

Visions of Development

Faith-based Initiatives

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Women's Empowerment through Islamic Organizations: The Role of Nahdlatul Ulama in Transforming the Government's Birth Control Programme into a Family Welfare Programme

Christopher Candland and Siti Nurjanah, February 2004

Throughout Asia, religious associations and religiously motivated individuals operate thousands of associations involved in community development. Muslims make significant financial and professional contributions to social welfare activities through Islamic associations. These contributions go well beyond a Muslim's individual obligation to aid the poor through 'zakat' [obligatory contribution for distribution to the poor in proportion to wealth owned]. Some of these associations are important agents for social change. This study focuses on the work of the world's largest Muslim association, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and its two women's associations, Muslimat NU and Fatayat NU.

Religion and the State in Indonesia

At independence in 1945, Indonesian leaders struggled with the question of whether the state ought to endorse Islam, as some Muslim leaders demanded. Muslims are a majority in Indonesia, but a substantial number of Indonesians are Christians (Catholic and Protestant), Confucians, Hindus and Buddhists. A variety of other spiritual practices are recognized not as religions, but as 'kepercayaan' [faiths]. One of these faiths, Kejawen [literally, 'Javanese-ness'] is widely practised. Kejawen refers to the principles for the conduct of life in harmony with society and nature and is rooted in the pre-Islamic culture of Java.

The 'Pancasila' [Five Principles] has been Indonesia's state ideology since independence in 1945. It has strong Kejawen overtones – emphasizing faith, humanity, unity, consensus and obedience, democracy and social justice. Governments, especially the New Order government under General Suharto (1966–98), have used the 'Pancasila' to promote loyal and obedient citizens. The first principle of the 'Pancasila' promotes belief in God but does not endorse any particular religion. The accommodation with other religious communities left some Muslim leaders feeling that the government had unfairly sidelined Islam.

Nahdlatul Ulama

Religious leaders established Nahdlatul Ulama [Revival of Religious Scholars] in 1926, in part as a counterweight to other Muslims leaders who wanted to make Indonesian Islam a stronger political force. Today, Nahdlatul Ulama may have as

many as 40 million members. Nahdlatul Ulama members are highly tolerant of diverse religious views and practices, including those that derive from Kejawen. After a long debate, Nahdlatul Ulama adopted the 'Pancasila' as its 'single principle'.³

The membership of Nahdlatul Ulama draws largely from humble backgrounds – mostly farmers – from rural areas and smaller towns. The life-blood of Nahdlatul Ulama is Indonesia's network of 'kyai' [Nahdlatul Ulama term for religious scholars] and 'pesantren' [Islamic boarding schools]. There are around 10,000 'kyai' and 8,000 'pesantren' in Indonesia which have educated millions of students of Islam.⁴ These students study 'fiqh' [jurisprudence], theology and 'kebatinan' [spirituality].⁵ In many parts of Indonesia people respect greatly and consult regularly with 'kyai' on religious and spiritual matters, as well as on career, family, community and health concerns.

The Philosophy of Nahdlatul Ulama

To explain their outlook and philosophy, Nahdlatul Ulama members often refer to the blessing bestowed by Allah on the entire universe. According to Nahdlatul Ulama scholars, all of the organization's activities are based on the recognition that Allah's blessings belong to everyone, without regard to their religion. The former leader of Nahdlatul Ulama, Abdurrahman Wahid, used to say that 'the inter-religious movement is more important than everything else.'⁶

The other basic principles of Nahdlatul Ulama are the five principles or basic human rights, derived by the scholar, Imam Al Ghazali, from the Qur'an and the Hadith. These are 'hifdz al deen' [the right to one's religion]; 'hifdz al aql' [the right to think for and to express oneself]; 'hifdz al nafs' [the right to life]; 'hifdz al mal' [the right to livelihood and property]; and 'hifdz al nasl' [the right to have a family].⁷ Like other Muslims in Indonesia, those associated with Nahdlatul Ulama follow the Syafe'i School of Islamic jurisprudence which is known for considering the social context of the Hadith and for reasoning by analogy.

Nahdlatul Ulama and Formal Politics

Nahdlatul Ulama has had considerable influence on but also a complicated relation to formal politics. It operated as a political party from 1952, when it broke from

3 André Feillard, *NU vis-à-vis Negara* (Yogyakarta, 1999), pp. 233–61.

4 Masdar F. Mas'udi, *Presentation to the International Workshop on The Role of Islamic Women's Organizations in Advocacy and the Elimination of Discrimination: A Comparison of Southeast Asia and the Middle East*, Yogyakarta, 28 July 1999.

