

## **Challenging Stereotypes: Indonesia as the World's Largest Majority Muslim Country**

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Thank you for that kind introduction. Thank you, also, to PBS for giving me this chance to speak to you, and to the University of Illinois for hosting me during my visit. It is always a pleasure to come to Illinois, especially at this time of the year.

My topic today is timely. Speaker Pelosi's recent visit to Syria, British tension with Iran, and the violent Sunni-Shiite divide in Iraq keep Islam in the news. Unfortunately, the coverage is too often limited. A casual observer could be excused for thinking Muslim, Arab, and Middle Eastern all described the same thing. The religion has become tied to the region.

But Islam exists outside of the Middle East, too. Indeed, the Muslim population of Southeast Asia is greater than the Muslim population of the Middle East. On its own, Indonesia is home to over 200 million Muslims. And Islam in Indonesia is unique.

Indonesia is a sprawling country of 230 million people and over 17,000 islands. It is also the largest country with a Muslim majority in the world. From Sumatra in the west to Papua in the east, Indonesia stretches some 3,000 miles—about the distance from Los Angeles to New York City. It is a new democracy. It protects the separation of church and state. It is a partner in the global war on terror. In short, it is far from the stereotype.

And that is why I want to speak today—to challenge stereotypes. The Islam of political cartoons and alarmist news reporting is not the Islam of Indonesia. Today, I want to talk to you about Islam in Indonesia, the global fear of radicalism, and Indonesia's role in the Islamic world. If we are to find progress, we must first abandon our stereotypes.

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Islam first arrived in Southeast Asia on a ship. Traders and merchants sailing from the Middle East and India brought the religion to Indonesia through a peaceful process of conversion and settlement. By the end of the 16th century, Islam had replaced Hinduism and Buddhism as the dominant religion on Java and Sumatra, two major Indonesian islands. Notably, there was no war of conquest and no violent conversion.

This unique and peaceful spread allowed local populations across the country's many islands to accept Islam slowly. Some continued to celebrate traditional Hindu or Buddhist holidays, or keep symbols and figures from their former religions. This process of slow and peaceful conversion gave Indonesian Islam a tolerant and moderate inclination that has remained with it through the years.

Today, Indonesia is still a pluralistic society, with hundreds of ethnic groups and languages, and five major religions. Though the vast majority of Indonesians are Muslim, a large number are also Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, and Buddhist. The famous island of Bali, for instance, is still mostly Hindu. Because of its history, Indonesian Islam respects this diversity.

Unfortunately, this reality of tolerant and moderate Islam is hidden by three stereotypes, all of which have to do with radicalism.

The first is that of Islamic law, or sharia. Just last month, I met with an interfaith delegation that had flown into Washington from Jakarta. The jet lag had them tired, but they stayed in our conversation. The representative from Muhammadiyah, a major Islamic organization in Indonesia, told me that people kept asking him about sharia law. "They do not understand," he told me, "that it is not really a religious issue."

Currently, four districts and around forty local governments have implemented some form of sharia law in Indonesia. In each of these, the laws are different. Often, they are not taken seriously. I heard one story of a young man and his girlfriend trying to get caught together in public so they could be sentenced. The punishment? Marriage. They wanted to be caught so they could save money on a ceremony.

Largely, the turn toward sharia law has been a response to slow or selective state law. The government of Indonesia is working hard to continue its democratic reform, but some areas still lack efficient rule of law. To fill this gap, people are turning to sharia. It is not a mass movement, and the national government and the two largest Muslim organizations remain committed to preserving religious freedom through state, not sharia, law. As democratic reforms continue, sharia law will decline.

The second stereotype is that of Islamic schools. In America, when some news stations falsely reported that Senator Barak Obama had attended a madrassa in Indonesia, people almost panicked. The report, of course, was false. But I want to correct this stereotype. In Indonesia, Islamic schools like madrassa and pesantren are supervised by the state, and must teach the same curriculum as government schools. As my friend from the interfaith delegation told me, "Out of 17,000 pesantren, maybe ten are radical." Certainly, this is nothing like the stereotype.

