

ABDURRAHMAN WAHID

There is no priesthood in Islam. Instead, the authority to guide believers is vested in scholars, men who command the religion's holy language of Arabic and a vast repertoire of Muslim Scripture, exegesis, and law. On Java, such men are known as *kyai*, and the institution through which they dominate the island's spiritual life is the school, specifically a kind of religious boarding school known as the *pesantren*. In the many centuries during which Islam has nested and thrived on Java, boys and youths from devout families have been sent to such schools to learn the rudiments of their religion, its special language, and the habits of a good Muslim life. Thus, as masters of the *pesantren*, *kyai* have shaped the educations and worldviews of generation after generation of Javanese believers and mentored the talented few to become authoritative scholars and *pesantren* masters in their own right. And always conspicuous among the talented few have been their own sons.

So conspicuous, in fact, that by tradition these boys are accorded the special "title" or childhood honorific of *gus*, as in Gus Dur—the nickname by which Abdurrahman Wahid is today known to millions of Indonesians. This popular nickname reminds them of Wahid's special lineage, for he is the scion of one of Java's most prestigious and influential *kyai* families. Moreover, to many devout Javanese Muslims, Wahid's genealogy denotes much more than prestige and influence: it is sacred.

The dominating figure in the modern branch of Abdurrahman Wahid's family tree was his paternal grandfather, Hashim Ashari. Hashim Ashari was himself the son, grandson, and great grandson of *pesantren* founders. Under the tutelage of his *kyai* father, Hashim Ashari showed exceptional intellectual and spiritual prowess as a boy, as well befits a *gus*; by age thirteen, he was already teaching students much older than himself. He spent seven years studying in Mecca and, in 1899, founded a school of his own, Pesantren Tebuireng, in Jombang, East Java. There he specialized in training advanced students. In the early twentieth century, Wahid says, Hashim Ashari's school was the true "center of excellence" among all Java's religious academies.

Under Hashim Ashari's direction, Pesantren Tebuireng pioneered in applying Western models to Islamic education. The *madrrasah* system, for example, introduced graded "classroom learning" to the school

beginning in 1916. From 1919 onwards, Tebuireng offered training in secular subjects such as geography, mathematics, and the Indonesian language to complement its religious curriculum, adding history and Dutch in 1926. (Java had been partially or wholly dominated by the Dutch for some three hundred years. By the early twentieth century, it was the centerpiece of Holland's giant tropical colony known as Netherlands India, or the Dutch East Indies.) Pesantren Tebuireng was thus both a center for advanced Islamic scholarship and a leading institutional innovator. As its graduates prospered in creating new *pesantrens* of their own, Tebuireng became known as Java's Mother Pesantren. Throughout his life, Hashim Ashari remained the school's presiding figure and cast a huge shadow over the *pesantren* world. Such was his reputation for scholarship, wisdom, and holiness that he was accorded the title Hadratus Shaikh, or Grand Islamic Scholar.

Beyond this, the figure of Abdurrahman's paternal grandfather looms large over the Javanese Muslim community for another reason. In 1926, Hashim Ashari took the lead in founding a religious organization that would play an important role in Java's history for the rest of the century. This was Nahdlatul Ulama (Rise of the Islamic Scholars), or NU, as it came widely to be known.

At the time, great debates were rocking the world of Islam. Reformers such as the Egyptian Muhammad Abduh taught that, in order for Muslims to adapt successfully to the modern world, Islam should be shorn of centuries of stultifying tradition and restored to its pure, original teachings. Reason, not tradition, should guide modern Muslims in the application of these teachings. This point of view gained many adherents among Indonesians, who inveighed against local practices and beliefs that they deemed not authentically Islamic. These included the reading of certain ritual prayers, the veneration of Muslim saints and their holy tombs, and adherence to one of the four traditional Muslim schools of law, or *madhab*. By the mid-1920s, so-called modernist ideas were being propagated to great effect by a large Indies-wide organization called Muhammadiyah (founded in 1912), as well as by other new groups.

