

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

Islam and Pluralism in Indonesia

Asia Dialogues

Margaret Scott, Devin T. Stewart

Transcript

DEVIN STEWART: Hi. I'm Devin Stewart here at the Carnegie Council in New York City. I'm sitting here with Margaret Scott. She is an adjunct professor at NYU and she also writes for *The New York Review of Books*.

It's great to have you here, Margaret. Thank you so much for coming.

MARGARET SCOTT: Thanks for inviting me.

DEVIN STEWART: Margaret, your specialty is Islam and Indonesian politics. Since the [Suharto era](#) of the 1990s [came to an end](#), how would you describe the current situation in Indonesian politics as it relates to the role of religion in politics? How does one get their mind around this very complex situation?

MARGARET SCOTT: It is very complex. Indonesia is endlessly fascinating because it is so complex.

So perhaps I'll start by saying it's 18 years, going on 20 years, that Indonesia has been engaged in a very important experiment, which is to create a democracy in a Muslim-majority place. As a consequence, the relationship between Islam and politics is central, as it would be expected because it's a Muslim-majority place.

But even that obscures a lot of the complexity, because Indonesia is a very pluralist place as well. Depending on the census, but from 2010, which is probably a decent one, 86 percent of the population of over 250 million people are Muslims. The rest, like the island of Bali, which most people have heard of, is not Muslim-majority at all; it's Hindu. Eastern Indonesia has a lot of Christians and a smattering of Catholics. There's also a vibrant and important Chinese minority in Indonesia, and many of the Chinese Indonesians are either Christian or Confucian. There are six official religions. Everyone is required to declare a religion and atheism is illegal in Indonesia.

DEVIN STEWART: What are the consequences for that?

MARGARET SCOTT: There used to be none. It used to be an overlooked phenomenon. People could say they were an atheist and nothing happened. But one of the themes, the major theme, of Indonesia, sadly, is the growing conservatism in Indonesia, which has a lot of reasons for it, political and religious.

Now, if someone—and there have been three cases of it—has publicly said or said on Facebook that they are an atheist, they have been charged and there have been prison sentences given.

DEVIN STEWART: What are the causes for this growing conservatism?

MARGARET SCOTT: There are many. Any researcher or scholar who looks at Indonesia is trying to come up with explanations or analysis that makes sense. There are many levels to it. There are the external reasons for it. World globalization and global politics, starting with 9/11, as one big trigger, and 9/11 was not so long after the overthrow of Suharto, and those early years were unbelievably gut-shudderingly difficult for Indonesia. So there was a lot of violence. There was contention over whether democracy was going to be allowed.

By about 2001, a lot of important changes had happened and the democracy was grounded and needed a lot of work to consolidate. It's very flawed in any event. So there were a lot of politics going on. So the internal factors have a lot to do with the relationship between political actors, political elite, the oligarchs, and Islamic leaders.

In my mind, to oversimplify, there has been, ever since the democratic period solidified a bit after 2001, a constant clash between what I consider to be—and this is very oversimplified—what could be considered loosely the most progressive Muslim population in the world pitted against growing conservative forces. That is the contest that is leading to a growing conservatism because, for lots of reasons, the progressive, downright liberal Muslims have been marginalized and have not played the political game very well.

DEVIN STEWART: Now, the Nahdlatul Ulama, the association of moderate Muslims, is that the main force for progressivism, or are there other forces?

MARGARET SCOTT: That's complicated. Everything in Indonesia needs to be untangled.

Nahdlatul Ulama was formed in 1926, and it was formed actually because of external factors. When the House of Saud and Wahhabism took over the holy sites and became the monarchy that runs Saudi Arabia now, Nahdlatul Ulama was very upset, because more than it being called a moderate organization, it really should be called a traditionalist organization.

It is the largest organization of Muslims in the world. It clings to a particular syncretic and melding of cultures that have everything to do with the history of how Islam came to Indonesia. So for instance, there are venerable saints that are legendary but Nahdlatul Ulama believes that they are actual, and their gravesites are places of pilgrimage. There are various rituals that Nahdlatul Ulama adherents practice.

