 to 1978 they were responsible for some minor attacks in some of the cities of Java, but their influence and their ability to project their power was limited by their own lack of resources. After the Iranian revolution of 1979, however, the leaders of the Komando Jihad claimed that they would embark on a revolutionary struggle against the Indonesian state. In March 1981 members of the Komando Jihad staged an attack on a police base outside Bandung and managed to steal a number of small arms. Analysts at the time suggested that the attack on the police base may have been an inside job, with rogue elements of the Indonesian army secretly working to ensure that

The government was also concerned about the dichotomous educational system in the country and in 1972 President Suharto issued Presidential Decree no. 34/1972 which called for the unification of all the teaching streams in the country, both secular and religious, under the Ministry of Education. But this measure was too controversial at the time and despite attempts to confirm the decree in 1974 and bring the matter up for discussion at the People's Assembly, the move did not meet with any concrete results. At the same time on the campuses of the country, a new generation of urbanized Muslim youth had come to the fore as student leaders and activists. Islamist student-activists such as Nurcholish Madjid and Imaduddin Abdulrahim were leading the students who were rallying to the banner of the "Salman movement" sweeping across the campuses of Indonesia, and calling for the inculcation of Islamic values in governance and social life. While in the outer island provinces of Sumatra, Kalimantan and the Moluccas there remained the remnants of the failed Darul Islam revolt of the 1950s and 1960s, who still nursed their ambition to topple the Indonesian government and create a Pan-Indonesian Islamic state under Shariah law.

Faced with these challenges, the technocrats and policymakers of the Suharto government focused their attention on the twin goals of nation building and rapid economic development. With technocrats like B. J. Habibie as his advisor, President Suharto sought to turn the Indonesian economy from an import-substitution based system to one geared towards manufacturing and low-tech industries instead. The discovery of oil and gas reserves added economic impetus to the plan, and helped to finance the early industrialization programme of Indonesia from the late 1970s onwards.

One factor however had to be taken into account. While the country's mainstream national schools, colleges and universities were predominantly secular and aimed at producing skilled workers for a developing economy, there also existed

the arms heist was successful. By then it was widely speculated that the Komando Jihad had actually been set up under the watchful eye of Indonesian army intelligence personnel who wanted to use the Komando Jihad to eliminate opponents of the government and residual elements of the banned communist party of Indonesia. On 28 March 1981, members of the Komando Jihad staged the hijacking of a Garuda airlines DC-9, which they directed to Malaysia and finally Bangkok. The hijacking was ultimately foiled by the Kopassandha (later KOPASSUS) unit of elite para-commandos. By then the Indonesian army commanders were distancing themselves from the Komando Jihad, and the group had grown beyond their control. Later in the 1980s the Indonesian army and intelligence would provoke the radical Islamists to gauge their strength, but this in turn radicalised them even further.

tens of thousands of traditional religious schools—*madrasahs* and *pesantrens*—all over the country that were providing rudimentary Islamic education to millions of ordinary boys and girls from poorer families. As mentioned above, the main reason for this anomaly was the bifurcation of responsibilities between two governmental Ministries: the Ministry of Education that was responsible for the provision of mainstream secular education all over the country, and the Departemen Agama that was left in charge of the religious schools of Indonesia. The technocrats of Suharto’s government realized that something had to be done urgently to narrow the growing divide between the secular universities and the traditional Islamic schools of the country, or else face the prospect of having thousands of graduates with little else save knowledge of religious scripture and rituals. And as Ichwan (2006) has noted, it was from this period onwards (the late 1970s and early 1980s) that the technocrats of the Suharto regime attempted to bring about what he calls the re-alignment of two divergent educational paradigms.¹⁷

Another factor that also had to be taken into account was the rise of campus-based Islamist student activism in other parts of the world at the time. By the early 1970s Muslim students worldwide were agitating their governments and calling for the inculcation of Islamic norms and values into governance and nation building. In neighbouring Malaysia, the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, ABIM) had been created by young student activists like Anwar Ibrahim and were openly opposing the secular developmental policies of the Malaysian government. Other campus-based Islamist revivalist movements like the neo-Sufi Darul Arqam movement had also sprouted on the campuses of Malaysia and were spreading its wings across the country. In Pakistan, the youth wing of the Jama’at-e Islami party, the Jamiatul Tuleba-e Islam were also mobilizing on the campuses of Lahore and Karachi, calling for greater representation of the Islamists in national politics. Understandably, the Suharto government was keen to monitor these developments and to see which direction political Islam took on the campuses of Indonesia.

Compared to Malaysia where Muslim schools had been in existence and had been given state support since independence, Indonesia’s Islamic educational sector had largely been left to the care of the country’s Islamist groups and movements like

¹⁷ Ichwan, 2006, pp. 140–141.

the Muhamadiyah and NU. While the governments of Sukarno and later Suharto had keenly supported the secular colleges, polytechnics and universities of the country with the hope of creating a new generation of skilled workers, professionals and technocrats, the Muslim schools were largely left under the care of the Department of Religious Affairs (Departemen Agama) of the country and little effort had been made to improve their curricula and teaching methods.

Motivated by the factors mentioned above—which, it has to be said, were more guided by security concerns rather than the desire to improve the standards of Islamic education—the Suharto government began to introduce gradual changes to the overall structure of the Muslim schools and colleges in the country. By the 1970s the government established the first National Academies for Islamic Studies (Institut Agama Islam Negeri, IAIN) in Indonesia. The IAINs were primarily research institutes which also had teaching responsibilities and which were regarded as teaching and research centres almost on par with colleges and universities then. At that time there were no fully-fledged Islamic universities in the country and the IAINs were the natural choice for Indonesian students who wished to further their education in Islamic studies after graduating from the *madrasahs* and *pesantrens* in the country. With the backing of the state and funded by the Departemen Agama, the IAINs were the only state-sanctioned and state-sponsored institutes of Islamic research and teaching where the graduates would be given official certificates and diplomas that would entitle them to jobs in the civil service.

On 6 September 1971, the crucial decision was made to appoint the scholar Prof. A. Mukti Ali to the position as head of the Departemen Agama. Mukti Ali was a graduate of the Pesantren of Pacetan in East Java, had studied in Pakistan and later completed his higher education in Islamic Studies at McGill university where he studied under Cambell Smith. Between 1972 to 1978 Mukti Ali served as the Minister for Religious Affairs and it was under his leadership that the concept and practice of research was introduced to Islamic studies in Indonesia. A scientist by training and spirit, he accepted and introduced the distinction between the sacred and the profane; and argued that it was equally important to study and research the normalized religio-cultural norms and praxis of society. Islam for Mukti Ali was not to be understood in terms of texts alone, but rather in the dynamic approach and relation between text and subject, dogma and praxis, ideas and society. It was this aspect that made Islam a living religion and, as a living, organic and dynamic phenomena, it could and should

be studied scientifically, he argued. Another contemporary of Mukti Ali was Harun Nasution, who was likewise an Islamic scholar of repute and who was well versed in traditional Islamic studies but who could see the need and value for a scientific approach to socio-religious norms. Mukti Ali oversaw the running of the IAIN in Jogjakarta that was established in 1951, while Harun Nasution ran the IAIN in Jakarta.

With scholars like Mukti Ali and Harun Nasution being put in charge of the IAINs in Jakarta and Jogjakarta, efforts were then made to inculcate the values of scientific and objective research into Islam as not only a belief system but also as a social phenomena that could be studied via the methods of empirical analysis. The IAINs began taking tentative steps into the research of Muslim behavioural norms in areas like political mobilization and participation, public perceptions of religion and the praxis of belief, quantitative and qualitative analyses of normative religious practice and so forth. The guideline for such research was laid down in the book by another scholar, Mulianto Sumardi, who both edited and contributed to the work entitled *Penelitian Islam* (Islamic Research) that was published in 1975 under the auspices of the Departemen Agama.

Penelitian Islam was a compilation of essays on the methodology of modern Islamic studies and it contained essays by Mulianto Sumardi as well as Mukti Ali, Taufik Abdullah, Deliar Noer, Lujito and Tom Michell. As noted by the Dean of UIN Sunan Kalijaga Amin Abdullah (see appendix A, below), the essay by Tom Michell was of crucial importance as it was written by a Christian scholar who had studied the works and ideas of the Muslim thinker Ibn Taymiyya. At the time this was a revolutionary step as it demonstrated that a non-Muslim was able to contribute to studies on Islam, and that a scholar could take objective distance from the subject of his or her academic research. Following its publication, *Penelitian Islam* became the core text for the work carried out at the IAINs across Indonesia.

The development of higher Islamic education in Indonesia was, however, much slower compared to the developments in other neighbouring Muslim countries. In Malaysia, the rise of politically motivated Islamist groups like ABIM eventually led to the co-optation of its leaders like Anwar Ibrahim into the government. With the gradual penetration of Islamists into the Malaysian government and civil service, the pace of Islamization in Malaysia accelerated visibly. While Indonesia was still taking cautious steps in its efforts to upgrade the standards of Muslim higher education, the

Malaysian government under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim embarked on a full-scale Islamization process that led to innovations such as the introduction of Islamic banking and finance in the 1980s.

In 1983, the Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (International Islamic University of Malaysia, IIU/UIA) was founded. The UIA project was announced after the Malaysian Prime Minister's visit to the Arab Gulf states. UIA's initial funding came from Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Libya, Turkey and Egypt, and the university's first president was ex-ABIM leader turned UMNO politician, Anwar Ibrahim. To add substance to the UIA initiative a number of international conferences around the theme of Islamic knowledge and science were held. Between 1983 and 1989, Kuala Lumpur was host to the International Conference on the Islamic Approach towards Technological Development (1983), Islamic Civilization (1984), Islamic Thought (1984), International Islamic Symposium (1986), Islamic Economics (1987), Islam and Media (1987), Religious Extremism (1987) and Islam and the Philosophy of Science (1989). Also in 1983 (on 1 July), the government launched Bank Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Bank), the first bank in the country to offer regular banking services in accordance with Islamic restrictions and norms related to commerce. It did not charge interest on loans and (on paper at least) avoided the practice of *riba*. Soon afterwards, Malaysia's Takaful (Islamic insurance company) was launched, as well as Lembaga Urusan Tabung Haji (LUTH, Hajj Pilgrims Management Fund). By creating UIA, Bank Islam, Takaful and LUTH it appeared as if the Malaysian government was fully committed to the Islamization of Malaysia.