Hashim Ashari was himself an innovator and modernist of a kind. But he did not subscribe to this particular school of reform. Instead, he reaffirmed the validity of Java's Sunni tradition, in which the tolerant teachings of the Shafii school of law was dominant. He defended the authority of the works of theology, exegesis, and law that had formed the basis of Muslim knowledge and belief for generations of *kyais*—the so-called Yellow Books familiar to all *pesantren* students. He founded Nahdlatul Ulama to harness the collective influence of Java's *kyais* and their *pesantrens* to strengthen their position against the modernists and, at the same time, to improve *pesantren* education and to advance the interests of Java's millions

of village believers. Under his guidance, Nahdlatul Ulama blossomed into an organization of great, enduring influence.

Hashim Ashari married seven times, each time to a woman from a distinguished *kyai* family. One of his wives was also descended from Hasan Basri, a nobleman and one of the founders of the small kingdom of Mangkunegara in Central Java. This was the mother of Wahid Hashim, who became in turn the father of Abdurrahman Wahid. Wahid says of this grandmother that, although her husband Hashim Ashari was a famous *kyai*, she looked down on him because he came from a common family and practiced agriculture. (In fact, he held extensive farmlands, as was the practice among *kyais*.) When correcting her son, says Wahid, she would say, “Don’t do that. You have Mangkunegara blood in you. You have Hasan Basri blood.” And, pointing disparagingly at the revered Hadratus Shaikh, “Not just the blood of that farmer.”

Wahid’s grandmother saw personally to the education of her sons, supplementing the religious instruction they received from their father with private tutors and correspondence courses in subjects such as Dutch and typing. Like his father before him, Wahid Hashim was a child prodigy who mastered advanced religious texts in Arabic at a tender age and who began teaching during his teen years. Growing up amid the early stirrings of Indonesian nationalism, he became alert to the great issues of the day and subscribed to Indonesian and Arabic periodicals of widely disparate points of view. At seventeen he went to Mecca. When he returned, Wahid Hashim established a new *madrasah* at Pesantren Tebuireng that emphasized secular subjects. He also established a library where students could keep abreast of the latest magazines and newspapers and of the great hopes and arguments that marked the times.

These hopes and arguments soon gripped Wahid Hashim himself. He abandoned his new *madrasah* to join the leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama in 1938. Two years later, he was elected chairman of Majlis Islam A’laa Indonesia (MIAI)—the Indonesian Muslim Supreme Council—a federation in which the colony’s contending Muslim organizations joined hands to promote Islam as the guiding element of Indonesian nationalism. It was just at this time that Wahid Hashim married Solechah, daughter of *pesantren* master Kyai Bisri Shamsuri. Abdurrahman Wahid was the couple’s first child, born in Jombang on 4 August 1940, just a year and a half before Java and the whole of the Dutch East Indies were swept abruptly into the Second World War.

Japan seized the Indies in early 1942 and set out quickly to win the allegiance of its new subjects. Indonesian nationalists, most of them, greeted the Japanese hopefully. The new conquerors had cast away the Dutch after all, and they promised a new age of dignity and prosperity for Asians. Despite their lofty promises, however, the Japa-

nese had only limited resources. They needed local collaborators to execute their occupation of the islands. Among those they courted were leaders of the territory's large Muslim organizations. Wahid's grandfather and father moved cautiously to protect NU and its rural followers under the new dispensation. In 1943, Hashim Ashari agreed to become chairman of the Consultative Council of Indonesian Muslims (Masjumi) under Japanese sponsorship. The following year the Japanese named him chief of its Office of Religious Affairs. But as he preferred to stay at Teburing, Hashim Ashari filled both these posts in absentia and Wahid Hashim acted in his stead.

