

# Fatwas and Religious Authority in Indonesia

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Kees van Dijk's opening lecture introduced a variety of regional cases (Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia), highlighting the tension between religious authority as expressed in fatwas on the one hand and political authority on the other. It was shown that in some cases religious authority was invoked successfully to overcome political tensions, while in others it was not.

The following three papers addressed the question of why fatwas are requested. The first, delivered by Khalid Masud, was of a general theoretical nature and as such, illuminating for the broader theme. Masud discussed the Quranic origins of *istifta'* (the formal question posed in order to obtain a fatwa), its further development and institutionalization. Masud suggested that it is the *istifta'* rather than the resulting fatwa which reflects a community's political and social conditions.

Certainly this contribution meshed well with Jajat Burhanuddin's paper, which addressed the dialogue established between the Egyptian reformist

May a woman serve in a position of authority over men? Is jihad licit in Maluku? Who are the upholders of orthodoxy? These questions have recently been put before Muslim scholars and institutions in Indonesia and have received answers in the form of fatwas. Fatwas are the pieces of advice from the perspective of Islamic law on topical issues affecting both individuals and society in general. Consequently they are important indicators within the discourse of religious authority. They were also the subject of last October's meeting of the Islam in Indonesia project, attended by some sixty participants, both from the Leiden scholarly community and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

journal *al-Manar* (1898-1936) and the Malay-Indonesian *Archipelago*. By examining requests for fatwas addressed to *al-Manar*, Burhanuddin pointed out that there were three sorts of Southeast Asian petitioners: Malay-Indonesian students in the Middle East who seem to have formed the most important channels of transmission of 'Salafi' reformist thought<sup>2</sup> to their homeland; persons of Arab descent living in Southeast Asia; and finally, Muslims indigenous to the region.

In the following paper, read by Martin van Bruinessen, Noorhaidi Hasan gave a contemporary account of how an Indonesian organization for Islamic propagation has used its links with conservatives in Saudi Arabia and Yemen to justify the formation of a paramilitary force. This force, Laskar Jihad, was dispatched to the Moluccas to wage jihad in 2000. The main crux of the paper did not revolve around jihad itself but interrogated the penetration of Salafi discourse in Indonesia and the networks of authority it has established. According to Noorhaidi, most Salafi groups had remained essentially apolitical until the crisis. He therefore

analysed the changes in this discourse and the role fatwas issued in Arabia have played in the process.

The three remaining papers each discussed influential bodies in present-day Indonesia that employ fatwas as part of their arsenal of authority. Nur Ichwan examined how the Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI) has attempted to play a proactive role in politics since its inception under Suharto. Focusing on what he calls its 'discursive products' – ranging from silence to fatwas – Ichwan argued that the MUI has attempted to guide the reformation process in post-Suharto Indonesia. Nico Kaptein then presented Syamsul Anwar's paper on fatwas of the Muhammadiyah movement. The most interesting case presented was related to whether a woman could serve in a position of authority over men. The resulting fatwa reinterpreted Prophetic traditions and Quranic verses with modern sociological interpretations, declaring that a woman could indeed be appointed. In doing so, Anwar argued that the fatwa reflects Muhammadiyah's attempt to promote a more dynamic understanding of religion differing from the estab-

lished views within the books of Islamic substantive law.

Next Michael Laffan described his recent encounter with a traditionalist organization that does employ such books. In July 2002, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) held consultative sessions to formulate topical fatwas. Laffan described the debates before examining how they have affected the language and substance of fatwas on such topics as the role of the sharia, and the permissibility of suicide bombs. Laffan concluded that the methodologies adopted, as well as the results and justifications, were uneven and show that whilst the membership might apply pressure to discuss an issue or to call for a fatwa, the resulting declarations are largely shaped by the political concerns of the executive.

The final session of the workshop was intended to provide an overview of the meaning of fatwas in the Indonesian context; the results suggested a wider relevance. The discussants returned to ask questions about what a fatwa is, and indeed how Islamic authority is constructed. Of particular

interest was the choice of terminology in the opinion released, and just how enforceable it might be, whether as 'a piece of advice' or, perhaps, a 'ruling'. Although many of the debates were not resolved last October, the project is making good progress. A selection of the above papers is being considered for publication. <

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- 1 The annual meeting of the KNAW/CNWS/ISIM-sponsored research programme 'Islam in Indonesia' took place in Leiden on 31 October 2002. For more information, see: [www.iias.nl/iias/agenda/archief/31102002.htm](http://www.iias.nl/iias/agenda/archief/31102002.htm)
- 2 The term 'Salafi' derives from the phrase *al-salaf al-salih*, lit. 'the pious generation'. Confusingly, this is used both by followers of the modernist movement, led in Cairo by Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, and the Wahhabiyya movement of Arabia, which is now effectively the state doctrine of Saudi Arabia.