Nurcholish Madjid and the Paramadina Foundation

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The Paramadina foundation was established in Jakarta in 1986. Its name is derived from para (for) and madina (Muhammad’s seventh-cen- tury city-state of Medina). The foundation runs a training centre, a secondary school and a university where Islamic philosophy, theology, mysticism and law are taught. Paramadina shares with those labelled Islamic fundamentalists the emphasis on creating an ‘ideal Islamic state’. This, however, is where the similarities end.

Paramadina departs from tradition in the way it conducts its activities. It organizes forums in luxury hotels, where participants in business attire applaud high-tech presentations by neo-modernist Islamic scholars. Training is imparted in seminars rather than lectures, which favour rational over normative argumentation. Paramadina has a flexible dress code: women are allowed to wear skirts in class during religious instruction. This approach to Islamic education has made the foundation popular among middle to upper class Muslims. Being a student of the Paramadina secondary school or university is considered fashionable, a sign of wealth and social status.

‘Islam yes, partai Islam no’

To understand Paramadina’s purpose and philosophy, it is necessary to know something about its leader Nurcholish Madjid, the institute’s inspiration and backbone. Born in 1939, educated in Jakarta, and president of the Islamic Students’ Association (HMI) from 1966 to 1971, Madjid gained prominence as a national student leader against the authoritarian governments of Soekarno and Soeharto. With a doc- torate in Islamic Studies from the Uni- versity of Chicago, Madjid is recognized as an authority on Islam and Indone- sian politics; since 1996 he has been professor at the State Islamic Univer- sity of Jakarta. Arguing that being a good Muslim is compatible with the pursuit of knowledge and cultural enrichment, and as a champion of masyakat madani – a concept which encompasses pluralism, tolerance, and democracy – Madjid enjoys a large fol- lowing among educated Muslims.¹ Most of Paramadina’s nineteen founders belong to the ‘1966 genera- tion’ that struggled to oust Soekarno. Some attained prominence in Soehar- to’s administration while others joined social and non-governmental organi- zations and became intellectual activists in the liberal Muslim commu- nity. Many were prominent writers, more influential than their counter- parts in the bureaucracy. Madjid early on became disillusioned with the strug- gle of Islamic political parties to form an Islamic state, which he claims has no basis in the Qur’an. The leader of Paramadina considers it more impor- tant for Muslims to develop themselves culturally, for Islam to become an ethi- cal force in society.

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In eschewing political parties and promoting Islam through education and social assistance, Paramadina has managed to ally the mistrust of the military. and has gained wide support in society. Within the state apparatus, Paramadina enjoys the patronage of high-ranking military personnel, bureaucrats, and politicians in the Golkar party. Within civil society, sup- port comes from leaders of the Islamic Students’ Association (HMI), leaders of socio-religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, PII (Indonesian Islamic Scholars’ Associa- tion) and KAHMI (Graduate Body of Islamic Students’ Association) – many belong to Paramadina while others are invited to give lectures. In business cir- cles, Paramadina is supported by suc- cessful entrepreneurs (Forum Kualan, 2003).

Are they fundamentalists?

Madjid’s discourse on pluralism and tolerance places all religions on a par with Islam. He frequently cites the words of the prophet Muhammad ‘al- hafaafiyah al-aumul’ (tolerant truth), and quotes the Mithaq al-Madina (The Con- stitution of Medina), and Qur’anic vers- es (2: 62; 5: 69) that state which all believers, including Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians will be rewarded equally in the Hereafter. He also refers to verses that state that each [religious] community has its own enlightened leader (35: 24-25; 13: 7). Democracy, too, is said to have Qur’anic precedents, implied in the terms masyakat and soekar, both meaning deliberation.

Despite the fact that Madjid’s lectures base themselves on the primary Islamic- resources of the Qur’an and the Hadith, literalists and traditionalists have criticized his foundation’s objec- tives and approach to Islamic educa- tion. Contrary to what many Muslims believe, Madjid’s ideas are not secular. His agenda is to restore a Madina-like

References
- Nurcholish Madjid, Djohan Effendi, Ahmad Wahib, and Abdurrahman Wahid. Jakarta: Paramadina
- Forum Kualan (May 2005) vol. 8 no. 18, pp. 14-15

Notes
1 Another derivation is from para (prime) and dina (our religion), ‘our prime religion’.
2 The term masyakat madani became part of Soeharto’s new Malay-Indone- sian vocabulary in the early 1990s. It is used widely in scholarly and political circles, in particular by Habibie, the third President of Indonesia, as well as by Anwar Ibrahim, former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia.

The American Council of Learned Societies in cooperation with the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for Scholarly Exchange announces a program of support for conferences and publications on “New Perspectives on Chinese Culture and Society”

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