One reason why the Indonesian government was not able and not as keen to embark on a similar form of Islamization by co-opting the Islamists of the country was the Suharto regime's fear of the radical potential of political Islam in the country. While the Malaysian government opted for co-optation as a means of domesticating the Islamist opposition, Indonesia's relation with the Islamists was of a more violent nature and with higher stakes. On the campuses of the country, more and more Muslim student groups and splinter cells were developing as part of the underground student movement. Thanks to the suppression of democratic life on the campuses and the depoliticization of the universities, many of these student groups turned out to be more radical in their political commitment and more revolutionary in their ambitions. They also opposed the secular ideology of the Indonesian state and often criticized the

more mainstream Indonesian Islamist intellectuals (like Nurcholish Madjid) whom they regarded as being too “soft” on the Suharto regime.¹⁸ In the 1980s conflict with Muslims arose in Northern and Southern Sumatra, and parts of Java were the scenes of violent conflict between the Indonesian armed forces and the local Islamist opposition movement. Indonesia’s mainstream Islamists like Nurcholish Madjid chose to avoid the path of confrontation altogether by rejecting the demands for an Islamic state and adopting a “cultural” approach to inculcating Islamic values in daily life instead.

Treading carefully into the domain of Islamic religious education that was fiercely guarded by the Islamist parties and movements, the technocrats of the Suharto regime began to make gradual modifications and reforms in the system. In April 1983, a seminar on Islam and National Education was held at the Islamic Research Academy (IAIN) of Sharif Hidayatullah in Jakarta that had been in the care of Harun Nasution. At the seminar, the then Minister for Religious Affairs Munawir Sjadzali outlined his vision of what a modern Islamic educational system should look like and what it was aimed to do:

“Islamic education aims to create development-minded persons who are able to improve themselves personally and their societies by giving integral education that marries science with religious knowledge, in a non-dichotomous sense.”¹⁹

Following the failure—in the early 1970s—to bring together the secular and religious streams of education in Indonesia under one Ministry of Education, the Suharto government by the 1980s was trying to create modern state-sponsored Islamic *madrasahs* (MIs) and *pesantrens* (PIs) that would offer a different sort of Islamic education that was deemed more pragmatic, modern and mixed with secular subjects like mathematics, geography and science. It was then hoped that by creating a different stream of Islamic education that was better funded (and which received the

¹⁸ Many Islamist students were the products of the Latihan Mujahid Dakwah (Missionary Activists Training) programme first launched by Imaduddin Abdurrahim, the former Indonesian secretary to the International Islamic Federation of Student Organisations (IIFSO), which was partially set up with help and funding from the Saudi Rabitat organization. Many student *usrath* cells were created by the Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam-Majelis Penyelamat Organisasi (HMI-MPO), a splinter group that broke from the Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam (Islamic University Students Organisation) led by “liberals” like Nurcholish Madjid. Unlike HMI, HMI-MPO was less inclined to pay lip service to the *pancasila* ideology of the state, and were more open in their opposition to the Suharto regime. They also opposed other Islamist intellectuals and activists like Nurcholish Madjid whom they regarded as being too “soft” and accommodating to the Suharto government and the non-Muslim minorities.

¹⁹ Quoted in Ichwan, 2006, p. 141.

political support of the state) parents of Muslim children would be more willing and inclined to send their children to the state-sponsored religious schools rather than the independent thought traditionalist *madrasahs* and *pesantrens*. Crucially, the curriculum of the state-sponsored *madrasahs* and religious schools was set by the 1984 curriculum which stated clearly that these schools would teach more secular subjects than religious ones, and that the religious content of the curriculum would not exceed 33 per cent.

Yet, while the government was able and willing to use the tools of state sponsorship and patronage to win over the support of Muslim schools that had come under its control, it did not relent in its aim to streamline the Muslim educational system under one general paradigm of development-oriented education. Thus in May 1988 the Minister of Education Fuad Hassan tabled a draft of the Revised Draft Law on National Education at the National Assembly, once again reiterating the call to bring all the religious schools of the country under the control of the Ministry of Education. This second attempt to unify the educational streams of Indonesia once again was met with strong opposition from the Islamist parties and movements of Indonesia, who regarded it as yet another attempt to weaken their own support base and to “dilute” Islamic studies and render Muslim education secular.²⁰ Both the Minister for Education (Fuad Hassan) and Minister for Religious Affairs (Munawir Sjadjadi) appealed to the Islamist parties and movements and insisted that the bill was intended to upgrade the standards of education across Indonesia regardless of the subjects taught, be they from the secular or Islamic streams, and that what Indonesia badly needed then was a modern form of education aimed at sharpening the intellect of the students and teaching them the tools of critical analysis. But their efforts came to naught and the bill was opposed nonetheless. What was eventually passed was a compromised bill that was enacted as Law No. 2/1989 in 1989 that recognized the right to Islamic education and left room for private Islamic education to be provided by non-state agencies. The positive aspect of the same 1989 law was that it formally recognized the state-sponsored *madrasahs* and the Islamic Research Academies

²⁰ Ichwan (2006) notes that the Islamists parties that opposed the 1988 Law reform denounced it on the grounds of the language used in the bill. They argued that the law presented an image of Islamic education as backward, unscientific and irrational; and claimed that this was an overt attempt at the de-Islamization of Indonesian society. (Ichwan, 2006, pp. 144–148). As such the bill was heavily attacked by all of the major Islamist movements in Indonesia.

(IAINs) of Indonesia as well, putting them on par with the state's own secular research institutes and schools.

A further shift in the Suharto regime's views on Islam came later in the early 1990s when it became clear—due to demographic and political factors—that it could no longer neglect the huge Muslim constituency that made up an overwhelming majority of Indonesia's population. In an attempt to bring the Islamist scholars and intellectuals closer to the fold of the state, the Suharto government created the Association of Indonesian Muslim Scholars (Ikatan Cendiakiawan Muslim Indonesia, ICMI). ICMI was formally launched on 6 December 1990. Although scholars like Robert Hefner (2000) have noted that a complex popular narrative had been spun around the early stages of the formation of ICMI, it is clear that it was “a Suharto-sponsored association” designed to mobilize Muslim support at a time when segments of the Indonesian military were challenging the president. Suharto also hoped to use ICMI to take the wind out of the sails of the fledgling pro-democracy movement by dividing it along religious lines.²¹ The formation of ICMI gave Suharto the opportunity to publicly show off his religious credentials and newfound commitment to Islam. The Indonesian press dutifully reported the story of how Suharto had dictated his own interpretation of Islam as a philosophy and way of life to B. J. Habibie, who later became a co-chairman of ICMI.²² Suharto was quick to court the progressive elements of the Islamist movement to lend their support to the project: Nurcholish Madjid, Dawam Rahardjo, Imaduddin Abdulrahim and General Alamsyah Ratu Perwiranagara (former Religious Affairs Minister) were all on the committee which drew up the guidelines and working parameters of the institute. The posts of co-chairmen of ICMI went to B. J. Habibie, a German-trained technocrat and close confidant of Suharto, and Dr. Emil Salim, a Berkeley-educated technocrat who had spearheaded the Suharto government privatization and liberalization policies in the 1970s and 1980s.

Again, the gestures of appeasement to the Islamists of Indonesia were motivated more by political and security concerns above all else. There remained the fear of the Darul Islam movement, and similar attempts to turn Indonesia into an Islamic state. By the early 1990s, the spectres of the past were being resurrected one

²¹ Robert Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 125.

²² Ibid, p. 137.

by one. Between 1993 and 1995, Indonesian intelligence and security forces had to deal with several clandestine movements and underground cells accused of trying to topple the government and create an Islamic state by force of arms. In August 1994, a nationwide sweep led to the arrest of 117 individuals accused of plotting to set up an Islamic state via armed revolution. An even bigger sweep in 1995 ended with the arrest and detention of 428 Islamists accused of propagating the ideology of Negara Islam Indonesia (Indonesian Islamic State), first voiced by Darul Islam leaders. Despite the use of force and threats of violence, the Suharto regime was not able to check the advance of the Islamist opposition. Nor did appeals to moderate Muslims and liberal Christians help, for the Islamists had grown in number and were prepared to take on both the state and any other group—moderates, liberals, Christians or secularists—who took sides with it. Suharto's active courting of the Christians only made things worse for the religious minority group. Soon after, Indonesia's Christians became the target of the Islamists, who regarded them as apologists and supporters of the Suharto government and security forces.²³

While these political and security concerns were being nursed by the Suharto regime, the teaching and research that was being conducted at the IAINs of the country continued at their own pace. By the early 1990s, the Suharto government had created more IAINs with branches and offices in many of the major cities of Indonesia like Jakarta, Jogjakarta, Surakarta, Bandung, Malang, Surabaya, etc. Then in 1994 the IAINs introduced the foundational course *Pendekatan Terhadap Pengajian Islam* (Approach to Islamic Studies), where the teaching of research methods became the core component of Islamic studies, making it a scientific discipline. The aim of the IAIN reforms was to demonstrate that the scholar had to research religion, and not just study it. The core courses introduced from the 1990s were all based on the humanities: Sociology, Anthropology, History, Discourse Analysis, Linguistics and Semiotics, Philosophy and the basic modes of empirical research and fieldwork research methods. These were the tools used to study religion in general, and Islam in particular. By then (1994) the Minister of Religious Affairs Tarmizi Taher had already announced the plan that the IAINs would soon be

²³ Growing resentment towards the Indonesian Christians (many of Chinese origin) later turned to violence. In 1996, Muslim mobs attacked Christian churches, shops and homes all over the country. In June 1996, 12 churches were destroyed in Java alone. In October, a mob of 3,000 Muslims burned down 25 churches in Situbondo, killing five Christians. In many attacks, it was widely reported that members of the Indonesian armed forces did not help the Christian victims of Muslim mob violence.

converted to fully-fledged National Islamic Universities (Universitas Islam Negeri, UIN)

While the IAINs were busy with the task of introducing new disciplines of social sciences to their research work, the state-sponsored religious schools (*madrasahs* and *pesantrens*) were also being directed to modernize their curriculum further to bring them closer to the national mainstream primary and secondary schools. Working in the spirit of Law no. 2/1989, in 1994 a further reform was introduced to the curriculum of the state-sponsored *madrasahs*, reducing the religious content of their teaching material further from 33 per cent (in 1984) down to 16–18 per cent. In order to ensure that the reduction of religious content in the state's *madrasahs* was not met with vocal opposition, rough guidelines were introduced to complement the reform measures and to ensure that the religious schools under the patronage of the state maintained some semblance of “Muslim identity”. Some of these changes, as Ichwan (2006) has noted, tended to be cosmetic—such as building prayer rooms and mosques in or close to the compound of the schools—while others tended to be vague—such as demanding “good conduct” from the students and teachers.²⁴

As Ichwan (2006) has argued, the real aims of the Suharto establishment—dominated as it was by a coterie of army and intelligence officers working closely with allied local business and foreign diplomatic interests—was to modify the Islamic educational system in Indonesia via a combination of coercion and patronage, with the long-term goal of shifting away the public's dependency on traditional religious schools to the more modern and development-oriented state mainstream schools, colleges and universities of the country. As Ichwan points out:

“The impact of this government-hegemonized discourse on Islamic education was not only to achieve the modernization and secularization of Islamic education, but also to ensure its (political) ‘moderation’.”²⁵

Nothing, however, could have prevented the Suharto regime from disguising the fundamental weaknesses of the Indonesian economic developmental model that was still dependent on the injection of foreign capital and the backing of the country's Western donors. While the governments of the West were prepared to tolerate some of the excesses of the military regime and its flagrant abuses of human rights during the annexation of Irian Jaya and East Timor, the crippling effects of three decades of

²⁴ Ichwan, 2006, pp. 156–157.