The modernist movement, which is called Muhammadiyah, which is the second largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, considers Nahdlatul Ulama to have what are considered impure additions to the practice of Islam, and their whole endeavor is to strip away some of these traditionalist practices, which they consider to be actually anti-Islamic, un-Islamic.

DEVIN STEWART: Like what?

MARGARET SCOTT: Like venerating tombs. To go to a tomb is considered to be a form of idolatry. So modernists think that's terrible. Mixing rituals that had sort of Hindu or animist past, which have been transmogrified and otherwise modernized into a practicing pious Muslim but believes in spirits, believes that it's a good idea to remember ancestors, that it's a good idea to remember that nature has mystical attributes and that there's a kind of Sufi view of nature and spirituality, are part of the mix in Indonesian Islam.

Modernists hate all of those attributes because they were giving rise to—and they're not Wahhabi. There's many kinds of Islam. But the modernist Muslims in Indonesia are at odds in some regard on

religious and practice ritual issues.

So back to Nahdlatul Ulama. We can go back to the modernist one later because that's also very complicated and very much important in the contest going on.

Nahdlatul Ulama has a great many young people who became very well educated. Nahdlatul Ulama has developed *pesantrens*, boarding schools, all over Indonesia, but mostly in Java where most of the traditionalist Muslims live, which makes up 50 percent of the population of Indonesia. Out of the *pesantrens* and then the state university system that Suharto, the dictator, built, a whole generation of Nahdlatul Ulama family-background Muslims became educated.

Many of them, because religion was the only form of expression basically that was allowed during the dictatorship, formed a progressive brand of being a Muslim that aspired to a democratic future where everyone was a citizen, where their depiction and interpretation of the *Qur'an* and the *hadiths* said that Allah meant for all people to be equal and the ramifications of that idea meant that equal rights for women, for religious minorities, even LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender), became part of the agenda for Muslim activists who played a role in the ousting of Suharto. So there is a strand of very progressive thinking in Nahdlatul Ulama.

But it is a huge organization and there is no way to generalize or to say that there's a predominant view, because there are many Nahdlatul Ulama *kyais*, religious leaders, who aren't so moved by this idea of human equality. In fact, many of them are really mad that there have been any attempts to have a child marriage law that disallows the marriage of children. Many Nahdlatul Ulama men believe that children and wives are their property and can be done with as they wish. I just raise that as one point, but there are many, many complications in Nahdlatul Ulama. However—and we might want to stop here and put in the political ramifications of the changed democracy and how this has affected Muslim activists and Muslim players and Muslim organizations.

So if I can, after Suharto was ousted, there was a flurry of violence. The lid on dictatorship led to a lot of trouble. Muslims and Christians *butchered each other* in Eastern Indonesia. East Timor split, was given a *referendum* and voted for independence, and 1,000 or so were *killed* as the military pulled out.

But there was also a flowering of politics. Over 40 parties contested in the *1999 elections*. There are now probably 10 major parties, three or four quite big ones that are important. It is no accident that these parties have an alliance with the different strands of Islam in Indonesia. So all of these strands and themes that I have been trying to lay out in the lens of looking at Muslims in Indonesia also have a very important role if you put on the lens of political electoral politics.

What is also very important to note is that direct elections were instituted in 2004. A former general—I'm going to just call him *SBY*; his name is Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono—*SBY ran* and was *reelected*. So he was 10 years in office. During his time in office, he helped a great deal in ensuring that conservatives were given a very broad voice, even though in electoral politics Islamist parties did very poorly. He ran in a secular nationalist party, called the *Partai Demokrat*, the Democratic Party. Yet he allowed especially one institution in Indonesia, a quasi-state institution, which is known by the initials *MUI*—it is the Council of Ulama, it's a council of religious leaders, in Indonesia.

DEVIN STEWART: Why do you think he did that?

MARGARET SCOTT: For reelection in my opinion. But that is not verifiable in any stretch of the imagination.

I also think it needs to be said that he's a conservative man, so there also was probably a personal inclination. But also there is in Indonesia—not as bad as in Malaysia—a sense that government officials, the state, and politicians must never ostracize Islam or say anything against Islam. So there is an Islamicizing that goes on amongst political leaders, which almost is kind of "keep the Muslims happy" or a fear that conservatives will go against the state if they aren't appeased. But anybody who really studies the electoral results will see that the more pluralist politicians, particularly in the fight that was most on these issues—the [pluralist politician](#) won the [election in 2014](#).