5 Aminoto Sadoellah, *Kyai Pesantren Al Alawi*, interview with authors, Tuban, Indonesia, 16 January 2004.

6 Abdurrahman Wahid, then Ketua Umum [General Chief] of Nahdlatul Ulama, interview with Candland, Ciganjur, Indonesia, 22 August 1998.

7 Ibid.

a coalition of Muslim political associations. In 1984, Abdurrahman Wahid, then leader of Nahdlatul Ulama, persuaded the leadership and members to withdraw from formal politics and return to their roots. However, with the downfall of President Suharto in 1998, Nahdlatul Ulama returned to formal politics and established a new political party, the 'Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa' [National Awakening Party – PKB]. The PKB came fourth in the national elections in June 1999.

Some scholars have written about Nahdlatul Ulama, demonstrating the political wisdom of Islamic associations in exploiting openings in an otherwise authoritarian system. Others have found that the Association's foray into formal politics undermined its social power. Few scholars focus on the community development work of Nahdlatul Ulama or on the work of its women's organizations.

Muslimat NU

The most effective Nahdlatul Ulama bodies involved in community development are its women's organizations. The impetus for Muslimat NU was the desire of Nahdlatul Ulama women to 'improve the well-being and status of Muslim women.'⁸ Although many of Nahdlatul Ulama's boarding schools are for girls, its leadership is composed exclusively of male religious scholars. Therefore, it is a male-oriented association. Many wives of religious scholars felt that they needed a separate association within Nahdlatul Ulama to promote the welfare of Nahdlatul Ulama women. Thus, they established Muslimat NU (originally in 1940, though under another name).

Muslimat NU represents Nahdlatul Ulama women above the age of 40. It is structured at national, provincial, district, sub-district and local levels. It has local leaders in more than 14,000 villages. Muslimat NU leaders often regard their connection to thousands of villages and millions of women through the concentric structure of Nahdlatul Ulama as one of their greatest strengths.

Fatayat NU

The younger women of Nahdlatul Ulama are organized within Fatayat NU, which focuses on leadership training, Islamic principles of organizational management, and the principles of Nahdlatul Ulama.⁹ It was established in 1950 for Nahdlatul Ulama women between the ages of 20 and 40. Many of the women in Muslimat NU and Fatayat NU are graduates from Nahdlatul Ulama boarding schools.

Fatayat NU is structured in the same way as Muslimat NU, with five levels, beginning in thousands of villages and, through sub-district, district and provincial leadership, reaching a national leadership based in Jakarta. Each of the five levels of Fatayat NU maintains nine departments: organization and management; leadership

⁸ Safrina Tristiawati and Munir Rozi, *The Nahdlatul Ulama*, mimeograph, 1995.

⁹ Masdar Mulia, former *Ketua* [Chairperson], Nahdlatul Ulama Fatayat, interview with authors, Jakarta, Indonesia, 13 January 2004.

and education; economic and co-operative activities; health and sports; 'dakwah' [propagation and information]; advocacy and legal affairs; social, artistic and cultural activities; research and development; and foreign connections. Each of these programmes is led by a group of several women.

Development and Population Control in New Order Indonesia

Soon after the resignation of President Sukarno, General Suharto's government launched an aggressive national development programme. Development assumed the status of an official ideology. New Order Indonesia stood for the sacrifice of political liberties for the sake of national economic growth. Suharto referred to himself as the 'Father of Development'. For more than three decades, development ('pembangunan' – literally 'to stand erect') was offered as the rationale for foreign investment and ownership and restrictions on political and civil rights.

A key component of the New Order's development programme was birth control. Like most Muslim associations, in the 1950s and 1960s Nahdlatul Ulama had been opposed to birth control. The deposed President Sukarno had favoured rapid population growth as a way to strengthen the Indonesian nation, and opposed birth control. President Suharto, in contrast, energetically supported family planning and accepted major funding from the United States. A national family planning co-ordinating body, the Badan Koordinasi Keluarga Berencana Nasional (BKKBN), was established in 1970 with United States assistance.

Some Muslim associations perceived these family planning programmes and the BKKBN, funded and operated by foreigners, as a Western imposition. There was a widespread feeling among Muslims that family planning was a foreign concept introduced in Indonesia to minimize the number of Muslims and thereby limit Muslim power.