²⁵ Ichwan, 2006, p. 166.

uncontested rule meant that by the late 1990s the Indonesian economy was particularly vulnerable to the contingencies and vagaries of the international financial system and global market. The East Asian economic crisis of 1997–1998 brought to an end the rule of Suharto as he and his supporters were swept from power by massive student-led revolts all over the country, leaving behind a weakened state and a fragile economy that remains even more dependent on foreign aid and trade than ever before. It is against this background of uncertainty that Indonesia's experiment with modern Islamic higher education now grapples to find its place.

IV. Thinking the Unthinkable: How Indonesia's Islamic Universities are now leading the way in Islamic Studies

Looking at the state of higher Islamic education in Indonesia today, we are left with two burning dilemmas.

The first dilemma is a political one, and it revolves around the question of power, the state and the reform and modernization process. As mentioned above, one of the outstanding features of the Suharto era was its brutal record of suppressing all forms of dissent and crushing any democratic opposition within the country. Yet one of the supreme ironies of the Suharto years—despite its appalling human costs that were incurred primarily on the Indonesian people themselves—is the fact that by domesticating the forces of political Islam and co-opting the Islamic educational sector into the national mainstream of modern development-oriented education it had actually saved Indonesia from the blight of religious radicalism.

As we have argued elsewhere (Noor, 2001), the experiment with Islamic higher education in other Muslim countries like Malaysia and Pakistan has led to the creation of modern Islamic universities as well, but ones that have come under the patronage and sponsorship of foreign, and notably Arab, donors from the Gulf States.²⁶ While Indonesia shielded its Islamic universities from foreign manipulation, the International Islamic Universities of Malaysia and Pakistan have become hotbeds

²⁶ Re: Farish A. Noor, “*Islamization by Degrees*: Europe in the formation of new Islamist consciousness among Malaysian students and activists between the 1970s and the 1990s”. Paper for the International Conference on “Cosmopolitanism, Human Rights, and Sovereignty in Multicultural Europe”; organized by the Institute of European Studies, UC-Berkeley and the Centre for Global, International, and Regional Studies UC, Santa Cruz, 4 and 5 May 2001.

of Islamist student activism, largely inspired by Islamist movements like the *Ikhwan’ul Muslimin* of Egypt and the Arab world and the *Jama’at-e Islami* of the Indian subcontinent. By comparison the Islamic universities of Indonesia are notably more inward looking and their students tend to look to local Muslim intellectuals like Nurcholish Madjid and Amein Rais for inspiration.

Yet this tendency to look inwards for inspiration and the calculated avoidance of dependence on foreign (notably Arab) funding was due primarily to the Suharto government’s fear of political Islam and the spread of radical militant Islam across the Muslim world. In its attempt to insulate the country, the military regime that backed Suharto went out of its way to suppress all forms of legitimate student protest, particularly when it was inspired by Muslim actors and Islamic themes. The net result has been the “protection” of the campuses of the country, but at the hands of a powerful military elite backed by the West. Today other Muslim countries like Pakistan under General Pervez Musharraf have taken a similar approach to prevent the spread of radical militant Islam in the *madrasahs* and Islamic colleges of Pakistan, and the Musharraf government has consistently defended its position on the grounds that only a strong military government that has dictatorial powers will have the power and ability to stem the spread of radical militant Islam. But does this mean that civilian rule is somehow conducive to radical Islamist politics, or that democratization actually works against the interests of reform and modernization of Islam? Of course the Indonesian case is unique in many respects and the developments in the country were shaped by both internal and external variable factors that could not have been anticipated. But nonetheless it remains a fact that the modernization of Islamic higher education in Indonesia developed faster and with more lasting results during the Suharto years than it did during the time of his predecessor Sukarno.

In the years following the fall of Suharto, successive leaders had come to the fore to stem the growing tide up public resentment against the political establishment in the country. Some of the laws that were passed, such as Law No. 22/1999 on Regional Authority, conceded ground to local provinces and district bodies that demanded increased autonomy from centralized rule. Other laws like Law No. 20/2003 on the National Educational System attempted to keep the country’s imagined community intact via emphasizing the need for a national educational

system for all citizens. The contradiction between these laws, as Ichwan (2006) has noted, has placed some traditional religious schools in an ambiguous position.²⁷

The contentious period between 1999 to the present, which witnessed the rise and fall of the fortunes of radical Islamist groups like the Laskar Jihad and a spate on religious and racial conflict across the Indonesian archipelago, had also divided the community of Muslim scholars, educationists and intellectuals across the country. Understandably many of the teachers and leaders of the more traditional *madrasahs* that have always opposed the attempts by the state to modernize their institutions and revise the teaching curriculum of the *madrasahs* and *pesantrens* were happy with the concessions made to the pro-autonomy camp, which also allowed local and regional governments to have direct control of the *madrasahs* in their territories. This has allowed for the creation of more independent *madrasahs* and *pesantrens* that operate outside the sphere of state control and thereby has also contributed to the pluralization of Islamic education in the country.

This leads us to our second question, which is of the status of the Islamic education provided at the UINs of Indonesia today. The question is primarily an epistemic one, and boils down to this: is the education provided at the UINs of Indonesia today primarily an Islamic form of education that has been modernized, or rather modern education that has been tinted by Islam and religious concerns? In short, is this a case of an Islamic modernity at work, or is modernity being Islamized?

While these academic questions remain debated hotly among the scholars of Indonesia there are some who are of the opinion that what Indonesia needs now is a centralized and modernized state-sponsored and state-guided Islamic educational system that does not promote too much pluralism in opinion, especially of the more militant and radical variety. Between 2003–2004 one of the most vocal advocates of mainstream Islamic education was the then dean of Sharif Hidayatullah IAIN (later UIN) Prof Azyumardi Azra, who repeatedly warned of the dangers of *madrasahs* slipping outside state control and being hijacked by radical groups for other political ends.²⁸ By the early 2000s, however the development that had taken place in the IAINs of Indonesia had begun to bore fruit and they had produced the second generation of scholars who had been trained to research Islam by using modern scientific tools and methods of analysis. At institutions such as IAIN Sharif

²⁷ Ichwan, 2006. p. 269.

²⁸ Ichwan, 2006, p. 289.

Hidayatullah in Jakarta and IAIN Sunan Kalijaga in Jogjakarta, an entire generation of Muslim scholars were engaged in critical Islamic studies that incorporated disciplines like philosophy, linguistics, logic and empirical data analysis to study the phenomenon of normative religion in Indonesian society. Soon after, the IAINs were elevated to the status of Universitas Islam Negeri one by one. On 20 May 2002 the first IAIN to be converted was Sharif Hidayatullah in Jakarta, to be followed by UIN Sunan Kalijaga in Jogjakarta and STAIN Malang on 21 June 2004.²⁹ Despite the elevation to the full status of Islamic University, however, there remained many questions about what the UINs were supposed to do and what their focus would be (see appendices A and C below). As Ichwan (2006) noted, there were several models that the UINs could have adopted, and the debate continued over which model was best suited to be adapted to the Indonesian scenario:

“Even at that stage, the concept of the UIN was not exactly clear, although an official formulation had stated that the task of the UINs was to ‘reconcile the dichotomy between religion and the general sciences. There were three dominant models then: First was the ‘differentiated model’ of a university with some general faculties and one faculty of religious science... Secondly there was the ‘Islamization of Knowledge’ model developed by the International Institute for Islamic Thought (IIIT) in the state of Virginia, USA, and its branch in London. Thirdly there was the ‘Islamic ethics and values model’ as developed by Fazlur Rahman.”³⁰

Thus far the UINs of Indonesia are still in the process of finding their way and determining what their long term objectives ought to be (see appendices A and C below). What is clear is that the criteria that has been set for them is primarily a scientific one and that the promotion of the scientific method is the benchmark against which the directors of the UINs judge themselves and the quality of the teaching that their institutions provide now and into the future. The UINs of Indonesia have also proven to be more daring in their choice of subjects and disciplines compared to the other Islamic universities that dot the landscape of the Muslim world. While conducting fieldwork in Indonesia in 2004, 2005 and 2006–2007, I was given the

²⁹ Amin Abdullah, “Desain Pembangunan Akademik IAIN Menuju UIN Sunan Kalijaga: Dari Pola Dikotomis-Atomistik ke Arah Integratif Interdisciplinary” in Zainal Abidin Bagir, Jarot Wahyudi, Afnan Anshori (Eds.), *Integrasi Ilmu dan Agama: Interpretasi dan Aksi*. Jointly published by Penerbit Mizan, Bandung, Suka Press and Masyarakat Jogjakarta Untuk Ilmu dan Agama, Jogjakarta, 2005.