So it's a bit unfortunate, I think, that the political elite in Indonesia has done the most to erode democracy from within rather than there being a great deal of support from below clamoring for this conservative turn and Islamization in Indonesia.

DEVIN STEWART: I got the sense from reading some of your work on this topic that you're essentially kind of arguing that the more conservative politicians are out of line with the popular sentiment. What do you think the average Indonesian citizen wants from their politicians?

MARGARET SCOTT: There's a great deal more and very good work on polling for public opinion. It's a very complicated question to say where the Indonesians feel about Islamization because the polling is very complicated to interpret. If an Indonesian Muslim is asked, "Do you like the idea of Sharia?" many, many, many will say, "Yes." But if then you ask, "Oh, so then that means that you think all women should be veiled?"—and they will say, "No, of course not." Or "Then that means that women shouldn't be out at night unaccompanied?"—"No, of course not." So there is a problem with interpretation.

I have no idea what most Indonesians want, except a better life for their kids and themselves, I assume. So economic issues are probably front and center for most people. It's a poor country. Forty percent live on \$2 a day or less.

But I'm not convinced that there is, and haven't seen, a clamoring for great Islamization. However—and this is something that I'm trying to work on now—there has been a great deal more influence coming from a handful of very conservative Islamic groups that include some political parties, include this Ulama Council, but also [Dewan Da'wah](#), which has deep roots in Indonesia and deep roots with Saudi money. There are many other ways in which conservative ideas, many of them springing from a Saudi-funded university which has been in Indonesia for 37 years—there's a cumulative effect of the graduates of that university that have led to many more conservative Muslims.

I am certainly not saying that that has led to any more violent Muslims, Muslim extremists, because in fact [ISIS](#) (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) recruiting in Indonesia of course goes on, but the number of people going to [Syria](#) and [Iraq](#) from Indonesia falls far below most other countries, probably because it is an open society and Muslims don't feel the draw of the caliphate quite as deeply or easily.

DEVIN STEWART: And you've written about this as well. It sounded like you are also skeptical about the claim that Indonesian Islam could be a counterforce to ISIS. What do you think about that?

MARGARET SCOTT: This goes back to Nahdlatul Ulama. Nahdlatul Ulama after [Jokowi](#) was elected, some of its young intellectuals, activists, liberals, were so relieved—many of them had worked very hard for Jokowi's victory—felt that they finally had some space after the SBY conservative turn. They started talking up in intellectual circles a term that has been around for a very long time, but it was like they gave it a renaissance and gave it new meaning. It's [Islam](#)

Nusantara, which is "Islam of the Archipelago."

Basically, for them it meant: "Let's go back to feeling relaxed, allowing tolerance and pluralism to be the biggest expression of what it means to be a modern Muslim. Let's embrace *pancasila*, the secular nationalist ideology of Indonesia. Let's stop with this trying to have a *fatwa* forcing women to ride sidesaddle on a motorcycle. Let's just stop this craziness." They took up this Islam Nusantara as sort of a shorthand for relaxed, tolerant, pluralist Islam.

Nahdlatul Ulama as an organization saw great benefits to this because there has been for both Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah and the Indonesian government and foreign ministry an interest in presenting Indonesia to the world as this tolerant, moderate Muslim-majority country that has something to tell the rest of the world. Islam Nusantara was a perfect vehicle for that agenda.

But then they went even one step further, and the leaders of Nahdlatul Ulama said that Islam Nusantara could form a sort of antidote or an inoculation against recruiting to ISIS. This further step to me, to be blunt, is ridiculous. If anybody knows anything about Islam, traditional Muslims are already almost considered infidels by Salafi or Wahhabi Muslims. Already for many, many years—that's the reason Nahdlatul Ulama even was created in 1926—there has been a total break between Wahhabi/Salafi ideas and traditional Islam ideas. So the idea that preaching Islam Nusantara would keep a Salafi/Wahhabi thinker from becoming radicalized just doesn't work.