In the first two decades of the New Order, from 1966 until the early 1980s, the government assumed an instrumental and coercive approach to family planning. Its purpose was to promote national development by limiting population growth. The police and military often accompanied government officials when they visited women in their homes to introduce contraception. Allegations of coercion were widespread.

The programme was target driven: visit as many homes as possible and introduce as many contraceptives as possible. Incentives were given to officials who surpassed their targets. The favoured contraceptive devices were intrauterine devices (IUDs) which prevent pregnancy for five years, Depo-Provera injections, which prevent pregnancy for three months and, later on, Norplant subdermal implants, which also prevent pregnancy for five years.

Conditions, lifestyles and attitudes in Indonesia, as in most countries of the world, do make it difficult for women and men to use some other contraceptives, such as diaphragms and the Pill. But the government's heavy reliance on implants and injections suggests that government officials were less interested in educating

or enabling women to use contraceptives themselves than in meeting contraception 'acceptance' targets.

The use of implants requires knowledge about how they work in women's bodies. Women were not equipped with that information. Many women became ill and permanently infertile. As a result, many Indonesian women are now highly suspicious of contraception and have a strong fear of government family planning programmes. The government's approach to family planning – as an instrument for national development – lowered fertility by abusing women's rights.

Nahdlatul Ulama on Reproductive Health

Initially, many 'kiai' of Nahdlatul Ulama campaigned against contraception, as they believed it to be an attempt to oppose God's will. However, realizing that without the support of the 'kiai' the family planning programme would have limited success, the government attempted to involve them in their birth-control programmes. Eventually, Nahdlatul Ulama did get involved, but in the process it helped to prevent the coercive approach used by the government and transformed the very purpose of the programme.

Many religious scholars had long argued that the strength of the Muslim community is directly dependent on the number of believers and thus requires the birth of as many Muslim children as possible. Supporters of the view that children are instruments of power often quoted the following passages from the Qur'an:

And make ready against them all you can of power, including steeds of war, to threaten the enemy of Allah and your enemy. (Surah Al-Anfal: 8: 60)

Allah has made for you mates of your own kind, and has made for you, from your wives, sons and grandsons, and has bestowed on you good provisions. (Surah An-Nahl: 16:72)

Opponents of family planning also referred to passages from the Qur'an and Hadith that supposedly advocate that Muslims procreate and multiply.¹⁰ The relationship between these passages and family planning seems indirect at best, but opponents of family planning remained strong.

A major shift in Nahdlatul Ulama's thinking about family planning was signalled in September 1969, when it released a 'fatwa' [religious instruction] that encouraged family planning for the creation of family welfare. There were eight parts to the fatwa: that family planning should be practised to space births not to prevent pregnancy; that family planning should emphasize the health and welfare of the mother and children rather than the fear of poverty; that abortion should be prohibited; that permanent severance of any part of the body of husband or wife should not be permitted; that family planning must be voluntary; that family planning is to be practised only with

10 Abd Al-Rahim Umran, *Islam and KB* [Islam and Family Planning] (Jakarta, 1992), pp. 98–102.

the consent of both husband and wife; that implementation of family planning should be practised in accordance with Islamic laws and values; and that family planning should not aid acts of immorality.¹¹

'Kyai' found justification for this fatwa from the Qur'an and Hadith. The Qur'an stresses that marriage is an institution designed for the satisfaction of both wife and husband, not merely for the purpose of procreation. The Qur'an does not make specific mention of contraception, but the Prophet Mohammed did. He was aware that many of his companions and some of his family members practised 'azal' [withdrawal] as a form of birth control. He did not disapprove of their practice. Indeed, he advised those who did not want to have children to practise 'azal' but warned that the method would not prevent pregnancy if conception were God's will. 'Kyai' were able to elaborate on the Prophet Mohammed's teaching to argue that family planning is supported by Islamic teaching for the promotion of a better life for the Muslim community.

Muslimat NU and Fatayat NU deliberations played an important role in encouraging the 'kyai' to study the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith related to family planning. Nahdlatul Ulama men and women found in the Qur'an and Hadith encouragement and injunctions to promote the health and welfare of the family. Thus in the Nahdlatul Ulama family planning is referred to as 'keluarga masalah' [family welfare] rather than family planning. The Indonesian word 'masalah' is derived from the Arabic word 'shalih' [virtuous and prosperous].

