

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 6 October 2017

Muslim NGOs and Civil Society in Indonesia



Podcast with **Robert Hefner** (16 October 2017).

Interviewed by **Giuseppe Bolotta** and **Catherine Scheer**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/muslim-ngos-and-civil-society-in-indonesia/>

Giuseppe Bolotta (GB): Welcome to the Religious Studies Project. We are Giuseppe Bolotta

Catherine Scheer (CS): And Catherine Scheer

GB: *And this is the first instalment in our series on Religions and NGOs. First of all, one or two words on this series. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been a remarkable surge of interest among policy-makers in the academy into the effects that religion has on international aid and development. Within this broad field the work of religious NGOs or faith-based organisations has garnered considerable attention. This series of podcasts for the Religious Studies Project seeks to explore how the discourses, practices and institutions of both religious actors and purportedly secular NGOs intersect – and how these engagements result in changes in our understandings of the concepts of religion and development.*

CS: *While the service provision activities of some religious NGOs complement and enhance systems of low state capacity, others compete with state services, and still others are seen as deploying service delivery in ways that build up support for political parties in electoral strategies. Across diverse engagements, religious NGOs depend on their ability to elude, enrol and subvert state institutions, while states themselves adjust to the impact of these new actors in turn. In this interview with [Robert Hefner](#) about his ongoing research on Muslim NGOs in both Jakarta and Yogyakarta, we will talk with him about his findings and what they can show us about Islam and civil society in contemporary South East Asia. Before introducing our guest for today's interview we would like to thank the [Henry Luce Foundation](#) for supporting our research on this topic and the production of this series. Speaking*

with us today about religion and NGOs is Professor Robert Hefner. He is the Director of the Institute
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of Culture, Religion and World Affairs, and Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Boston University.

While Professor Hefner is an anthropologist long-involved in the study of Muslim South East Asia – more specifically Muslim politics, ethics and law – he is also an interdisciplinary scholar and comparativist who carried out research on Christianity, Hinduism and political secularism. He directed over a dozen research projects, and among his numerous publications figure [Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratisation in India](#), published in 2000; [Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia](#), published in 2009; and most recently, [Shari'a Law and Modern Muslim Ethics](#), published last year. A leading scholar of Islam, civil movements and democratisation, with an extensive field experience in Indonesia, we are glad to have Professor Hefner with us today to talk more specifically about the place of development among Indonesian Muslim NGOS. Thank you for being here with us on the Religious Studies Project.

RH: Thank you.

CS: *Giuseppe, do you want to start with our first question?*

GB: *With pleasure. In your introduction to Civil Islam, you explain how your research on Islam and democracy has been partly prompted by Indonesian colleagues and Muslim lecturers. And you relate how a member of a Muslim youth organisation, who had read one of your books, confronted you with the unexpected question of whether you thought Muslims can create a civil society. All of this contributed to your decision to enquire more thoroughly into these and related questions. How do you see our role as researchers in writing and communicating about such highly complex and sensitive issues, not only in the academic arena but also on the ground, with the people at the centre of our studies?*

RH: Thank you. One of the fascinating things about Indonesia is that – well there's two things actually – is that it has undergone some of the most extraordinary political and cultural changes anywhere in the Muslim world. Over the span of the last thirty-five years, the country has gone from being a very authoritarian developmentalist state to being – not a perfect – but a well-functioning electoral democracy, with a free press and a variety of other institutions that we associate with democracy. But the change has happened so rapidly, I think, that many people don't quite understand the role that Muslims and Muslim NGOs played in it. Going back, briefly, to my encounter in the early 1990s – it was actually 1991 – when I began my research in Jakarta. Prior to that time in fact, in the late 1970s and then again in 1985, I worked in East Java in an area which was majority Muslim, and where a very large . . . the largest Muslim social welfare organisation in the world, called *Nahdlatul Ulama* [NU],