However, that doesn't mean that this campaign of Islam Nusantara doesn't have a great deal of benefit. There has been a huge conservative turn in Indonesia. If the liberals were given not only more space but actually some attention by the government and attention by the Religious Affairs Ministry, that's all for the good, because they are preaching a tolerant, pluralist version.

But I also just need to caution that Nahdlatul Ulama has a little bit of an image problem pushing this "we are tolerant, pluralist Muslims," because its past, which is an important past, and this past is hovering on the present and actually piercing the present, is what happened in 1965 in Indonesia, which is when the military went into cahoots with Nahdlatul Ulama to **exterminate communists and leftists**.

Suharto took advantage of a low-level putsch in the air force to rise to power on this bloodbath of 1965–1966. For lots of reasons, which we don't have time to go into here—partially because the military basically insisted, but partially because Nahdlatul Ulama hated communists because there was a lot of propaganda that they were going to kill them, that they were atheists. But nonetheless, Nahdlatul Ulama and its youth arm were very involved in being the willing executioners for the military in 1965. That wasn't exactly tolerant and pluralist.

So for them to be pushing Islam Nusantara now I think is great on a lot of levels, as a human being. But I do think that there needs to be also a reckoning that Indonesia is going through slowly with that past and Nahdlatul Ulama has a role to play in that reckoning.

DEVIN STEWART: Going back to what you have described as a quasi-governmental institution, the Ulama Council, what is its influence today? I think you mentioned they had issued a *fatwa* against Western influence. What is its real influence in politics today?

MARGARET SCOTT: Changing. I am actually trying to get a handle on that. In the SBY years, it was extremely important because SBY actually told the Council that they had jurisdiction over Islamic issues, and in 2005 they issued an infamous *fatwa* against secularism, pluralism, and liberalism, which quickly was dubbed *sepillis*, to sound like syphilis. It's invoked as the "Western diseases" that

the conservatives want to keep from infiltrating Indonesia.

DEVIN STEWART: What is the origin of that word *sepilis*? What's the etymology of it?

MARGARET SCOTT: "Se" is secularism, "pi" is pluralism, and "lis" is liberalism.

DEVIN STEWART: It's a portmanteau, I think.

MARGARET SCOTT: Exactly.

And also that same year, in 2005, the Council issued a *fatwa* saying that Ahmadiyahs are deviants. Ahmadiyah is a tiny sect, 500,000 Indonesians perhaps. But it has led to a lot of religious discrimination and also violence against Ahmadiyahs; and then it has moved to Shias, which is also a small—we don't know how many—a very small group of Indonesians; and also to gay Indonesians.

Because of the power that SBY invested in the Council, it has come to be seen that their *fatwas* are enforceable and vigilante groups have decided that if there's a *fatwa* that they can take the law into their own hands and go after these deviants. The police have not cracked down on it. But that may be changing.

DEVIN STEWART: What type of deviants specifically?

MARGARET SCOTT: People who adhere to the Ahmadiyah sect. Shias—and Shias are not officially banned. The Council has asked for the government to consider them deviants, but the government has said they won't do it, and they probably won't, because that's just too inflammatory.

DEVIN STEWART: What about other religions?

MARGARET SCOTT: No. The official religions are fine. But there's a great deal of tension from time to time between Christian groups and Muslim groups, which is a whole long story which I don't think we have time to go into here.

But one ramification of the growth of the Council's power was that SBY basically prioritized religious harmony over religious freedom and created something called the Religious Harmony Forums. These are down to the district level. They were given the ability to weigh in on whether a [mosque or a church could be built in a place](#). This has led in Muslim-majority places to many times churches being denied the ability to renovate or build, despite having fulfilled all of the regulations and even having decrees from the Supreme Court that they should be able to build a church. But, on the other hand, in Christian places, like in Papua, mosques have been prevented from being built by these same Religious Harmony Forums. All to underscore that majority rule on religious issues is really against religious freedom.

DEVIN STEWART: Who's enforcing it? Is it local government, the city government?

MARGARET SCOTT: Yes, the local government.

DEVIN STEWART: Another institution you've mentioned in your writing is the emergence of the Constitutional Court. Can you talk about that a little bit?