And third is the image of radicalism. As with all countries that protect religious freedom, Indonesia is home to people with many different beliefs, including conservative interpretations of Islam. Just as in America, these people have every right to practice their religion peacefully. Across the archipelago, however, they are a small minority.

Recent election results show how small this group actually is. In the 2004 legislative election, conservative Islamic political parties earned less than 16 percent of the vote. In the presidential elections held that same year, they earned just 3 percent.

Among this group, those radicals who believe in violence are far fewer. They are a minority of the minority. The shocking terrorist bombings that shook Bali in 2002 and 2005 and Jakarta in 2003 and 2004 proved that these people do not care about their fellow Indonesians. The government considers them outlaws. The largest Muslim organizations have strongly condemned their actions. Several interfaith efforts continue to work for peace. The stereotype of radical Indonesian Muslims is simply misleading.

Still, though they may be a minority of a minority, some radicals do live in Indonesia. As a partner in the global war on terror, the government is committed to stopping them before they strike again. Indonesia has taken two approaches to fighting terrorists.

First, there is the short-term response. This effort is focused on law-enforcement, intelligence gathering, border protection, financial monitoring, and preventative police work. This short-term focus has accomplished much. Indonesian authorities have arrested over 300 suspects. The network of one group, Jemaah Islamiyah, has been severely limited. With international partners, we established the Jakarta Center for Law Enforcement Cooperation, a regional counterterrorism training center. Indonesia continues to field new initiatives regularly.

But victory in the fight against terrorists requires a long-term approach as well. This is the second part of Indonesia's strategy. Together with its international partners, civil society organizations, and several religious groups, the Indonesian government is working to restore the country's traditional moderate voice. Today, toleration and peaceful worship are the norm. In order to save tomorrow, we must continue to open up interfaith dialogue and to empower voices of moderation.

By attacking the radicals in the short-term and empowering moderates in the long-term, Indonesia will remain a country of diversity, harmony, and religious freedom. That is the Indonesia I know.

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Where does Indonesia stand internationally?

Abroad, Indonesia is both Asian and Muslim. It is Asian in its location and cultural history. It is a proud member of many Asian international organizations, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Asia Pacific Economic Community, and the ASEAN Regional Forum. Recently, in 2003, it successfully proposed the creation of an ASEAN Community in an effort to preserve dialogue and peace throughout the region.

But Indonesia is also involved in many Islamic initiatives abroad, and remains actively engaged in Islamic affairs. Indonesia is a member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, an international organization of states with large Muslim populations. Just recently, Indonesia hosted an international meeting to search for solutions to the Sunni-Shiite violence in Iraq. Representatives from around the world attended. And when violence broke out in Lebanon last summer, Indonesia was among the first to volunteer peacekeeping troops. Today, with transportation assistance from the U.S. military, Indonesia has 1,000 peacekeepers serving bravely in Lebanon. Indonesia is engaged, and it is engaged for peace.

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Two weeks ago, PBS aired a new documentary for the first time. A part of its wonderful “America at a Crossroads” series, the show investigated Islam in Indonesia. I found it fascinating. Among other things, the documentary tackled stereotypes. “Compared to the stereotypes carried in the minds of most Westerners,” reads the program’s website, “Islam in Indonesia is very different... [it] has a centuries old tradition of being a tolerant, compassionate, and inclusive religion.” This is exactly the message I have tried to convey today.

In our public conversation, we tend to separate and polarize views that are not opposites. Islam and the West. Islam and democracy. Christians and Muslims. These things are not opposites. They are far from opposites. We must not let them become opposites. Indonesia—a diverse country, a majority Muslim country, a vibrant democracy—Indonesia proves that there is room for understanding. It is not Islam or democracy. It is Islam and democracy. It is not a clash of civilizations, but cooperation between civilizations.

That is the story of Islam in Indonesia. And, in many ways, it is the story of Indonesia itself.

Thank you. God bless you all.