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had its base. It was a very, very strong but moderately conservative – not extremely conservative – moderately conservative Islamic social welfare organisation. And it was a region which, in 1965-66 at the dawn of the authoritarian regime that ruled Indonesia from 1966 to 1998, and who had played the central role in the destruction, and in fact massacre – mass killings – of members of the Communist Party, many of whom were Muslim in background, but not particularly observant. So I had this experience from earlier when I went to Jakarta in 1991, and I had already published a book about – among other things – the political change that led up to the great changes of the ‘80s and the ‘90s. But I had written a good deal, too, about the role of NU in the killings. So when I went to this meeting, at the invitation of some Muslim youth members of the *Nahdlatul Ulama*, I went there with a little bit of reservation, knowing that other people in the Muslim community had criticised some of my comments on the events of ‘65-66. And to my surprise, the first gentleman who asked me a question raised his hand, and he was almost trembling with intense purpose and at first I thought he was angry, but his question was: “Professor Hefner, on the basis of NU’s involvement in the killing of Communists in 1965-66, do you really think Muslims can possibly create a civil society?” And I was shocked – I was astonished. And there were, in the course of the next hour-and-a-half that I spoke with them, there were strong expressions of concern and self-critique of the role of Muslims about, what these NU youth said, was buttressing, really, the authoritarian regime of the New Order. So this was my first exposure, in what would become in the period from 1991 to 1999, a long series of engagements with Muslim NGOs, both NU, *Mohammadiyah* and also some smaller independent organisations. And I learned from that that, actually, Jakarta – but also Indonesia generally – was the home of some of the most vibrant Muslim civil society organisations, anywhere in the Muslim world. In fact I would, today, in the retrospect of more than thirty years of working in Indonesia, say that Indonesia has the largest Muslim – as well as non-Muslim – but the largest Muslim NGO and Muslim civil society organisational structure and network of associations of anywhere in the Muslim world. A rather extraordinary story. In any case, I then – from 1991-99 – spent those years working with a series of NGOs including one called LP3ES, which was a kind of amalgam of Muslims from a relatively conservative – but still pro-democracy – social welfare organisation, and then Muslims who had earlier been associated with Indonesia’s social democratic party. So I watched the way in which they grappled with a whole slew of issues, including: the question of religious tolerance; the question of how one engages matters of religious freedom; and another issue, which was very hot already in the 1990s and has remained so until this day, which is the question of women’s equality. So it was the beginning – that first meeting in 1991 was the first . . . it was the beginning of a kind of re-education, on my part, of my understanding of this huge organisation that I had originally met in the countryside

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in East Java, in villages, meeting with relatively conservative, but very decent Muslims, that this organisation had somehow given birth to a remarkable social welfare movement and that a wing of it had become a pillar – arguably their most important pillar – in Indonesia's pro-democracy movement. A movement which - in combination with a great variety of social organisations, including secular nationalists but also including Christians and Hindus – would in May of 1998 succeed in, if you will, pushing President Soeharto from power and initiating an inauguration to a new electoral democracy in Indonesia. One which, during its first three years in particular, saw outbreaks of ethno-religious violence, but which the country weathered. And though there are still problems like questions of religious tolerance, today it stands as the most successful – one of the most successful – democracies anywhere in the global south, and certainly, certainly, by far the most successful Muslim majority democracy. And those Muslim NGOs that I first sort-of encountered in the countryside, but most dramatically in the critical decade of the 1990s, are a major part of the story of how this Muslim majority country became democratic.

CS: *Thank you, that is a fascinating story. That leads me to ask you, how have particular organisations that you have been following, in Yogyakarta, been shaped by the political legal context in which they are working and how have they contributed to shape it more specifically? And you have already introduced elements of this, but if you can explain some further?*

RH: Yes. After 1999, Indonesia's transition returned to electoral democracy and I decided that I would put my Jakarta research phase behind me and return to working, not in the countryside, in this instance, but working in a non-capital region. So I chose Yogyakarta in part because I had university affiliation there, but also because Yogyakarta had a reputation of being – even though it's a relatively small city by Indonesian standards, it's a half million – it's a kind of intellectual centre. It's also a cultural centre and I love Javanese culture, so for me – and now I had children – it seemed like a good place to position ourselves. But the other reason – and the more serious reason that I decided to sort-of shift back to a non-capital region, to Yogyakarta in particular, is that I had come to realise that one of the major challenges that the democracy movement – and all efforts of kind-of social reform in Indonesia were confronting – was the question of how to devise Islamic rationales for things like gender equality, things like democracy and things like religious pluralism. And as I sat, during the first years of this great transition back from 32 years of authoritarian rule, there were serious outbreaks of violence across Indonesia. Some 10,000 people died, primarily in violence between Christians and Muslims although the dynamic wasn't by any means exclusively, and in some instances even primarily about religion. But the question of how to, if you will, disseminate this idea, this new institution.

