

Nurcholish Madjid and the Paramadina Foundation

Research >
Indonesia

Religious meetings in Indonesia today differ radically from past tradition. Yet, in content, many represent a back-to-basics approach.

By Andi Faisal Bakti

The Paramadina foundation was established in Jakarta in 1986. Its name is derived from *para* (for) and *madina* (Muhammad's seventh-century city-state of Medina).¹ 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. Train-

ing 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 doctorate in Islamic Studies from the University of Chicago, Madjid is recognized as an authority on Islam and Indonesian politics; since 1998 he has been professor at the State Islamic University of Jakarta. Arguing that being a good Muslim is compatible with the pursuit of knowledge and cultural enrichment, and as a champion of *masyarakat madani* – a concept which encompasses pluralism, tolerance, and democracy – Madjid enjoys a large following among educated Muslims.²

Most of Paramadina's nineteen founders belong to the '1966 generation' that struggled to oust Soekarno. Some attained prominence in Soehar-



Nurcholish Madjid

to's administration while others joined social and non-governmental organizations and became intellectual activists in the liberal Muslim community. Many were prominent writers, more influential than their counterparts in the bureaucracy. Madjid early on became disillusioned with the struggle 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 important for Muslims to develop themselves culturally, for Islam to become an ethical force in society.

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 *musyawarah* and *syura*, 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 objectives and approach to Islamic education. Contrary to what many Muslims believe, Madjid's ideas are *not* secular. His agenda is to restore a Madina-like

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'eschewing political parties and promoting Islam through education and social assistance, Paramadina has managed to allay the mistrust of the military'

In eschewing political parties and promoting Islam through education and social assistance, Paramadina has managed to allay 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, support comes from leaders of the Islamic Students' Association (HMI), leaders of socio-religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, PII (Indonesian Islamic Learners' Association) and KAHMI (Graduate Body of Islamic Students' Association) – many belong to Paramadina while others are invited to give lectures. In business circles, Paramadina is supported by successful entrepreneurs (*Forum Keadilan*, 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-hanafiyah al-samh*' (tolerant truth), and quotes the *Mithaq al-Madina* (The Constitution of Madina), and Qur'anic verses (2: 62; 5: 69) which state that all believers, including Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians will be rewarded equally in the Hereafter. He also refers

Islamic community, one that is tolerant, democratic and pluralistic. Many of those labelled 'fundamentalists', however, have persistently failed to grasp this fact and consider Madjid a heretic.

Nevertheless, Nurcholish Madjid's teachings, through his presentations in mosques and his foundation's activities, are gaining adherents. While Madjid's readership is now limited to Malay-Indonesians, it is hoped that his works will be translated into English and other languages. ◀

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- 1 Another derivation is from *parama* (prime) and *dina* (our religion), 'our prime religion'.
- 2 The term *masyarakat madani* became part of Soeharto's new Malay-Indonesian 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.