As Japan's fortunes began to turn and Indonesian nationalists faced the imminent possibility of independence, Wahid Hashim joined the committee charged with drafting his would-be nation's first constitution. And when Sukarno declared Indonesia independent in August 1945, Wahid Hashim was named to its first cabinet. In the fight with the Dutch that followed, Hashim Ashari issued two authoritative religious opinions, or *fatwas*, that helped mobilize Java's legions of believers for the cause. He forbade Indonesian Muslims to use Dutch ships to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. And, more importantly, he proclaimed that Indonesia's war against the Dutch was a holy war, or *jihad*.

The Japanese Occupation (1942-1945) and the Indonesian Revolution (1945-1949) formed the backdrop of Abdurrahman Wahid's early life. However, little of the turbulence reached Pesantren Tebuireng, where he spent most of these years. As a little boy, he could scarcely be aware of the momentous roles being played by his grandfather and his often absent father. Instead, he simply enjoyed being Gus Dur, a little prince of the *pesantren*. At the age of six, however, these indulgences came to an end when Wahid's grandfather insisted that he come to live with him. Hashim Ashari's house was only a few hundred yards from his mother's, but he was subjected to stricter discipline there. Wahid was already attending the public elementary school nearby. Now, after a long morning at school, he was also expected to report to his grandfather for his initiation into the mysteries of Arabic and the Koran. Thus, daily, he recited his lessons to his stern but loving grandfather who, as he recalls, "was impassioned by small mistakes."

Now in his mid-seventies, Hashim Ashari was the most venerated *kyai* on Java. People flocked to him for his advice and blessings; young Wahid watched in awe as "he received guests continuously everyday." Some of these guests were emissaries from General Sudirman and other leaders of the independence struggle, including Sukarno himself. For two years, Gus Dur sat at his grandfather's feet and hovered unselfconsciously in his aura. These were the last two years of Hashim Ashari's life. He died in 1947.

Wahid continued attending primary school as the Indonesian revolution unfolded, except during the final year of 1949 when classes

were suspended. When victory came at last, Wahid's father became independent Indonesia's first minister of religious affairs. The family moved to Jakarta and occupied an official residence. Wahid completed grammar school there. To supplement his formal schoolwork, Wahid's father sent him bicycling down the street for private lessons in Dutch. His instructor, Willem Buhler, was a German who had converted to Islam and was known locally as Iskandar. In addition to teaching him Dutch, Buhler instilled in the boy a wonder for Western classical music that he carried joyfully into adulthood.

In his final year of primary school, Wahid won a citywide writing contest and received his prize at the municipal stadium from the governor himself. Then, in April 1953, just a few months before graduating, he joined his father for a motor trip to the West Java highlands to attend the inauguration of a new *madrrasah*. Somewhere along the mountain road between Cimahi and Bandung, the car crashed. Wahid himself was barely injured, but his father was killed.

Wahid Hashim's death was a great blow to the family. His wife Solechah was three months pregnant at the time and already caring for four children. It was partly with the thought of easing the burden on his distraught mother that, later that year, Wahid asked permission to strike out on his own. He proposed to go to Yogyakarta and study at Krapyak, a renowned *pesantren* much respected by his father and grandfather. His wish was granted and, at the age of thirteen, Gus Dur embarked upon his first adventure as a "wandering scholar."

The *pesantrens* Tebuireng and Krapyak enjoyed a long-standing relationship. And as a *gus*, Wahid was afforded special access to Krapyak's master, Kyai Ali Ma'sum. Indeed, his maternal grandfather, Kyai Bisri Shamsuri, accompanied him to Krapyak and introduced him personally. But Wahid found life at the *pesantren* too confining and begged to live in the city instead. With his mother's help, he found lodgings in the home of one Haji Junaidi, a local Muhammadiyah leader, and enrolled in Yogyakarta's Economic Junior High School. Thus settled, Wahid soon immersed himself in a daily routine. Early in the mornings, he studied with Kyai Ma'sum at Krapyak; in the afternoons, he attended junior high school; and in the evenings, he enjoyed the company of Haji Junaidi and other Muhammadiyah-linked intellectuals. His world was expanding.