³⁰ Ichwan, 2006, p. 297.

opportunity to teach at several UINs, notably UIN Sunan Kalijaga in Jogjakarta. There I found students from the Islamic Studies department studying the Qur'an and Hadith using the tools of discourse analysis and critical theory, as pioneered by the influential though controversial Egyptian scholar Prof. Nasr Abu Zayd, who was forced to leave his own country after receiving death threats from Islamists and accused of apostasy. At UIN Sunan Kalijaga, not only are the works of Nasr Abu Zayd translated into Bahasa Indonesia, but he is also widely read and has been invited to lecture there and at other UINs in Indonesia as well. Other prominent Muslim scholars like the Sudanese Abdullahi an-Naim (who was also persecuted in his own country and forced to flee abroad) have been invited to the UINs of Indonesia, and the works of scholars like Ebrahim Moosa and Farid Esack, proponents of a Muslim "Liberation theology" from South Africa are also widely taught (see appendix B below)

The UINs of Indonesia have come a long way, and were developed under the complex circumstances of the Suharto dictatorship of the 1970s–1990s. While as IAINs they were instrumentalized in Suharto's attempts to blunt the advances of the Islamist opposition in Indonesia, they have also carved a niche for themselves as modern, competent producers and disseminators of Islamic knowledge in the country. The IAINs elevation to the status of full universities today means that they are able to stand on par with the best universities of the country, such as the prestigious Gajah Mada University of Jogjakarta. But this also means that for the UINs to survive they will have to demonstrate their worth as institutions of serious scientific research and higher learning not only to the Indonesian public but also in the eyes of other peer institutions the world over. As stated by Professor Akhmad Minhaji of the Faculty of Shariah at UIN Sunan Kalijaga in the course of our interview with him (see appendix C below) the goal of UIN Sunan Kalijaga and the other UINs of Indonesia today is not simply to teach, but to be seen and recognized as modern and competent universities by the other universities of the world. To that end it is the development of their scientific potential and capacity as research and teaching institutions that count more than outward cosmetic demonstrations of piety or Muslim identity. In many other parts of the Muslim world today such an outlook on the part of Muslim scholars and educators may seem incredible, if not unthinkable. But something unique has happened in Indonesia as a result of the country's convoluted and painful history, and

Indonesia's experiment with Modern Higher Islamic Education certainly deserves more attention than it has received thus far.

Appendix A

Interview with Professor Amin Abdullah, Rector of Sunan Kalijaga Islamic University, Jogjakarta.

FN: 'It is interesting to note that both Malaysia and Indonesia embarked on the path towards modernisation and the upgrading of Islamic education around the same time, but with mixed results. Malaysia's experiment with a state-controlled Islam began in the early 1980s, following the co-optation of former Islamic youth leader Anwar Ibrahim into the ruling UMNO party and the Mahathir government's attempt to set up institutions like the International Islamic University (UIA), the Malaysian Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM), and the Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC). Indonesia's move to upgrade the state Islamic academies (IAIN) to the level of national Islamic universities (UIN) came much later, yet the discrepancy between the two countries is obvious: Malaysia's Islamic education system has lagged behind despite its early start and has become institutions that are not only politicised but are often dubbed dens of conservative, traditionalist and literalist-fundamentalist thinking, with a strong bias in favour of Saudi-style Wahabbi and neo-Salafi Islam. Yet here in Indonesia and in places like UINSUKA, we see students studying the Quran using methodologies unheard of in Malaysia, like hermeneutics and discourse analysis. How and why did this happen?

AA: 'It is true that in Indonesia and in institutions like UINSUKA in particular we are well ahead of many other contemporary institutions, not only in Malaysia but also across the region and further afield such as in the Arab countries and North Africa. But remember that what has happened here in Indonesia is the result of a longer historical process that has been continuous, even if it was problematic at times. In brief, we can trace the development and evolution of Islamic research and Islamic studies in Indonesia following several stages:

Firstly it should be remembered that Indonesia's grappling with the question of modernity and Islam dates back to the colonial era when the pioneering reformers and

modernisers of the late 19th and early 20th century were forced to struggle against the reality of Western, in this case Dutch, colonial rule. Now the Muslim reformers were not against the Dutch per se, but rather the Dutch system of education that they regarded as problematic due to its eurocentric, Orientalist and colonial biases. Dutch colonial education may have been regimented, rationalised and modern, but it was also colonial in nature and its aim was to protect and maintain the structures of colonial power and knowledge then, (in the Foucauldian sense). In reaction to this colonial order of knowledge, modernist Muslim movements like the Muhamadiyah were formed (in Jogjakarta) in 1912. The initial aim of the Muhamadiyah was to create a new, reformed, rationalised, systematic and regulated schooling system that could teach Islam to a new generation of students that was different from the methods used in the Dutch colonial schools as well as the literalist-based traditional pondok Pesantrens.

Secondly came the post-colonial phase: Following independence in 1945 the post-colonial generation of Muslim intellectuals were forced to deal with the new political reality of working within the context of a modern nation-state. New concepts like nationalism, political territoriality, citizenship, political emancipation, civil society, had to be addressed and inculcated in their activism.

So by the 1970s the younger generation of Muslim university students once again revised the reformist project of the Muhamadiyah: If in the 1920s-1930s the Muhamadiyah had pioneered modern schools, then what was to be the goal of the post-colonial generation? The schools were already there; there were Islamic colleges and academies all over Indonesia, but what was being taught in them? Thus the 1970s was the period when introspection became the norm and the question was asked: What is the essence of Islamic studies? Surely not simply memorizing texts and teaching moral conduct...

Thirdly, by then the traditionalist movements like the Nahdatul Ulama had also begun to accept the need to change, adapt and reform their education system and to improve their curricula. The challenge posed by the reformists of the Muhamadiyah gave added impetus for the traditionalists to alter their way of looking at Islam and Islamic studies too.

Fourthly, the state came to play its role by the 1970s when the Suharto government could no longer turn a blind eye to the prevalence of Islam in the country. Historically the Suharto government was not comfortable with Islam, particularly its political

variety. One way to ensure that Islam in particular and religion in general would not become radicalised in Indonesia was to ensure that the best, forward-looking and progressive intellectuals and academics were put in charge of determining the Islamic studies curriculum. In the 1970s it was the state's own Religious Affairs Department (Departemen Agama) that introduced the idea, value and practice of research to Islamic studies and religious studies in general. This was an important step as it meant that henceforth religion was a subject to be *researched*, and not memorized blindly.

FN: 'Thus as you say this was a long drawn-out historical process with a number of actors and agents at work, including the state. But surely it could not have been a linear progression as easy and straightforward as that?

AA: 'It was certainly not without its share of problems. As I said, this reform process took time and of course there was resistance from the beginning: The reformers opposed the traditionalists, the traditionalists opposed the reformers, the state was wary about Islam per se, etc.

But what is important is the synergy that developed and propelled the process. Knowingly or unknowingly, all these actors: the state, the intellectuals, the academics, the reformers and the traditionalists, all played their part to shape the debate and bring us to where we are today. Can you imagine the UINSUKA standing as it is without this long and sometimes conflictual process? Indonesia has had to pay a price for its reform of Islamic education, and it did not happen overnight, but the process did not simply involve building university buildings here and there: It was a public process involving the public debate of ideas and the slow inculcation of these values and ideas that were debated then, like reform, modernity, science and the scientific method, etc. This process was always dynamic, even if it was confrontational at times, with accusations being thrown at each other by all parties. But it was a necessary step to get us to where we are today.

FN: 'Now here is where scholars like myself, who are trained in the school of Western social sciences, encounter difficulties. I don't know how to classify what is happening in places like UIN SUKA: You have pious Muslim students who are practicing Muslims who nonetheless can actually read the Quran and Hadith using the methodology of discourse analysis; who can write papers about inter-textual

interpretations of the Quran; who can write deconstructive accounts of Islamic history, politics and ethics. How is this possible? From a Western point of view one might even call UINSUKA a secular modern university, but would you accept such a typology?

AA: 'No, we don't and we will not. We are not a secular or modern university in the Western sense of the word. UINSUKA is, after all a UIN, an Islamic university. There are secular universities here in Indonesia like Gajah Mada next door.

The misunderstanding arises, in my opinion, in the somewhat narrow definition of 'secularism' and 'modernity' in the West. It is true that secularism and modernity arose from a specific historical context in the West, but the evolution of Indonesia's world of ideas is likewise specific to Indonesia: it cannot even be compared or transposed to Malaysia next door.

Like I said earlier, our scientific approach stems from the cultural tide of changes that began in the 1970s when reformers like Nurcholish Madjid and neo-traditionalists like Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) began to question the premises and objectives of the Islamic project itself. They realised that the political constraints under the Suharto government meant that political Islam was not an option, but in a sense this saved Indonesia from the path of a literalist, politicised and ideologised reading of Islam as happened in other places like Iran, Pakistan or even Malaysia.

FN: 'But how did this reform process begin and why do you not wish to have it labelled 'secular' or 'modern'?

AA: 'Because it was never meant to be modern or secular in the first place. How it began was like this: Thanks in part to the state's cautious approach to Islam, the Departemen Agama (Religious Department) of the government appointed men like Mukti Ali to its head position. Now Mukti Ali had studied in Pakistan, was himself a graduate of the Pesantren of Pacetan in East Java, and was later a graduate of McGill university where he studied under Cambell Smith.'

Between 1972 to 1978 Mukti Ali was the Minister for Religious Affairs and it was under his leadership that the concept and practice of research was introduced to Islamic studies in Indonesia.

Mukti Ali was a pious Muslim who nonetheless saw no contradiction in learning about Islam and researching it at the same time. He accepted and introduced the distinction between the sacred and the profane; and he argued that it was equally important to study and research the normalised religio-cultural norms and praxis of society. Islam for him was not to be understood in terms of texts alone, but rather in the dynamic approach and relation between text and subject, dogma and praxis, ideas and society. It was this aspect that made Islam a living religion and as a living, organic, dynamic phenomena it could and should be studied scientifically, he argued.

Another contemporary of Mukti Ali was Harun Nasution, who was likewise an Islamic scholar of repute and who was well versed in traditional Islamic studies but who could see the need and value for a scientific approach to socio-religious norms. Mukti Ali oversaw the running of the IAIN in Jogjakarta which was established in 1951, while Harun Nasution ran the IAIN in Jakarta. Both of them were path breakers in their time, and while they introduced modest reforms in terms of fundamental social science research, they paved the way for the introduction of higher sciences such as hermeneutics, discourse analysis, psychoanalytic-based deconstruction, etc later on in the 1990s. So once again, the reform process in Indonesia started a long time ago, you see.

