

Southeast Asia

ANDRÉE FEILLARD

Andrée Feillard toured Java last March to give lectures in four cities for the launching of her book on the Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest traditionalist Muslim organization. She also visited several *ulama*, politicians, and student groups in East Java. She gives here a short account of her journey in the troubled province where 254 people were mysteriously murdered from September to November 1998. At the time of her trip, interreligious and interethnic violence was high in Ambon.

Wednesday, 3 March 1999

My first visit outside Surabaya is to see Kiai Hasyim Muzadi in Malang, a likely successor to Abdurrahman Wahid, alias Gus Dur, the Nahdlatul Ulama chief, to be replaced at the next NU congress in November. In the hall of the brand new, sparkling white *pesantren*, I wait for the recitation of the soft Sufi *wirid* to be finished. Sitting on a bright green carpet, surrounded by a dozen teachers and *santris*, the 56-year old Kiai Hasyim holds a *tasbeih* in his right hand, ready for the toughest questions. He is a popular, humorous local MP (1972-1983; 1986-1987) and now also a respected *kiai* with an innovative touch (he opened a *pesantren* for the students of general universities in 1991). Kiai Hasyim is a no-nonsense man: 'Formalist Islam', he tells me, 'has proven its incapacity to rule the country.' This rather direct judgement of Habibie's ten-month old regime goes hand in hand with his concern about a possible disintegration of Indonesia. But I find his assessment of the violence in the Moluccas reflects a rare equanimity: 'According to our NU office in Ambon, there is a Christian fear of Islamization. There is also the economic factor and the political factor. The Jakarta elite is playing around, people think there is a scenario'. The Banyuwangi assassination campaign, which he compares to Bosnia's, was in his opinion a political campaign in favour of the status quo, but which produced the reverse effect: NU's political party, the Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB), which was at first terrorized, afterwards gained more popularity. His confidence is shattered more by money politics (in favour of the PPP) than by NU's small splinter parties. Finally, he concludes, the 38 military seats in the MPR will be the determining factor. But, whatever happens, Kiai Hasyim seems convinced that 'formalist Islam' is bound to be a big failure, a disintegrating factor for the archipelagic nation. Like everyone else I meet during this trip, he reacts most coolly to the possibility of an alliance with Amien Rais, a pluralist 'for just two days', he notes ironically.

Gus Dur told me later in Jakarta that Hasyim is indeed, so far, a favourite candidate to succeed him. Hasyim Muzadi may be more of an organizer, and Gus Dur more of an intellectual, but Hasyim seems to approve of Gus Dur's choice of 'substance' and ethics rather than 'formalism', and he smiles, visibly amused, pointing out that Gus Dur is now being dubbed a 'krislam' (an acronym for Christian and Islam).

Thursday morning

Prof. Tolhah Hassan, the rector of NU's university (UNISMA) receives me warmly. I find him most concerned about the situation in Ambon, which he feels is less a religious than an ethnic problem. During a trip in East Nusatenggara (NTT), east of Bali, he saw huge discrepancies between the living standards of 'settlers' and the 'original population'. There the shops were owned by Buginese or Javanese, and locals had less access to universities. Eight years ago, he started a grant programme for students to come and study in Malang (there are now about 20 students in

town). Such sensibility about ethnic problems linked to the transmigration programme is new to me in Java.

Downstairs, a number of students wait for me. They speak of a regular weekly meeting of political parties aimed at preventing animosity from degenerating into violence, a bid to prove to the armed forces that 'we are ready for democracy'. On the way to the Malang PMII (NU's student organization) headquarters, one student tells me of the increased popularity of Shiism among some students, synonymous with 'free-thinking' and the power to change things. At the headquarters, many of the 40 or so PMII students question the wisdom of creating the PKB, which they fear will bring the NU back to the ugly politicking of the 1970s. All but two of them will vote PKB. They are mostly proud of NU's 'progressive' and no longer want the NU to be called 'traditionalist', which they deem unfair. 'Progressive traditionalists'? They loudly agree, optimistic that they are the future of Indonesia, while the 'others' are the *partai setan* (satanic parties) 'using Islamic symbols for political gains'.

Friday morning

Back in Surabaya, the PKB chief for East Java, Choirul Anam, is busy and as placid as I have always known him to be. His soft tone hardly reveals his solid optimism about PKB's prospects: 'We will score higher than you would expect', he tells me in confidence of the PKB and the PDI, always linking the two. But he too points to the crucial role of the armed forces seats. On the Banyuwangi massacres, Choirul comments: 'One objective was to create disorder, so that the army would step in to restore order, but it failed. And now, it is Ambon's turn.'

