



[PRINT WINDOW](#) [CLOSE WINDOW](#)

THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW

Daughter of Islam

An eloquent (and elegant) foe of Muslim fundamentalists.

BY NANCY de WOLF SMITH

Saturday, February 25, 2006 12:01 a.m.

WASHINGTON--Yenny Wahid has a smile that could melt a Hershey bar at 100 yards. Her sunny disposition is all the more remarkable because Ms. Wahid is on what may be the world's most difficult mission right now: She's a prominent Muslim (and a woman at that) who speaks out against terror and the hijacking of her religion by ideologues who twist it to their own political ends.

After 9/11, many Americans assume that the radical Islamic agenda is to destroy the U.S. The reality is that attacks on Western targets are designed to function as brutal propaganda coups that will attract recruits to the cause of violent revolution. The main goal of ideologues like Osama bin Laden is to topple the governments of *Muslim* countries, including, most famously, the Wahabi royal regime of Saudi Arabia. But the real strategic plum, Ms. Wahid says, would be her native Indonesia and its 220 million citizens--with the largest Muslim population on earth.

"We are the ultimate target," she told me in Washington during a trip to the U.S. earlier this month. "The real battle for the hearts and minds of Muslims is happening in Indonesia, not anywhere else. And that's why the world should focus on Indonesia and help."

Think of it as a potential domino whose fall would be felt far beyond Asia. "It's big enough to destabilize the region," Ms. Wahid notes. But "imagine if Indonesia became a hotbed for terrorism, or a source for people to get martyrs from. We've got enough people to provide an army of terrorists if we're not careful."



At present, Ms. Wahid calls that a "worst-case, doomsday scenario," and she is probably correct, given Indonesia's history of moderate, syncretic Islam, with elements from the region's Hindu and Buddhist past. While there have been demonstrations there over the Danish cartoons that lampooned the prophet Muhammad, they have generally involved only few hundred people. By contrast, Ms. Wahid points out, a December rally she helped organize under the banner of "Islam for Peace" attracted some 12,000 marchers.

At the head of that crowd, riding in a wheelchair alongside Ms. Wahid, was her father, Abdurrahman Wahid, the respected and beloved Islamic scholar who headed Indonesia's largest Muslim cultural organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), before becoming the first president of newly democratic Indonesia from 1999 to 2001. In a seminal article for this newspaper--"Right Islam vs. Wrong Islam"--Mr. Wahid wrote on Dec. 30 that "a terrible danger threatens humanity" in the form of "an extreme and perverse ideology" that grossly distorts the true meaning of the religion. He called on fellow Muslims to end the "complicity of silence" about terrorism and other acts of

intolerance which characterize the radicals' behavior.

At 31, Yenny Wahid--her real name is Zannuba--is trying to follow her father's example and defend the values their faith teaches. Educated in Indonesia, she got a Master's degree in public administration from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government in 2002. Her ease in Western surroundings is apparent not merely from the snappy cream-colored pantsuit she was wearing when we met but also from her elegantly accented English.

She is active in the NU's political wing, the National Awakening Party, and an adviser to Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. The job most dear to her heart, however, is running the Wahid Foundation--named after her father--which works to promote, in the words of its [Web site](#), "democratic reform, religious pluralism, multiculturalism and tolerance amongst Muslims" and reflects "a universal Islam [that] desires justice and prosperity for all."

The key word may be prosperity. Indonesia, which was on its way to Asian Tigerhood until the currency crisis of 1997-98, has not recovered from the economic meltdown that coincided with the fall of the Suharto dictatorship. The country is a democracy now, but a struggling one to which few investors have returned. It also has a free press, among the friskiest in Asia. Yet the new openness has also paved the way for vocal opponents of Indonesia's traditional secular approach to government--voices previously suppressed--and they are gaining ground.

It is still politically incorrect to call for an Islamic state; and the mainstream press, along with the vast majority of Indonesians, vigorously supports efforts to fight and arrest terrorists such as the ones who perpetrated the Bali and Marriott hotel bombings of 2002 and 2003. Even so, Ms. Wahid says, the fear of being labeled un-Islamic has become intimidating to many moderate political candidates. Radicals who want to install an Islamic regime--those who dream of violence while many ordinary religious conservatives still do not--also are operating in an economic milieu not unlike the one communists exploited in poor countries a generation ago.