Once the 1969 fatwa was issued, Muslimat NU and Fatayat NU became extensively involved in the promotion of 'keluarga masalah'. The Muslimat's Welfare Foundation set up a 'Lembaga Kemaslahatan Keluarga' (LKK) [Family Welfare Institute] as a body within Nahdlatul Ulama to promote family welfare through reproductive health and family planning. LKK supports more than two dozen hospitals and health clinics.

LKK conducts training programmes for health care workers, works with domestic and international governmental and non-governmental agencies, and produces and distributes pamphlets and books on reproductive health. Muslimat NU and Fatayat NU women run most of Nahdlatul Ulama maternity hospitals, birthing centres and clinics. In 1979, a group of senior 'kyai' reviewed the 1969 fatwa and concluded that all contraception that does not produce permanent infertility is permitted by Islam.¹²

The Nahdlatul Ulama women who run LKK maternity hospitals, birthing centres and clinics and conduct reproductive health education programmes are motivated by the sentiment that humans are a community whose blessings can be enhanced through

11 Saifuddin Zuhri et al., *Fatwa: Keluarga Berencana Ditinjau dari Segi Syari'at Islam*, [Religious Opinion: Reflections on Family Planning from the Perspective of Muslim Law] (Jombang, Indonesia, 1979), p. 68.

12 Zuhri. Also Abdullah Aziz Masyhuri, former Director, Bureau of Information and Motivation, Nahdlatul Ulama Institute for Family Planning, interview with authors, Jombang, Indonesia, 16 January 2000.

training, education and the promotion of both practical knowledge and awareness of fundamental rights. According to Musdah Mulia, a Deputy Chairperson of Muslimat NU and former Chairperson of Fatayat NU, the greatest resource of Muslimat NU is not material or financial, or even organizational, but spiritual. It is the commitment of Nahdlatul Ulama women to 'to work to satisfy the inner self', she says.¹³

Musdah Mulia describes one of the sources of 'satisfaction of the inner self' as the discussions and deliberations in which Muslimat NU and Fatayat NU women regularly engage. Every three months, 'kyai' engage in round-table discussions or 'problem solving' using the Qur'an and Hadith to develop solutions to issues of contemporary social concern. Muslimat NU and Fatayat NU hold parallel discussions and make the results of these deliberations the focus of their educational work for three-month intervals.

Total fertility rates in Indonesia decreased rapidly from 5.6 births per woman in 1971 to 2.8 births per women in 1997.¹⁴ The rate of reduction decreased most rapidly only after religious associations, such as Nahdlatul Ulama, became involved in family planning and the government focused on the welfare of parents and children rather than on limiting population growth.

Findings

In the story of Nahdlatul Ulama's involvement in the national family planning programme, religion can be seen as the basis of social solidarity and a powerful force for promoting human development. The women of Fatayat NU and Muslimat NU are motivated not by money or by power, but by the desire to be good Muslims. According to a Hadith authenticated by Imam Bukhori and quoted by Nahdlatul Ulama women, 'those who do not care about the problems of others are as if they are not Muslim.'

The story shows, too, how Islam can be a powerful resource for women's empowerment. Muslimat NU and Fatayat NU were able to promote reproductive health, in an area of the world where reproduction is the single greatest threat to (women's) health,¹⁵ by reference to the Qur'an and Hadith. Islamic associations helped Indonesians to achieve one of the highest mother and infant survival rates among lower-income developing countries.

The achievements of Indonesia's family planning programme depended upon the transformation of priorities from controlling and reducing national population rates to promoting family welfare and empowering women to make reproductive choices.

13 Interview with authors, Jakarta, 13 January 2004.

14 S.A. Wilopo, H. Sigit, T. Hatmaji and K. Mohammad, *Country Population Assessment* (Jakarta, 1999).

15 Nafis Sadik, Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund, quoted in 'UN Warning, As Population Nears 6 Billion', *New York Times* (23 September 1999), A5.

Fatayat NU and Muslimat NU helped to effect that transformation from a coercive and instrumental approach to a voluntary and principled approach.

Women's empowerment is highly dependent upon men's attitudes and, therefore, requires that men are a focus of educational activities. The involvement of and positive reception by 'kyai' was necessary for Fatayat NU and Muslimat NU's progress in promoting women's health and women's empowerment. Thus, the education of men about women's rights is the key to the promotion of women's reproductive health.

At the core of socially just and sustainable development is the empowerment of individual women, especially with respect to their health and that of their families. An increase in the wealth of the 'nation' is not an adequate definition of development. Sustainable development depends on individuals who have the education and capacity to behave in socially just ways.