FN: 'Could you explain the steps and measures that were involved in this process? What were the key events and ideas that got Indonesia to where it is today?

AA: 'Well there were several key events that shaped this historical process, that were the landmarks that determined where we were heading. I don't mean to suggest that this process was historically determined or guaranteed from the start: after all it was a state-guided experiment in many ways, and it did encounter resistance. But there were some landmark events that did have a permanent lasting effect.'

The first has to be the publication of Mulianto Sumardi's 'Penelitian Islam' in 1975, a book that was published under the auspices of the Departemen Agama. Now this was a relatively modest effort by today's standards, but then at that time it was a monumental step. The book contained essays by scholars like Mukti Ali, Lujito, Taufik Abdullah, Deliar Noer, Tom Michell and others.

This book is historically important for us today for a number of reasons: It laid the foundations for what would later become research on religion and Islam; it was an

objective exposition on key Muslim thinkers and ideas related to Muslim society and politics; and it included essays by non-Muslims like Tom Michell who wrote on the thinker Ibn Taimiyya.

Now at that time this book caused quite a stir, because nobody ever thought that a Christian like Tom Michell could write about a Muslim thinker like Ibn Taimiyya! Tom was a Catholic but in his essay he demonstrated keen knowledge and a critical sound understanding of Ibn Taimiyya's ideas. This shocked everyone, and for the first time it became clear that Islam was a subject that could be researched and analyzed critically yet objectively. Since then Mulianto Sumardi's 'Penelitian Islam' has become one of the key foundational texts of Religious studies at all the IAINs and later the UINs.

By the 1980s Indonesian society was developing a civil space, albeit slowly, and these academic ideas became rooted in the discourse of civil society. Many of our graduates had joined the new NGOs that were popping up all over the country and they brought to the NGOs their own academic background and training. By introducing the spirit and culture of analytical research to religion, Indonesia's new feminist NGOs, for instance, could conduct their own activism based on sound research premises.

Then in 1994 the IAINs introduced the foundational course 'Pendekatan Terhadap Pengajian Islam' (Approach to Islamic Studies), where the teaching of research methods became the core component of Islamic studies, making it a scientific discipline. We at the IAINs wanted to show that one has to *research* religion, and not just study it. So the core courses we introduced from the 1990s were all based on the humanities: Sociology, Anthropology, History, Discourse Analysis, Linguistics and Semiotics, Philosophy and the basic modes of empirical research and fieldwork research methods. These were the tools we used to study religion in general, and Islam in particular.

FN: 'And you would still insist that this entire process was guided by a rationale and value system that was religious, specifically Islamic, and not secular, in nature and intent, despite the methodologies involved?

AA: 'Yes, because for men like Mukti Ali and Harun Nasution, there was no incompatibility between science and faith: Rationalism does not contradict belief, as long as we do not subscribe to a narrow definition of rationality that reduces faith to

un-reason, or irrationality. What they were doing was trying to use scientific reasoning to understand and explain the phenomena of faith itself. Faith was being studied, you see, in a scientific way.

I have serious concerns about labels such as 'secular' or 'modern' today for as you know these two words carry terrible historical baggage that date back to the colonial era when modernity was said to have been introduced, or rather imposed, on the back of colonialism. In Indonesia the words 'secular' and 'modernity' carry ideological connotations relating them symbolically to structures of power, dominance, cultural oppression etc.

But by avoiding these labels I am not trying to play politics. The reality is this: Here in the UINs of Indonesia we are applying science to the study of religion in all its forms, from a scientific, rational analysis of sacred texts as texts, to the scientific study of public religious behavioral norms, including religious politics. So the students of UINSUKA are fundamentally *social scientists*, who are trained in rational social sciences. When IAIN Jogja was upgraded to the status of UIN Sunan Kalijaga in 2004, we kept up this tradition and have been following in the path of scientific reform since.

FN: 'Of course I understand and even sympathise in part with your concerns about labels such as 'secular' and 'modern', but is the fear or reluctance to adopt such labels mainly a political manoeuvre or does this actually reflect the hybrid episteme that is being formulated here?

AA: 'I can understand your concern but I can only reply by saying that both of the factors you mentioned are at work here.

The focus and thrust of UINSUKA's research is scientific in nature as well as its goals. If there is any label you can put to it, it would be a 'Scientific' school of Islamic studies, using scientific methods to get to verifiable, objective conclusions. Our scientific approach is scientific because we inculcate and promote the values of objective, distanced, critical research to all that we do. From the beginning we introduce our students to fundamental ideas, categories, theories that define clearly what a scientific methodology is and what it entails. Our students are taught that the distinction between the sacred and the profane is not a barrier that stops the process of rational enquiry and that all objects of analysis need to be contextualised. For

instance, when reading the Quran as text, it has to be seen and read as a text, no more, no less. This does not devalue any text, but it means that there are many ways of reading the text as there are many ways to live out one's religious life and religious experiences.

Why do I hesitate to use labels like 'modern' and 'secular'? Well as I said these concepts are all with their own historical baggage and one cannot enter into this sort of word-play and labelling-game without political costs.

Once a system of education is labeled 'modern' it immediately creates its Other that in 'non-modern' or even 'anti-modern'. The same applies to the term 'secular'. But this is where the scientific method gives way to religious or political dogmatism, and that is what we wish to avoid: We do not want our students to be dogmatic in the sense of holding on to only a single world view which they cannot reflect upon critically and independently.

So in answer to your question, we are primarily a scientific university dedicated to a scientific goal and using rational scientific methods. But as a result of this scientific approach we have also produced students from our Islamic studies faculties who are knowledgeable in traditional Islamic subjects like Quran, Hadith, Fiqh, but who are also scientists in the true sense of the word. Furthermore because we have inculcated the values of self-critique, introspection, rational skepticism and deconstruction, our students have turned out to be more moderate (politically) than the graduates of the secular universities, some of whom have turned into literal-minded conservative Islamists in their own personal struggles to 'rediscover Islam' for themselves.

FN: 'This emphasis on a purely scientific method must have made your institution some enemies by now.'

AA: 'Of course. Even during the time of the IAINs there were polemics written about our approach. The hardliner Hartono Ahmad Jais wrote (in 2003) the book "Ada Permurtadan di IAIN" (Apostasy at the IAINs), because he found our objective rational approach to religious studies not compatible with his own interpretation of Islam. But this sums up the difference between us and our detractors. We remind our students that religion is also a social phenomenon and as a social phenomenon it is necessarily historical, evolutionary, dynamic and plural; so the scientific respect for alterity and difference has to be reflected in their own research.'

Unfortunately the dogmatic conservatives do not accept this approach and accuse the Muslim scientists of being apostates. Sometimes the attacks can be ridiculous, and sometimes bitter.

When Nurcholish Madjid first spoke about Secularism as a process in the 1970s he was branded an apostate too, and right to the time of his death he was condemned by dogmatic sectarian hardliners who did not understand him. Why, even the famous Ustaz Abu Bakar Bashir claimed after his death that Nurcholish Madjid's death was due to secularism!

FN: 'I have to confess that I have always been impressed by the standards of Islamic research in Indonesia compared to other Muslim countries like Pakistan or Malaysia, but what is the next step. If, as you claim, this is a constantly evolving process that is not historically determined, then surely there can be reversals as well. Furthermore the open nature of the intellectual project means that it can also metamorphose in manifold directions. What does the future look like?

AA: 'It is true that any open-ended project cannot have its goal kept at a constant. But what has been constant in the Indonesia experience of the IAINs and UINs is the desire and intent to render Islamic studies scientific and rational. So this is not a project bereft of guidelines or guiding values. As I said, we maintain a scientific approach to avoid the danger of ideological and/or religious dogmatism.

As for the future, let us see where we are now. In many Muslim countries the popular understanding of Islam has remained at the level of texts. This is what we call Hadaratul Nas, a text-based religiosity that is often literalist, fundamentalist and conservative. This is where all understanding of religion is based on continuous references to sacred texts and the texts are in turn read and interpreted often literally, but also re-read and mis-read to manipulate their meanings. In such societies, the text is all and everything; and everything from politics to governance to finance to social order is based and justified on textual reference. So when conservative Muslims do things like impose their narrow understanding of Jihad or Shariah, they simply say "The Quran tells us to do this".

This stage of Hadaratul Nas, of text-based religiosity, is the most basic and unevolved. It is also the most political and politicised, as so many Islamic parties and governments fall back on a literal interpretation or manipulation of the text to justify

their politics. We in Indonesia have gone beyond this stage way back in the early 20th century, though as you say there are still remnants of conservative fundamentalists in the country, like some of the small but vocal neo-Salafi and Wahabi radical movements.

By the mid to late-20th century Indonesian Muslim intellectuals moved to the level of Hadarat'ul Ilm, which is knowledge-based religiosity. This was the legacy of Nurcholish Madjid, Gus Dur, Mukti Ali, Harun Nasution, Mulianto Sumardi, etc. The 1970s to the early 2000s was the era of deepening our knowledge of Islam through critical research, where we go beyond simplistic, dogmatic, ideological interpretations of religion for sectarian or political ends. It is now impossible to undo the work of this generation, and for that reason Indonesia and Indonesians are more comfortable with the ideas of pluralism, difference, alterity, social dialectics, etc compared to other societies where such a culture of rational auto-critique never set in.

Where do we go from here? Well, Indonesia knows that religion is a social phenomena and we have also seen it used and abused for political ends. That is why it is harder for Indonesians to fall for the simplistic utopian slogans of the radical militants and fundamentalists for instance. But our culture of moderation and tolerance did not arise from some 'essentialist' cultural train or in-born character: It was the result of a political and historical process. Here a moderate public space was constructed through the dynamic synergy between state and non-state actors, intellectuals and the wider community.

Indonesia is today facing a crisis: Following the economic collapse of 1998 and successive weak governments, we can see that the people are desperate, restless and frustrated. Rationally we know that this accounts in part for the relative popularity and prominence of the radical movements, for the latter have tapped into the moral panic and collective anxieties of the masses.

So Indonesia's intellectual and academic community must now push our project further, to the level of Hadarat'ul Falsafah, an ethics and philosophy-based religiosity that can give meaning and purpose to a society faced with the challenges of globalisation, shrinking of the state, borderless transmission of ideas, and an unstable geo-political climate.