Although run by the Roman Catholic Church, the Economic Junior High School offered a completely secular curriculum. Here Wahid studied English for the first time. Recognizing his talent, his teacher Madame Rupiah spurred him to master the language and to read as often as he could. In a year or two he was devouring one book after the other. Wahid still brightens as he remembers discovering the famous works of Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and William Faulkner. ("The most difficult," he says, was Faulkner. "But I was intrigued by his chronicle of the Sartoris family—how, in three generations, the Sartoris family degenerated.") He read at random, any

tome he could find in Yogyakarta's used-book stalls: Johan Huizinga, André Malraux, José Ortega y Gasset. For a while he was mad about anything Russian. He read Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky. *And Quiet Flows the Don*, by Mikhail Sholokhov, became one of his favorites. (Such books were being distributed free in Indonesia by the Soviet Embassy.) He plowed through volumes of Will Durant's *The Story of Civilization*. Now and then he reported his progress to Madame Rupiah. "Good, good, good," she would say. It was Madame Rupiah herself who introduced him to André Gide, whose novel *Strait Is the Gate* so moved him that, years later, he named his first child Alissa after its heroine.

Wahid shared his excitement with his pal Saimo, a fellow student who lived near the railroad station. He realized that Saimo did not really understand a lot of what he was saying, but the two teens enjoyed a happy camaraderie. "I would stay at his place for hours," says Wahid, "telling him what the books said." For his part, Saimo told Wahid about his ideas and activities as a member of the Pemuda Rakyat (People's Youth), a communist youth movement: helping the peasants, lifting the poor. Wahid was sympathetic without really knowing much about communism per se, just as he now suspects that good-hearted Saimo himself was also largely ignorant of the movement's true philosophy and aims. In Saimo's neighborhood, he says, vague utopian notions labeled "communist" were simply in the air.

At the time, President Sukarno's friendly relations with communist states and his fiery, revolution-tinged rhetoric were creating a fertile ground for such ideas. The Communist Party of Indonesia (Indonesian acronym, PKI) was growing rapidly and, in the elections of 1955, captured thirty-nine seats in Parliament, just six fewer than Nahdlatul Ulama. One of Wahid's teachers, Pak Sumantri, was a PKI member. When he learned that Wahid could read English, he gave him a copy of Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* ("a very practical guide to revolution," recalls Wahid) and, later on, an Indonesian translation of another of Lenin's books. Wahid absorbed it all and, at the same time, listened avidly as NU student leaders and intellectuals critiqued the communists and explored Islam's alternatives for solving his country's myriad problems.

Amid these intellectual stimulations, Wahid found fun and relaxation at the movies. After his early morning sessions studying Arabic with Kyai Ma'sum, he would mount his bicycle and race to the cinema house four kilometers away. Yogyakarta at the time offered a surprisingly wide range of films from Europe and North America. He watched comedies, dramas, crime stories. "Movies everyday!" he remembers gleefully. At some point he saw Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*. And he loved American westerns such as *Shane*, *High Noon*, and *Stage Coach*.

Wahid's Yogyakarta idyll came to an end in 1957 when he graduated from junior high school. He embarked upon a period of inten-

sive religious training, for he hoped eventually to enter the ranks of his esteemed forebears and male relatives as a Muslim scholar in his own right—an *alim*. He was already proficient in some areas, including Arabic, by virtue of his early training at home and several years with Kyai Ma'sum. But during the next six years, at Pesantren Tegalrejo in Magelang, Central Java, and, later, Pesantren Tambak Beras in Jombang, Wahid worked his way through the senior stages of a *pesantren* education. This included the advanced study of the Koran and its exegesis (*tafsir*); of the *hadith*, or traditions surrounding the life and words of the Prophet Muhammad; of Muslim law and systems of law (*fiqh* and *usul fiqh*); of Islamic theology, ethics, and history (*tawhid*, *akhlaq*, and *tarikh*); of the finer points of Arabic language, literature, and rhetoric (*tajwid*, *adab*, *balaghah*); and of the Muslim mystic traditions, or Sufism (*tasawwuf*). By tradition, the study of these subjects in the Javanese *pesantren* proceeds through the mastery of certain hallowed Arabic texts of the Shafi'ite School (and their Javanese translations)—always in dialogue with one's teacher. Ordinarily, older students teach younger ones at the *pesantren*. But because he was a very special *gus*, Wahid received most of his training from senior scholars, if not from the *kyai* himself.