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Muslim support for this new institution of democracy loomed much more centrally in the aftermath of the sudden and, for many people, unexpected return to democracy. So I began working in Jogya. I sort of stumbled onto a group of some people who told me about it, when I was still working in Jakarta in the '90s. And it was a group of mid-twenties Muslim youths, graduates of the State Islamic University. Most of them had spent their youth in madrasas - the Indonesian equivalent of madrasas which are known as [audio unclear] *pesantren*. So they came from a kind of archetypical *Nahdlatul Ulama* background and had not had a kind-of secular education or things like that. But after graduating the equivalent of their first degree – BA in Islamic Studies – they had established an NGO whose purpose was really to address this issue of working within the Islamic tradition – and in particular within the jurisprudential tradition which is known as *fiqh* in Islamic tradition. Working within that to, if you will, invite people – they couldn't do it themselves, they had to make this a kind of national collaborative effort, to invite people – to rethink collectively, together, the grounds for justifying things like representative democracy, gender equality and – the thorniest of all, actually – is the question of religious tolerance. Because there are, within the *fiqh* tradition, major precedents for identifying non-Muslims in a way that makes modern notions of equal citizenship difficult. So here were these mid-twenties, young guys – mid-twenties to early thirties – and I began working with them. And it was another one of these transformative moments for me. Because I followed them out to the countryside, out to the Indonesian madrasas, the *pesantaren* where they gave courses. But they weren't in a position, because they were young – even though they were quite smart and they knew the jurisprudential tradition – but they couldn't just sort of arrive and say, “Well, here's what we need to do.” They had to work in a very collaborative way, in a way that was respectful of established religious scholars and, if you will, opened a dialogue that really would then continue over many years. And again, this was happening . . . they were part of a network. They were a key node, because they were also a publishing house. The group I'm referring to is called *Al KIS*, which is the Institute for the Study of Islam in Society, if you translate it. And they were a publishing house as well, so they were one very critical node in what was from the mid 1990s even before the return to democracy, to today. A node, a network of Muslim activists who were kind-of, who were trying to work from within the tradition and work with scholars – some were quite conservative – to bring about a kind of cultural shift. And this has proved to be a much more serious challenge than many people might have hoped. It didn't surprise me. There were counter-currents. There are, particularly since 2005, there's been a kind-of an upsurge in some conservative currents in Indonesia – some very conservative. But these efforts continue and once again they were part of, they are part of the Indonesian story. And part of the reason that you meet in Indonesia today – however much certain issues are still under debate – questions of,

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for example, democracy, the importance of the rule of law, the separation of powers. These ideas are now very much received by the Muslim mainstream in these countries. So again, I witnessed their efforts, I participated in some of their meetings with religious scholars and above all, I learned a lot about the importance of this new breed, this new species of Islamic NGO that had, at this critical moment in the democratic transition, jumped forward to, if you will, work on what it referred to sometimes, to do the “normative” work for justifying what is a significant kind of readjustment in Islamic legal and political thought.

GB: *Thank you so much Professor Hefner. Your work on Indonesia is really, really meaningful. Even from a comparative perspective. Your work in Indonesia over the years has highlighted the dynamic nature of discourses on democratisation, pluralism and religious freedom. What would you highlight as the major points that your long-term experience in Indonesia could contribute to a broader conversation on the role of religion in civil society in a global context?*

RH: There's so much there, one doesn't know quite where to begin. But the first thing I would say is something that I say when I am invited by Muslim colleagues and friends to go – particularly when I'm not speaking with Muslim academics or Indonesian academics But I'm invited to go out into the countryside and meet with people whose lives have changed so dramatically, both because of the political changes, but also because there's been an educational revolution in Indonesia. Everywhere in the countryside you find children who've graduated from high school. When I first began my work in Indonesia, the average Indonesian had about a fourth grade education. Today it's just short of a high school education. So there's all sorts of changes that have taken place. But, when I go to the kind-of ordinary Indonesian settings, one of the points that I try to make is something that I've learned from my Muslim friends and which I also convey when I travel through . . . for example, I've been invited to give lectures in places like Turkey or Egypt or India, where there's not great interest in Indonesia but a little. And one of the messages that I make in those countries, but also more significantly within Indonesia, has always been that, you know, democracy is not a It may have achieved an earlier development in Western, parts of the Western world, but it's very much an instrument, a tool, a social tool for dealing with difference, negotiating difference, of all of humanity. It's therefore a kind of generalised . . . it isn't a kind of made-in-the-West institution. Indeed, even in the West, democracy takes different forms because it has to accommodate itself to different social, political, legal and ethical environments. We shouldn't be surprised – in fact we should very much expect – that that would be the case in the Muslim world as well, within certain limits. You can't – there has to be family resemblance – there has to be some kind of institutional and ethical core. And I think there is. But the

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idea that some conservative Islamists, who reject democracy and pluralism and things like that, the idea that they promote is that, "No, no. Democracy is a Western value and Western institution." And my point – and it's a point that isn't my idea, it's the idea that I've learned from speaking with my friends in NU and *Muhommadiyah* and other major Muslim social organisations in Indonesia – is that, no, democracy – particularly in its modern form – is an invention of humankind, to deal with certain kinds of challenges of living together in the world that we inhabit. So democratisation is not Westernisation. It is something that builds on, and must build on and have roots in, the ethical, legal and cultural traditions of each society in which it takes root. So that's my first point, and I don't think that's particularly original or insightful

CS: *But important.*

RH: It's one that I learned above all, from that, beginning with that meeting in '91, when that young earnest, decent man reflecting on the trauma of the *Nahdlatul Ulama's* involvement, and feeling ashamed – those were the words he used – for what had happened. And that was the beginning of my re-education into the culture, politics and ethics of Muslim Indonesia. And I think that basic lesson is very much generalisable to other parts of the world.

GB: *We could speak with Professor Hefner for hours but our time is over. So thank you very much for joining us, Professor, at the Religious Studies Project.*

RH: Thank you very much, It's been an honour and a pleasure. Thank you.

CS: *Thank you.*

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