Terry Shoffner

Poverty and a lack of education make millions of Indonesians desperate, and easy, targets, Ms. Wahid says. "After the fall of Suharto, people expected democracy would solve all their problems. But of course it takes a long time for things to fall into their right places, and people are not patient. They want a quick answer. So there is this sense of democracy-fatigue in Indonesia. And my fear is if people are willing to entertain the idea of Islam, and an Islamic state, as an alternative solution to governing, because they are so frustrated by the level of corruption . . . we'd be in big trouble."

Ms. Wahid is not imagining things. She points to other examples: "This is exactly the issue that just happened in Palestine. Because Hamas managed to portray themselves as the clean party. We do have parties like that as well [in Indonesia], like Hamas."

Well-financed radicals have already infiltrated at least some of Indonesia's traditional religious boarding schools, or *pesantren*. For poor rural families especially, these schools--called madrassas in other Muslim countries--are the only way to see that their sons get decent food and clothing. Yet even the majority of *pesantren* that teach a moderate form of Islam turn out young clerics who find it difficult to make a living in the outside world. This is one reason, Ms. Wahid believes, that Indonesia's mosques have become a potent trouble zone.

"The market for these preachers is quite limited, and you get to be the top preacher by being the preacher with a sexy message. A sexy message can be very inflammatory: 'Christians are the ones that created all these problems for you guys--kill them!' Friday prayer is an obligation for men, so it has become a very effective medium to propagandize with preachings that are just

very, very hateful toward non-Muslims."

Like her famous father and other influential clerics in Indonesia, Ms. Wahid is trying to hold the line against this trend. Their task, as she sees it, is to remind Indonesians of the true teachings of Islam and its sacred texts. "One thing for sure is that [radicals] have a very distorted view of what religion should be," she says. "Killing people meaning glory? It's lunacy. We do discuss these things, we hold conferences, for instance on the word 'jihad' and how it's been used and abused throughout history. The prophet Muhammad said the greatest jihad is against yourself, how to make yourself a better person. It's not . . . running to kill people."

For a true definition of martyrdom, she points to the sacrifice of Riyanto, a young man dispatched with other members of the Nahdlatul Ulama youth militia during Christmas several years ago to guard churches threatened with attacks. When he discovered a bomb outside a church, he tried to throw it out of the way of the crowds and was killed when it blew up. Ms. Wahid and others mark the anniversary of his death every year. "We always tell this message: *This is the real case of martyrdom*. That's the way to defend religion, not by killing others but by defending others' rights to practice their religion."

As uplifting as her story is, Ms. Wahid cannot speak to Indonesians with the same authority as her father, whose power to influence public opinion derives in part from his credentials as an Islamic scholar. However, Abdurrahman Wahid is 65, blind and frail. The NU organization where he remains a towering figure may have 40 million members, but there are power struggles under way inside the group, and no guarantee that its future leaders will be as wise and outspoken as he has been.

Ms. Wahid is doing what she can to help a new generation follow in her father's footsteps, through the Wahid Foundation. It involves "trying to . . . identify these young leaders, young clerics with same-minded beliefs, and connect them with one another and provide them with something, a house, so that they can come out and speak. An army of able, dedicated young men who can talk in a unified message of tolerant and peaceful Islam."



That's an ambitious project, and Ms. Wahid says Indonesia cannot prepare for the future without help. It needs foreign investors "willing to take the risk," and more contact with the West on every level--including contact as rudimentary as instruction in English that will enable people to pull themselves out of poverty. The Wahid Foundation, for instance, has a program that tries to arrange micro-loans in rural communities.

She's not surprised when I point out that calling for foreign investment in a country with Indonesia's financial reputation is a tall order. "This is a difficult period for us," she admits, "but this is a win-win situation for all. We have all these resources, we have a population of 220 million, a big market. As for rule of law . . . we're trying to simplify the bureaucracy, the red tape and there have been many corruption cases brought to court. The wheels of justice are starting."

Given the threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism, ignoring Indonesia could quickly become a lose-lose situation. If for no other reason, she says, "the world has an interest in making Indonesia a stable country politically and economically so that people do not entertain this idea that an Islamic state is a solution to their problems. When people are hungry, when people are poor, they can do drastic things."

One could argue that by openly resisting the ideology of Islamic extremists, Ms. Wahid herself is taking a drastic step, albeit one born of courage, not desperation. When I asked her where she got the strength to speak the truth at a time when many prefer to remain silent, she beamed and said: "This is the real thing that defines people of faith. I have faith in God. That's enough for my father, and enough for myself."

Ms. Smith is a member of the Journal's editorial board.