Pesantren Tegalrejo was led by Kyai Khodori. Wahid remembers him as a man of great humanitarian warmth and piety and a beloved spiritual mentor. It was Kyai Khodori who initiated him into the rites of the Sufi orders and other mystical and ritual practices deeply embedded in Javanese Islam. Under his guidance, Wahid began making pilgrimages to the sacred grave sites of Java's Muslim saints. This was done at certain ritually propitious times of the year—as when, for example, the day of *Legi*, one of five days in the Javanese week, coincided with *Jumaat* (Friday) on the seven-day-week Muslim calendar. On the Thursday before such a day, Wahid would fast and visit a nearby tomb called Candi Mulyo and recite the Koran and sacred prayers there. “And then,” he says, “I would go to another tomb about fifteen kilometers away, walking barefoot and clad in my sarong and pajama. I would cover about fifty kilometers in the next twenty-four hours, not sleeping at all. And in each place, at each venerated saint's tomb, I would recite many prayers.” Through such exercises one could deepen one's own spiritual insights. But Kyai Khodori also encouraged them as a way of dramatizing the role of *kyai* as spiritual leaders among the people and of drawing poorly educated rural folk into the fold of practicing believers. (It was just this sort of practice that Indonesia's religious modernists tended to stigmatize as relics of Java's pre-Islamic past.)

Kyai Khodori imbued Pesantren Tegalrejo with his “love for people and for his students,” says Wahid. And although Kyai Khodori was demonstrably upright and pious, he also loved to host joyful celebrations before the fasting month and at graduation time. At such times, says Wahid, Kyai Khodori would provide food, drink, and all sorts of

entertainment: gamelan orchestras, martial arts demonstrations, and local dance performances that involved shamanistic trance rites, “including this fellow who ate glass.”

After three years with Kyai Khodori, Wahid moved back to Jombang and took up residence at Pesantren Tambak Beras, not far from Tebuireng. Here his uncle Kyai Abdul Fatta presided. Wahid was nearly twenty and already an *ustad*, meaning a senior student who also teaches. Abdul Fatta named him constable of the *pesantren*. Life at Tambak Beras was highly regulated. Students were required to go to bed and to rise at certain hours; to pray at the prescribed hour five times a day; to attend certain study sessions; and to take their turns on guard duty. They were required to wear appropriate clothing and to avoid long hair and necklaces. And they were forbidden to consort “freely” with girls or women, to scale the fence surrounding the school, and to be rowdy at night or in public. And so on. Older boys acting as prefects policed the younger ones. As constable, Wahid was the chief enforcer. He was also responsible for guarding against theft and other breaches of *pesantren* security. It was while acting in this capacity, Wahid says, that he learned a critical lesson from Kyai Abdul Fatta.

A certain boy had been caught again and again committing petty offences, such as stealing coconuts from a neighbor’s tree. One day he climbed onto the roof of a dormitory, pried a tile loose, and, using a long stick with a nail on the end of it, fished all the clothing hanging on wall pegs up onto the rooftop. “As a prank, of course,” says Wahid. When the boy fell to the ground, he was caught. Exasperated with his repeated infractions, the council of prefects decided he should be expelled. Wahid conveyed this to his uncle. Kyai Abdul Fatta’s response caught him off guard. “You should remember, my son,” he said, “that this boy’s father brought him to me because he was hopeless at home. He hoped the boy would improve here. And while he has not yet improved, we send him home? It is a breach of trust.” The venerable *kyai* then summoned the boy. “Take that room in my house,” he said. He made the boy his constant companion, day in and day out. “And do you know what happened?” Wahid asks. “That boy now has his own *pesantren* with two thousand students! The gradual approach to human beings, not shock therapy, is the best thing. That is my conviction.”