MARGARET SCOTT: There were quite a few very important reforms that happened in Indonesia. This was a coming together of civilian politicians. Some very good decisions were made to take away the ability of the military to be in parliament and have veto power. Direct elections, as I

mentioned, were instituted in 2004; and the creation of the Constitutional Court, which came into being in the early 2000s; and an anti-corruption commission was also one of the major reforms.

The Constitutional Court has had its ups and downs. But it is very popular. It is considered by many Indonesians as sort of a check, part of the important checks and balances of a democratic system. So it's a check on the president; it's a check on the parliament; and also it's a check on parliament's ability to impeach a president, because the Constitutional Court has the power to review the reasons for impeachment if there is an attempt to impeach a president.

The Constitutional Court, though, has also had corruption. Indonesia is plagued with corruption. The [last head](#)—two heads ago—of the Constitutional Court was [taking bribes](#) and he is now in prison.

The Constitutional Court, sadly, in one of its major decisions, upheld a blasphemy law and actually read the [constitution](#) as saying that the constitution does promise religious freedom, but it also promises, because it requires a belief in God, that the state does have a role in enforcing piety. This contradiction is what is the reason why the contest is far from settled—what I tried to lay out at the beginning—between progressives and conservatives, because there is ample room for both agendas in Indonesia, and it's a political fight that is going to carry on for quite a while.

DEVIN STEWART: Margaret, thank you so much for your incredible tour of the horizon today. We've touched on a lot of issues.

Did we leave anything out that you want to talk about today?

MARGARET SCOTT: No. I mean I'm always intrigued by Indonesia and I find it fascinating that nobody else is.

I also just want to say that in this current very bleak period of the world, that there are so many Indonesians who are Muslims who are fighting to preserve a democracy and the values of pluralism and tolerance. This is something that I wish more people knew about because it might give pause to the broad brush that "Islam is 'blank'" that is going on today.

DEVIN STEWART: That's a great way to end our talk, Margaret.

Just in terms of a reading list or a literature review for people who want to get more familiar with Indonesia, could you recommend a couple of books, or even a research question, that would help researchers' understanding of that place?

MARGARET SCOTT: For reading, for general interest, just if you're interested in Indonesia, because it's a great read and it's a great book, but it's not an academic tome, is [Elizabeth Pisani's *Indonesia, Etc.: Exploring the Improbable Nation*](#). I highly recommend that.

[Merle Ricklefs](#), a terrific historian, has written a [trilogy](#) on the history of Islam in Java. The last one is [Islamisation and its Opponents in Java](#). I highly recommend reading that.

[Anthony Reid](#) has written about the history of Southeast Asia. Anything he has [written](#) has been great. He has written on Aceh.

DEVIN STEWART: How about research questions? When people go visit this amazing country, and given the incredible complexity of it that you just touched on today, how would you—what's the question?

MARGARET SCOTT: Social media is really important and this contest that's going on in social media. So social media is fascinating. Learn Indonesian. It's very important and I constantly regret that my Indonesian is so bad.

The roles of Saudi, Qatar, and Kuwait are not enough known. I just read a [dissertation](#) by a wonderful Indonesian scholar named [Din Wahid](#) who was in the Netherlands where he did his Ph.D. I really hope his book is published. It's on the Salafi movement in Indonesia. I highly recommend that. It's available online. It's in English.

DEVIN STEWART: Any relation to [Gus Dur](#)?

MARGARET SCOTT: No relation to Gus Dur.

DEVIN STEWART: Thank you again so much, Margaret. It has been great learning a lot today from you.

MARGARET SCOTT: Thank you, Devin.

DEVIN STEWART: Thanks for coming.

Audio

"It's going on 20 years that Indonesia has been engaged in a very important experiment, which is to create a democracy in a Muslim-majority place," explains journalist and scholar Margaret Scott. In this valuable interview, she untangles the complex relationships between various factions of Islam and politics in the world's most populous Muslim-majority country.

Read More: [Democracy](#), [Education](#), [Islam](#), [Justice](#), [Religion](#), [Cultural Rights](#), [Human Rights](#), [Role of Religion](#), [Southeast Asia](#), [Indonesia](#), [Saudi Arabia](#)