Now by an 'ethics and philosophy-based' religiosity I am not talking about moral policing or a moralising politics of the literalist fashion. In fact the whole evolutionary thrust of Indonesian Islamic science is meant to move us away from such literalist and

fundamentalist expressions of Islam and religion in general. But this will have to be a form of religiosity that seeks to pose the question of what is good and right for the development of a society in crisis in scientific, rational terms rather than the mask of moral language.

End.

Appendix B

Interview with Dr. Moch Nur Ichwan of Sunan Kalijaga University

FN: 'Indonesia is unique in many respects, but one area where Indonesia's academic institutions stand out the most is in the field of scientific religious studies, where scientific methods are used in the study of socio-religious norms and praxis. This is practically unheard of in so many other Muslim countries, and yet in Indonesia we have Islamic universities like UINSUKA where even students enrolled in the department of Quranic and Hadith studies have no problems using tools such as linguistics, semiotics, discourse analysis and hermeneutics to study the Quran as a textual base. How did this come about?

MNI: 'Well, Indonesia's path of intellectual and academic development is unique in the sense that it goes well back to the beginnings of the 20th century and was a long-drawn and contested process. (re: See Interview with Prof. Amin Abdullah, "*We need to research religion, and not just study it.*") But by the time of my generation who grew up during the New Order of Suharto and who entered university in the 1990s, many of the developments we see today were already taking root then.

By the late 1980s, hermeneutics as a method of analysing and interpreting texts was already being used in many universities, but confined to a small circle of students and scholars of literature. It had not been introduced to Islamic studies, though by then a scientific approach to religious studies was already becoming the norm. Several Indonesian scholars of religion were then at work and looking for new methodological tools to enhance and expand their scope of research. I myself was a student of Quranic

exegesis and Hadith studies, and in the early to mid-1990s I was engaged with the task of working on my thesis, which was about mapping the manifold methodologies of interpretation that had been applied to Quranic exegesis in history.

I was not the only one who looked at hermeneutics as a possible method of analysis and interpretation: I recall that by then the popular Islamic journal *Ulumul Quran* (then edited by Dawam Raharjo) had discussed hermeneutics as a method and there was the pioneering article by Saleh Yapar about *ta'wil* as a form of hermeneutics in Islamic history. (Though Yapar discussed it in the context of literary studies and had not applied it to sacred texts.)

Around the same time my generation of scholars began to read Western hermeneutical writings and that was a major breakthrough for many of us. We saw that Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics (which some literary theorists had tried to apply to Biblical studies) could also be used as a mode of textual analysis when applied elsewhere.

In 1993 I proposed to the Usuluddin Faculty of IAIN Sunan Kalijaga that hermeneutics should be taught in the Department of Qur'anic exegesis and Hadith studies. I also supplemented my proposal with a draft of syllabus. But it could not be approved. To strengthen my proposal I wrote my undergraduate thesis on *Qur'anic Hermeneutics: the State of Affairs of the Methodology of Qur'anic Exegesis*, and I finished it in 1995. Hermeneutics was adopted into Usuluddin curriculum in 1997-1998. It was IAIN Sunan Kalijaga that pioneered the adoption of hermeneutics in university curriculum. Since then, it was adopted by other IAIN/UIN. The postgraduate programme of the Sunan Kalijaga university now even has a journal called *Hermeneia*

So it cannot really be said that hermeneutics was radically introduced to Indonesia, but rather that it was a natural progression in Indonesia's educational evolution and part of a much longer historical process.

FN: 'You are, however, known as the one who introduced the ideas of Nasr Abu Zayd to Indonesia. This is interesting in many respects, not least considering your own background as an Islamic scholar of Hadith studies; and Nasr Abu Zayd's reputation worldwide. In his own native country (Egypt) Nasr was branded a secular modernist and even accused of apostasy, to the point where he received death threats, was hounded out of the country and had to flee to Leiden, Netherlands. Yet in Indonesia

his works are read and used in the Islamic universities. How did you come to read his work, and how has he been received here?

MNI: 'Well as I said, my own initial research work for my thesis was focused on the manifold ways of interpreting the Qur'an. In my early research I looked at several thinkers like Farid Esack, Hasan Hanafi, Aminah Wadud and Fazlur Rehman. Around this time Nasr was becoming known in Indonesia thanks to his work *Mafhum al-Nass* (Concept of Texts/Textuality), and was being read by Islamic scholars here.

I came to read of his work while I was mid-way through my research for my thesis, but found it most interesting and relevant. Later I was sent to Leiden where I met with Nasr personally and from then on we interacted on a weekly basis as our offices were close to each other. So what began as intellectual or academic interest later evolved to the level of an inter-personal relationship. In Leiden we were able to share ideas and compare methodologies.

In Indonesia at the time Nasr's ideas were being discussed more and more. In particular two of his works – the *Falsafat al-Ta'wil* (Philosophy of Interpretation) and *Ishkaliyyat al-Qira'a wa Aliyyat al-Ta'wil* (Problematics of Reading and Methods of Interpretation) were being read and discussed by Islamic scholars with interest.

The directors of the Islamic academies and universities of Indonesia, such as those who ran the UINSUKA like Prof. Amin Abdullah, looked at both texts closely and decided that they were sound and useful tools to be used in their own curricula, and thanks to that works like the *Mafhum al-Nass*, *Falsafat al-Ta'wil* and *Ishkaliyyat al-Qira'a wa Aliyyat al-Ta'wil* became part of the teaching modules at UINSUKA.

For my part, I translated many of the interviews and discussions I had with Nasr in Leiden into Bahasa Indonesia and these first appeared in Indonesian journals like Panji Masyarakat and Ummat, and through these journals Nasr became a familiar figure in Indonesian Islamist intellectual circles.

Eventually however the initially positive reception to Nasr was met with a conservative reaction. At the time Nasr and his ideas were an unknown quantity in Indonesia, but soon enough conservative Muslim groups began to spread the rumour that Nasr was an apostate and that he was guilty of desacralising the Quran. Of course these were the same accusations that were levelled against Nasr in Egypt, and it showed that the conservatives in Indonesia were in contact with their fellow conservatives in Egypt as well. Ultimately the conservative groups in Indonesia were

warned by their Egyptian counterparts about Nasr's ideas and the local reaction we saw was part of this effort of isolate the man and discredit his research work.

FN: 'What was the reaction of the Muslim scholars who had read and introduced Nasr's ideas then?

MNI: 'Our immediate reaction was to refer the conservatives to the works of Nasr themselves. This accusation was, we felt, totally baseless as nowhere in his writings or speeches did Nasr ever deny or put into question the sacred dimension of the Quran or any religious text for that matter. Nasr's argument, we insisted, was that as a text the Qur'an was related in the language of the Arabs then. Given the specificities of Arab history, culture and politics, the language of the Qur'an reflects the historicity of the moment. Nobody even uses classical Arabic like that anymore.'

What Nasr was saying is that: Yes, the Quran as a phenomenon may be sacred, but the language of the Quran is a text and has to be read according to the rules and norms of textual analysis. One cannot transpose a historical text revealed fourteen centuries ago to the present without taking into account the diachronic and dialectical development of history and the evolution of semantics and semiotics. Language evolves and this evolution, development and displacement of meaning has to be taken into account in any contemporary interpretation of the Quran, as historical slippage is a fact of language-use, what more when texts are transferred from one locality to another via transnational transmission of ideas.

Hermeneutics is all about trying to understand how such historical, contextual slippages and displacements of meaning take place in order to better understand what a text means. In the context of a contemporary understanding of the Quran, taking into account the etymological evolution of meaning in words is necessary.

Now this sophisticated argument was understood by many progressive minded Indonesian Islamist intellectuals, such as JIL (*Jaringan Islam Liberal*) and JIMM (*Jaringan Intelektual Muda Muhamadiyah*) who were themselves part of the long Islamic reform process in Indonesia. But of course the more literal-minded conservatives would have none of it: they refused to listen to our argument and simply repeated, again and again, the same baseless charges against Nasr Abu Zayd and those associated with him.

FN: 'Presumably this meant scholars like you too, who were using his work and referring to his ideas, even if in your writings you have also been critical of some aspects of Nasr's theory?

MNI: 'Yes, exactly. In my own assessment of Nasr's theory of Quranic hermeneutics I point out what I saw as some weaknesses in his general line of argument. But for me, as an academic, this was part of what an academic intellectual culture is all about. After all, one cannot study the ideas of a particular scholar or school of thought unless we cultivate a healthy objective distance from the object of analysis itself.

But in my own case, i did encounter difficulties when working on Nasr, and one of the first incidents happened not in Indonesia, but in Leiden itself when I was there. One day I was 'invited' by a group of four Egyptian students who claimed to be researchers. I was taken to their flat but soon enough they began to ask me probing questions about my relation with Nasr and why I was studying his books and ideas. Then they proceeded to repeat the same accusations about Nasr, like that he was an apostate, etc.

What was supposed to be a meeting was obviously an interrogation! And to make things worse, one of them who claimed to called Ibn al-Shati' (later he published a book criticising Nasr, Arkoun, Hanafi, and other progressive intellectuals) actually threatened me by making a gesture with his hand, indicating that my throat would be slit if I continued! I was shocked and alarmed by this episode. What kind of intellectual world did these people live in? Do you threaten to kill people just because you dont agree with their ideas?

FN: 'I suppose this would demonstrate Foucault's point about the intimate relationship between knowledge, epistemology and power: Clearly Nasr's ideas threatened the simplistic orthodoxy and dogma of people like them, as a hermeneutic approach to any text, sacred or otherwise, would render closure of meaning and epistemic arrest impossible. This stands in the way of simplistic ideological dogmatism so favoured by conservatives everywhere, of every religion...

MNI: 'Yes, and such attempts at closure are always at work among the dogmatic conservatives, as well as the tendency of selective interpretation when it suits them.

Why, even when they criticised Nasr here in Indonesia and attacked his ideas, some of these conservatives actually misquoted and misappropriated some of my own critical comments about him and used the quotations in an instrumental and strategic manner to discredit him!

FN: 'Yet this has not prevented Nasr from coming to Indonesia and even giving lectures at the Islamic universities here?

MNI: 'No, that is where Indonesia is different from so many other Muslim countries. It is true that there are conservative hardliners in Indonesia, including those of the literalist-fundamentalist variety. And it is also true that many Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia like Nurcholish Madjid, Ulil Abshar-Abdallah, Sukidi have been condemned and even threatened in public. But thus far not a single Muslim progressive thinker has been physically attacked yet.