Friday evening

Some 30 km to the east of Surabaya, I spend the night at Kiai Choiron's *pesantren* in Bangil. Besides the many NU *pesantren*, there is a rare 'reformist' *pesantren* of the Persis (Persatuan Islam) and a *pesantren* of Shiite reputation, the Yayasan Pesantren Islam (YAPI). PAN's Amien Rais recently visited the district, but his convoy was stopped by protesting Muslim youths. It was Kiai Choiron who opened the doors of his *pesantren* for Amien, despite threats that his school would be set on fire. 'The majority here votes for PKB', explains Kiai Choiron, 'whereas PAN will find voters in the Persis and Shiite *pesantren*.' Sitting on a wooden bench in the yard of the newly extended *pesantren*, Kiai Choiron says there is practically no PKB cooperation with PAN. I remember that during my research in 1991, differences between NU and Muhammadiyah were minimized. This time, it is the reverse.

Saturday morning

Kiai Choiron kindly lends me his car to drive to Jember, some 200 km to the east in Banyuwangi's direction, where Kiai Muchith Muzadi, the right hand of NU's former *rois aam*, Kiai Achmad Siddiq, is waiting. I had first visited Jember in 1988. All along the road, red PDI flags alternate with PKB or PPP

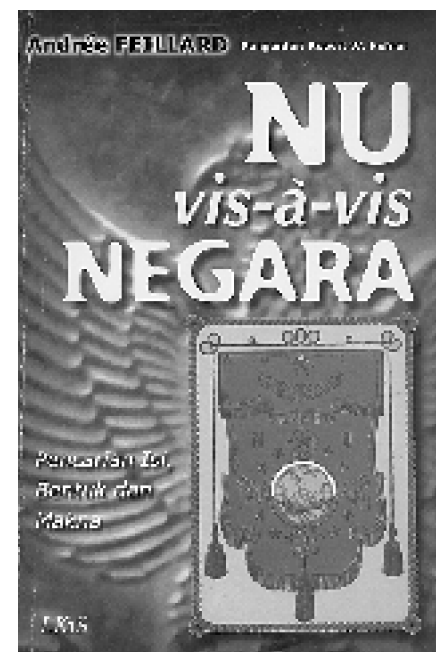
green flags, while the yellow Golkar flag appears only once in a while. The thin 74-year old *kiai* who studied in the famous Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari's *pesantren* from 1937 to 1942 is an 'intellectual' *kiai* whose unassertive ways hide a solid influence on the NU. Kiai Muchith recalls the high points of 1998, Gus Dur's political choices, and the usual role of the supernatural in NU's decisions. He calls Gus Dur a *kiai moral*, as compared to 'normative' *kiais*. He adds: 'PAN is in the process of adapting from the modernist *pola* (way of thinking) to a *pola* like NU's', he comments, 'but Muhammadiyah still has difficulties in rejecting sectarianism, and actually NU also has [such difficulties], but because of Gus Dur's charisma, there is a breakthrough in this direction.' For four hours, in his small noisy sitting room, Kiai Muchith speaks in confidence. He has been asked by local Protestant priests to distribute *sembako* (basic food items) in their place, as some Muslim radicals see it as a material incentive for conversions. But the elderly yet dynamic *kiai* preferred to have the students' organizations, including NU's PMII, do it: 'I have to be careful', he explains. A constant advocate of tolerance, he rebuffs the widespread fear of Java's *kristianisasi*.

Sunday morning

Back in Bangil, I have a long conversation on the phone with Ustad Zahir, the rising teacher in the Shiite YAPI *pesantren*, an articulate young man, a passionate admirer of Khomeini's achievements. Like some other Nahdlatul Ulama *kiai* I have met, Kiai Choiron is increasingly tolerant of Shiism. Walking through the large yard to the road, Kiai Choiron mumbles that he does not regret that the NU finally set up its own political party: 'With Golkar and PPP, we were always the losers.'

My trip in East Java comes to an end. I meet Choirul Anam again in Surabaya. He tells me of his efforts to convince the small Islamist party, Partai Keadilan, the party of justice, to accept NU's pluralist line. PK recruits mostly among general university students, and has Internet connections to the Refah and Hamas. 'I say to them that God decided men should have different religions, so it is not for us to try and change this, our duty on earth is to apply religious values and ethics.' 'Do they accept your argument?' I ask. In a tired voice, Choirul answers: 'It is difficult for them, the indoctrination is too strong over there.'

In just over five days, ten months after the fall of Suharto, I have discovered an Islamic community increasingly divided by politics, but at the same time hopeful that change is at the doorstep after 32 years of manoeuvring to protect the *kiais* and the *pesantren*. I have also seen the seeds of pluralism, planted by Gus Dur a long, long time ago, now burgeoning in the midst of inter-religious strife while one essential question looms among *ulamas* and activists: Has God decided whether Indonesia should remain one single country? ◆



NU vis-à-vis Negara, Pencarian Bentuk, Makna, dan Isi was published by the LKIS, in Yogyakarta, and is an updated translation of Andrée Feillard's book *Islam et Armée dans l'Indonésie Contemporaine* (L'Harmattan, Paris, 1995).

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