

# Religious Fundamentalism Gains Ground in Indonesia

By Siobhan Dowd

The largest Muslim community in the world is found in Indonesia, where 90 percent of the population (total: 200 million) are adherents of Islam.

However, the country's leadership has traditionally been held by a Christian elite. Recently, Muslims have sought more participation in politics: the government has acceded to their demands, giving them more influence over political decisions, and allotting them a few top-ranking government posts. As early as 1990, this influence bore signs of a radical stamp. The government arrested Arswendo Atmowiloto, editor of *The Monitor* newspaper, for publishing the results of a popularity poll in which the Prophet Mohammed came only eleventh. Atmowiloto, was branded "Indonesia's Salman Rushdie," and was jailed for two and a half years.

During the 10 days in March that I visited Indonesia on a mission with other members of PEN (Poets, Essayists and Novelists: the international organisation of writers), two headline stories pointed to a similar trend: The first concerned the movie "Schindler's List." The Committee for World Muslim Solidarity (KISDI), a group representing thousands of young Muslims, declared: "Too much sympathy for Jews would hurt the Muslim cause. The film represents nothing but Zionist propaganda. From history we can see that the Jewish people are always trying to spread their influence through the use of media, which they control." The movie was subsequently banned.

The second story concerned an anti-Rushdie demonstration on 25 March. Several dozen Muslim students, apparently from the Muhammadiyah Student's Association, protested in front of the Austrian Embassy after an Austrian independent panel named Rushdie as recipient of the Austrian State Prize for European Literature. Banners reading "Rushdie is Islam's enemy. Annul the Award" were displayed. The Austrian charge d'affaires invited four demonstrators into his office to discuss their concerns.

Not surprisingly, Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* is banned in Indonesia, and no attempt to translate it into Indonesian has ever been made. "I would imagine only about 10 people have read the book here," said one of my interviewees.

I had been prepared to find that the very word Rushdie was taboo, but not so: during a seminar at the the University of Indonesia, the first question, eagerly asked, was "What does PEN think about Salman Rushdie?" Most of the young audience displayed curiosity about his writing and Bharati Mukerjee, one of PEN's delegates, gave them a spirited description of Rushdie's innovative language and his depiction of the immigrant experience. The students seemed enthusiastic.

This positive encounter made me wonder whether fundamentalism was such a threat after all. Many interviewees stressed that the danger was overstated. "Here, we don't ban alcohol, people lead their own private lives, there is tolerance and moderation," one Indonesian businessman told me. An American journalist com-

mented: "It's about time that Muslims had more political influence. I don't see this development as a bad thing. It's not fundamentalism." Another Indonesian said: "New Muslim study groups are springing up, especially in the universities. You can talk more frankly about politics there than anywhere else."

A minority, however, was more concerned: "Indonesia could go the fundamentalist road," one lawyer acknowledged. Another interviewee was more overt: "I think fundamentalism is a real threat. It's raised its head very suddenly; only a few years ago the Arswendo case would never have happened." He added that the anti-Rushdie demonstration on so slight a provocation, was disturbing. No similar manifestation, he said, had occurred when President Clinton met with Rushdie, an event of surely greater political significance. I later discovered that a few days before the demonstration, the Austrian government had granted Iran a generous time frame for settling a debt of 5.6 billion Austrian schillings. Were the two events coincidental?

Speculation alone can supply an answer. The fundamentalists, though still a tiny, if vociferous, fraction, may or may not succeed in securing groundswell support in Indonesia. But the banning of "Schindler's List," the imprisonment of Arswendo Atmowiloto, and sentiments expressed against Rushdie all underline that here, as elsewhere, complacency is ill-advised.

Source: Journal No. 6, 1995, p. 59, Women Against Fundamentalism.