So Nasr did indeed come, and was well received at the Islamic universities in Indonesia including at UINSUKA where he lectured students in Islamic studies...

FN: 'The fact that UINSUKA has invited someone like Nasr to teach its students in staggering for some as the man himself has a considerable amount of political baggage that he brings with him. In neighbouring Malaysia, for instance, Nasr's theory of Quranic hermeneutics is seen as anathema to any kind of study on Islam and his books are never taught or mentioned, save in negative, derogatory terms. Yet we both know that hermeneutics has a long history in Islamic scholarship and can even be said to have been part of the Muslim academic and intellectual tradition. How do you assess Nasr's contribution to Indonesia's UINs and his role in the development of Islamic studies here in Indonesia?

MNI: 'As I said, Nasr's ideas have been largely ignored or deliberately twisted and misrepresented as part of the campaign to discredit him personally and hermeneutics as a method of scientific research.

But let us go back to the fundamentals and look at what hermeneutics is, how it evolved, and what its contribution to scientific intellectual reform really is. For me, Nasr's contribution to the development of Islamic studies in Indonesia is great for a number of reasons:

Firstly he has restated something which needs to be emphasised time and again, namely that there is a difference between Religion as a set of revealed ideas and code of ethics and the praxis of religion in the social space. Religion and religiosity are two totally different phenomenological categories and has to be seen and studied so. This was the point that Nasr was making in his book *Naqd al-Khitab al-Deeni* (Critique of Religious Discourse), where he called for a sense of objective rational distance from the discursive practice of religious discourse as a social phenomenon, insisting that we can study the use of religious discourse in society in the same way that we can study the use of political or economic discourse in society.

Secondly, Nasr's greater contribution is that he has re-rooted the methodology of hermeneutics in Islamic history, by referring us back to the ideas of classical Muslim thinkers like Abdul Qahir al-Jurjani, who did not differentiate between God's speech and human speech in terms of their status as '*kalam*'. So you see in many ways Nasr was not even trying to make the claim that he had invented Quranic hermeneutics: What he was really trying to do is demonstrate to Muslims today that even during the classical age of Islam there were already Muslim scholars who were engaged in a critical objective reading of scripture as scripture, as texts.

FN: 'So we are back to the question of the reform of Islamic education in Indonesia and you are saying that Nasr is and should be seen as part of a reform and development process that is organically rooted in Islam and not modern or secular?

MNI: 'Yes, that is how we see it. Nasr is in a sense localising hermeneutics and that is how we approach him here (in Indonesia). Of course the hermeneutic method has also developed in Europe, and we have thinkers like Gadamer who looked at hermeneutics in relation to the interpretation of the Bible, and Derrida who applied it to Jewish Talmudic exegesis, but Nasr is doing the same only as part of an older tradition that we have lost or forgotten.'

FN: 'Perhaps that slippage is partly due to the fact that hermeneutics now is associated with the Aristotelian tradition and has been claimed as part of the Western European intellectual tradition?'

MNI: 'Undoubtedly so, but let us not forget that there has existed a parallel tradition that evolved and developed organically in the Muslim context as well. Western hermeneutics may have its roots in the Aristotelian tradition and method, but in between the Classical age of Europe and contemporary European philosophy following the Post-Structuralist and Deconstructionist era, there was a long historical gap where Muslim intellectuals from the Mutazilites to Abdul Qahir al-Jurjani also developed the methodology further.

Here at UINSUKA we see hermeneutics that is something organic to the Muslim intellectual tradition and so we do not see this as hybrid innovation or a mere grafting of secular modern concepts to classical Islamic education. This is not a sort of cut-and-paste Islamic study where modern, secular ideas are added onto classical Islamic scholarship to produce an Islamic studies that is neither modern nor Islamic. Our approach begins from the fundamentals of Islam, but one that does not root itself in nostalgia or a politics of authenticity.

FN: 'So why then the often violent reaction to the teaching of methodologies like hermeneutics? We are back to Foucault's critique of Power and Knowledge and it seems clear that the struggle to define and fix – permanently – the meaning of the word of the sacred text is bound with the logic of power and politics. Surely the conservatives who react and reject the teaching of hermeneutics are fearful of a deconstruction of power of some kind, be it political or even epistemic.

MNI: I think so too. Closure of meaning is one way to get us to rigid dogmatism and we know that this can be dangerous.

The conservative reaction to hermeneutics is often couched in an appeal for stability and permanent arrest of signifiers. The fear of hermeneutics, or any deconstructive reading of scripture, lies in the worry that this leads us to discursive chaos and the free-play of signification.

FN: 'Thus the most common complaint being that once you allow for a critical interpretation of the sacred texts, or even the plurality of interpretations, then the text loses its sacred status and you can read it any way you like...'

MNI: 'Exactly. This is what we hear most often: Once we apply a hermeneutic reading to the Quran then you can read it any way you like and come to your own conclusions. Now this is nonsensical as hermeneutics is not a license to free signification or the free-play of interpretation. All texts, even those deemed sacred, need to work on the basis of language and textuality, and as such follow rules of signification that are consistent and stable. We cannot, for instance, read a holy scripture and interpret it like a common newspaper or menu at a restaurant.

But what hermeneutics tells us is that embedded in the literal text of the scriptures are multiple meanings that have always been there and therefore have to be read and interpreted via cross-referencing, inter-textual comparisons etc.

FN: 'But here we cannot separate religious studies from the wider world of politics, and of course the reform process being undertaken at UINSUKA is bound to be drawn into the wider world of Indonesian Islamist politics and the contestation of meaning and definition.

MNI: 'This is part of the process. However it has to be said that hermeneutics for us is also one of the safeguards to the closure of the text and the narrowing of the field of interpretation and exegesis. As you said, the deconstructive approach renders the closure of meaning an impossibility and it is this that angers and frustrates many of the conservatives who would rather gain and maintain their monopoly over the discursive field and the doors of interpretation. The attacks on scientific methodologies like hermeneutics and deconstruction are part and parcel of this sustained attempt – carried through via a series of discursive strategies such as hate campaigns and death threats to accusations of apostasy in the case of Nasr Abu Zayd – to keep the doors of rational interpretation and exegesis shut.

Of course the irony lies here: That while dogmatic conservative-literalists want to close the door to discourse and public debate over meaning and signification, they are themselves among those who continue to interpret the Quran, Hadith and law on their own terms to suit their political-ideological agendas.

Take for instance the ways that words like Jihad, Imam, etc are continually misinterpreted and recontextualised to suit the needs of an activist-exegesis that is ideological. Now we all know that Jihad has a plethora of meanings, and yet time and

again there are attempts to fix the meaning so that it signifies only war against non-Muslims, or even other Muslims.

Another example is how in the politicised exegesis of so many political Muslim groups words like '*Imama*' in the Hadith and Islamic political literature and re-interpreted as '*Khilafah*' (Caliphate) or some other construct of institutionalised Muslim political power. Here lies the danger of a literalist approach to text-based readings of any scripture that does not take into account the cultural, historical and sociological particularities of the moment of its inception, or the diachronic slippage and movement of meaning over time.

FN: 'And hermeneutics is meant to serve as a protective stopgap to that form of ideological manipulation of texts and textuality?

MNI: 'Hermeneutics may not be able to stop the literalist closure of reading or even prevent the ideological manipulation of scripture for political ends, but it can introduce an element of rational objective distance from the text as object and thus open the way for an auto-critique of its reading.'

This may seem like a political move, but remember that UINSUKA is primarily a university and we are fundamentally concerned with Islamic research. I regret the fact that today for a majority of Muslims, indeed for most believers of all religions, the task of interpretation has been left to conservative interpreters of the texts. This abandonment of the task of critical reasoning and reading means that conservative literalists can and often do manipulate texts for their own uses and ends. As Ebrahim Moosa puts it: *The text can be made to say anything in the hands of those sophisticated enough to manipulate it.*

But I do not believe that the conservative ideologues who read the sacred texts for political ends do not know what they are doing. After all here in Indonesia many of the leaders of the radical Islamist groups were trained in Arab or Pakistani madrasahs where they surely learned Arabic well enough to understand it! Yet they are conscious actors in the misrepresentation and manipulation of meaning as it serves their ends.

This conscious manipulation of texts, the ideological reinterpretation of meaning and the closure of discursive space may be political in nature, but it also has an impact on the academic sphere for it means the closure of the Muslim mind. The conservatives know that they have manipulated the texts, but they profit from the ignorance of the

masses, who are like a floating mass that can be mobilised and instrumentalised in many ways. Thus a political problem has also become an academic one, for in the long run this does a disservice to the deepening of critical, scientific knowledge of Islam as a living, organic phenomena.

The aim of Islamic and Quranic hermeneutics is therefore in tandem with what we see as the evolution of Islamic studies and philosophy going back to the time of the Mutazilites and the Muslim rationalist tradition. It may have the political effect of making it difficult for extremist groups to form narrow ideologies on the basis of Islam, but for us here at UINSUKA its primary objective is to open the way for a deeper, more sophisticated, rational and scientific understanding of Islamic texts and textuality.

End.

Appendix C

Discussion with Professor Ahmad Minhaji, Faculty of Shariah, UIN Sunan Kalijaga

FN: 'Modernity may have its discontents, but it also has many admirers. One of the ironies of the transition from the colonial to the post colonial era is that the concept of Modernity has become highly contested, even problematic, in some developing societies. Now without essentialising or framing Modernity in exclusively Eurocentric terms, I begin with the premise that Modernity as it is *popularly* understood today is seen as something that was introduced to the developing world as part of the colonial project. Furthermore Modernity's intimate and complex relationship with colonialism and imperialism has left the concept tainted in the eyes of many, with so much ideological and historical baggage associated with it. Yet today we see many Muslim societies attempting to modernise themselves, and also modernise Islamic education in the process. Is this not problematic for you, and why does every form of development end up being judged according to the criteria of Modernity?

AM : 'Here at UINSUKA we are not attempting to re-invent Islam in modern terms, or merely dress it up to make it look modern. We are a research-based university and our reputation rests on the research work we do. Our criteria lies there, in our capacity to research and to produce social scientists and researchers who are scientifically-inclined.

Now having said that, the need to reform the mode of education and research we do and offer is apparent: This does not apply to UINSUKA only, but to all universities, be they secular or Islamic. The main variable factor that we need to take into account is globalisation, where the structuring power of capital accumulation today constitutes a concrete and existing menace to human survival in various ways and degrees.

Thanks in part to the withdrawal of the state and the increasing movement of capital and ideas, new discoveries and new phenomena have arisen that the nation-state cannot deal with. But more importantly we are now faced with new scientific developments and innovations that may not fit into the ethical-legal framework of traditional Islamic jurisprudence, such as bio-technology, genetical engineering, new modes of travel and communication that challenge traditional understandings of space and territoriality etc.

Islamic law, because it is comprehensive, covers all aspects of social life, but when social life experiences radical changes like this, the law needs to take into account changing realities as well in order to remain ethically relevant. Hence the need to expand and develop the faculty of *Shariah* to reflect the concerns and issues of the age we live in.

The developments we see at UINSUKA now are not new: In Jogjakarta there has always been the Society for Knowledge and Religion (*Masyarakat Jogjakarta untuk Ilmu dan Agama*, MYIA) that has been working with the Religious Studies Programme and Inter-Cultural Studies Masters (S2) programme of UINSUKA and Gajah Mada University. The result of this collaborative work has been conferences like the 2003 conference on 'Religion and Science in the Postcolonial World' and the 2005 conference on 'Integration of Knowledge and Religion: Between Interpretation and Action'. We also have our regular journal '*Relief: Journal of Religious Issues*' where these concerns and the call for reform have been raised.

These developments partly contributed to the upgrading and transformation of the various institutes and academies of Islamic research (IAINs) to the level of State Islamic Universities (UINs) in the early 2000s: In 2004 UIN Sunan Kalijaga

announced its new research-based curriculum (*Kerangka Dasar Keilmuan dan Pengembangan Kurikulum UIN Sunan Kalijaga*, 2004 – Foundational Framework for Knowledge and the Development of the Curriculum of Sunan Kalijaga Islamic University); in 2004 UIN Malang unveiled its *Memadu Sains dan Agama: Menuju Universitas Islam Masa Depan* (Unifying Science and Religion: Towards an Islamic University of the Future, 2004); in 2006 UIN Syarif Hidayatullah of Jakarta announced its commitment to research in *Integrasi Keilmuan UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta: Menuju Universitat Riset* (Integration of Knowledge at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta: Towards a Research-based University, 2006) and in the same year UIN Sunan Gunung Djati also released its blueprint in the document *Pandangan Keilmuan UIN: Wahyu Memandu Ilmu* (The Approach to Knowledge of the UIN: Revelation as a Guide to Knowledge, 2006).

FN: 'So the reform process is being driven by globalisation and its axiomatic effects?

AM: 'Well, successful universities are successful because of their teachings and research, primarily. The most successful universities are those that excel in their teaching services and research capacity and outcome of their research. This is the core business of universities and there is no reason why the same rules should not apply to Islamic universities like UINSUKA.

What are the functions of any university? Well, for a start there are the three primary functions: the transmission of culture; the teaching and training of professionals; and scientific research.

Any university that falls behind in any of these areas will necessarily be left behind. Yet look at all the international surveys of universities worldwide, and what do we see? Not a single Islamic university can be counted among the top 200 universities anywhere in the world. Why? Being an Islamic university does not mean that we are prevented from doing scientific research or to modernise our teaching and research methodologies.

FN: 'Why the obvious gap then? You are right to say that no Islamic university has made it to the top rankings of any global survey, but is this because they are identified, or identify themselves, as *Islamic* universities?

AM: 'Being an Islamic university is not the thing that handicaps them, but they fail in terms of their standards of research and analysis, which do not meet universal standards of rational, objective, scientific knowledge-production.

Now I'm sorry to say that this is most apparent in some departments, such as the *Shariah* Faculties and Departments of many Islamic universities today. Why? Not because *Shariah* as such is a field that handicaps a university, but because so many *Shariah* faculties and departments still teach *Shariah* in a classical way, hardly different from that of *madrasahs*, even the better ones.

What do they lack in terms of research and teaching of *Shariah*? It is clear that what is most wanting is the teaching of philosophy and logic, and the application of modern social sciences and tools of analysis. Why is this necessary? Well, we go back to the original purpose of universities themselves, that is to educate and to prepare students for life in this, the real world. As such all universities need to educate the young to teach them how to think for themselves, think objectively, critically and scientifically so that they can cope with the demands of the age they live in.

The teaching of *Shariah* in particular has to be the teaching of a comprehensive competency in dealing with life's everyday issues. But to have such a comprehensive outlook in this rapidly changing postmodern world means having the analytical tools to understand social phenomena and to react to it. If the *Shariah* departments are going to produce students who may one day become *Shariah* judges or lawyers, then these students need to be kept abreast of modern-day developments and the progress and evolution of society. How will a *Shariah* judge cope with questions related to bioengineering? Are genetically-modified foods *haram* or *halal*? What constitutes the new legal categories and the new legal reasoning in this day and age when every aspect of social life is changing? This is why the teaching of *Shariah* has to evolve, but it evolves through scientific research of social phenomena.

FN: 'And even if modern discipline are introduced to the Faculty of *Shariah*, you would insist that this is not a modernisation of Islam but rather the introduction of a scientific method?

AM: 'Yes, because these developments are taking place in other disciplines as well. We live in an age of multi-disciplinary studies and even in the teaching of secular law

there are subjects like the sociology of Law, the sociology of criminality, the History of Law and the law-making process etc. So why should *Shariah* law be any different?

This is why UINSUKA's Faculty of *Shariah* is now considering opening up a research centre to supplement and enhance its teaching capacity. We recognise that we cannot simply teach *Shariah*, but we have to research it as well, as a social phenomenon.

If we believe that successful universities must be both research-intensive and teaching-intensive, then the research department, its performance and the way it functions and its reputation are all crucial to the university's success.

Good departments will be the main training ground for young academics, establishing codes and norms of academic work and behaviour, acculturating them into what constitutes good performance, providing them with the professional equipment to succeed in their academic careers and giving them identity and prominence among other academics in their field.

This is what is so badly needed now in the field of *Shariah* studies, as it happens to be one of the disciplines that has existed from the beginning of Islamic education and Islamic universities, yet has not proved itself as a discipline.

FN: 'So what is wrong with the teaching of *Shariah* in the Islamic universities we see today?

AM: 'The judgment of the teaching quality in *Shariah* departments is based on an intellectual-academic criteria that determines the value of a discipline by its results.

Now research is a careful, deliberate and exhaustive process. It involves the investigation of a scientific subject matter, having as its aim the advancement and expansion of knowledge. Scientific knowledge is an inter-subjective, accurate, systematic analysis of a determinate body of empirical data, in order to discover recurring relationships and patterns among phenomena.

Now the problems we face in this field are: lack of conceptual clarity and theoretical precision; inattention to problems of reliability and validity; the failure to consider other perspectives and modes of interpretation of data; disproportionate attention given to psychological and psycho-social variables while ignoring structural realities; and problems (legal test-cases) often being defined on the basis of tested assumptions and sometimes guided more by political reasoning. We still have to develop an objective, scientific mode of analysing *Shariah* and applying it in a scientific manner.

Here lies the difference between a scientific approach (to studying *Shariah*) and the traditional one: Traditionally the teaching of *Shariah* has involved teaching the legal ideas of specific schools of thought as opposed to others, and to persuade others that one school of thought is right while others are wrong. So much effort was spent trying to dispute with other legal schools and to silence alternative legal worldviews and interpretations.

But the work of science is not a matter of persuasion or conversion (to one's point of view), but rather a demonstration of truth-facts, that, given the circumstances, are demonstrative rather than persuasive. We have to *scientifically demonstrate* that *Shariah* works, and not simply try to persuade that it does. What the scientific Muslim scholar has to do therefore is to prove, on the basis of objective scientific research, that *Shariah* works and can be applied.

FN: 'But why has it been so difficult to prove that *Shariah* works, if the proponents of *Shariah* are certain of its correctness, both in the ethical and epistemological sense? After centuries of development of Islamic education, why can't Islamic scholars demonstrate that their ethical system is beneficial, correct and relevant?

AM: 'Partly because the prevailing social norms were a hindrance, both socio-politically and academically.

As I said, the real work of science is not persuasion but demonstration. If you cannot demonstrate that your argument is correct then you have failed or the position you took was wrong. The function of the scientist – and this includes Muslim scientists or scientists of Islam – is to demonstrate to us that their ideas and viewpoints are right, good, proper and in some ways desirable.

Now this has not happened particularly in the field of *Shariah* because often the biasing of data by the personal involvement or interests of the scholar is a form of interference in the scientific method; though it is not the only source of interference. Other interferences and hindrances have been the existence of a Muslim society where there are groups that do not or cannot deal with a climate of rational enquiry and open search for knowledge.

The scientific method or approach involves overcoming these subjective and variable inhibitions and hindrances; and it is safe to say that a positive interest in academic freedom is also another ethical principle characteristic to modern science, which

together with absolute honesty, and the willingness to admit to being wrong, can be derived from the basic value that objective demonstrable knowledge is far better than ignorance.

FN: 'And for you the attempt to create a research centre and to introduce research methods of social science to the study of Shariah is all part of the process of developing Islamic studies and Islamic knowledge? What is the epistemic status of this new body of knowledge then? Is it, as you claim, Islamic?

AM: 'Shariah is a body of knowledge that is part of Islamic culture, thought and society; so in that sense it is rooted in Islam. But in our reform and development process we apply a scientific approach to the development of teaching and research methods: that is what is happening here and what we wish to do.

Now because our reform process is guided by a scientific criteria, we stress the importance of logical framework analysis (LFA), which should be used to formulate and at the same time understand the vision, mission and goals of the institution. But a logical framework analysis like this, which charts where we are and where we wish to be in the future with clear goals, outlines and trajectory has to work hand in hand with a results-based form of management and assessment (RBM).

This is what we are trying to show to the students and faculty of *Shariah*: That the teaching and research quality of the *Shariah* faculty has to be gauged by the results of the work done there, and how the *Shariah* faculty has to produce teaching and research results whose results match and meets the societal needs of today.

What is clear, however, is that the teaching of *Shariah* in the future cannot continue the way it has been carried out in the past, because we cannot become what we want to be by remaining what we are. If we want to do what we have always done, we will always get to where we have gotten. Our understanding, teaching and research on *Shariah* has to go beyond that.

End.

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