By the early 1960s, tensions on Java between communist-affiliated organizations and Muslim ones were highly inflamed. Nahdlatul Ulama, in which Wahid’s maternal grandfather and uncles were leaders, was fiercely anticommunist and engaged in a multifaceted power struggle with the nascent PKI. This power struggle reached deep into the island’s towns and villages and was particularly intense in East Java. Year by year the number of violent clashes grew. By 1963, they threatened to breach the calm and security of the region’s

famous *pesantrens*. It was part of Wahid's responsibility at Tambak Beras to keep *pesantren* boys out of the fray, and for the time being he succeeded. But just beyond the *pesantren* walls, politics was spilling into the streets.

Wahid was twenty-two. He now contemplated the next essential step in his education as an *alim*, which included a pilgrimage to Mecca and further advanced studies in the Middle East. Wahid longed to study at Egypt's famed Al Azhar University. As he laid his plans, Kyai Abdul Fatta raised the delicate question of marriage. Very likely, the *kyai* explained to him, you will be away for a long time, so it is perhaps better to choose a wife now. When you return, it may be harder to find just the right person. "If you choose a pretty face," the *kyai* said, "you won't get the brain; the girls will be too young. But if you choose the brain, you won't get the face," he said, implying that the pretty girls of his age group would already be married.

"Who then, Uncle?" Wahid asked.

"Ah," he said, "there is Haji Zakul's daughter."

This was Shinta Nuriyah. Wahid already knew her because she was one of several hundred female students who attended classes at Pesantren Tambak Beras's *madrasah* for girls, where he occasionally instructed.

As it happens, Haji Zakul and Wahid played chess together regularly at the NU branch office in Jombang. So it was over a game of chess that Wahid spoke of his plans to study abroad and asked for the hand of Shinta Nuriyah. Haji Zakul said that he would agree to the marriage, and the family, too. But his daughter was still in school. "Please be patient," he said. Shinta Nuriyah did indeed wish to complete her education. She would wait for him, she promised, but she would not yet marry him. Thus betrothed, Wahid set out for a sojourn abroad that would last much longer than he originally anticipated.

Wahid set sail for the Middle East bearing a copy of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Age of Jackson* to read during his journey. He departed from Indonesia on the same day in November 1963 that American president John F. Kennedy was assassinated in the city of Dallas—an event that would captivate and obsess him. In Egypt, he was disappointed to learn that he had been enrolled in the Higher Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies at Al Azhar University. The institute specialized in training virtual beginners, and Wahid soon discovered that he had already covered nearly the entire curriculum while still in Java. "I was bored," he says, "fed up with the whole thing." So while carrying on at the institute in a desultory fashion, he reverted to the *modus operandi* of his Yogyakarta days. He haunted the libraries at the University of Cairo and the United States Information Agency and the bookstalls of the city and consumed everything he could find about John F. Kennedy, plus novel after novel and any number of works on history, philosophy, and music. Almost

daily he went to the movies. He discovered the French New Wave and enjoyed the films of Francois Truffaut, Alain Resnais, and Jean Luc Goddard. When he could, he indulged his love for classical music.

Many of these things he could have done in any cosmopolitan city, but there was one great boon to being in Egypt at the time. Under Gamal Abdel Nasser, the country's dynamic nationalist hero and president, Cairo was experiencing something of an intellectual golden age. The free exchange of ideas flourished. In books and newspaper columns and over the airwaves, Egyptian proponents of an Islamic state vied openly with the country's socialists—a debate that held much interest for Wahid. He followed it avidly and developed a great respect for Egypt's modern Muslim thinkers.

Meanwhile, Wahid stayed in close touch with other Indonesian students living in Cairo and became vice-chairman of the local Indonesian Students Association. At home, political conflict between the surging communists and their opponents was reaching fever pitch. A certain Colonel Iskandar, an Indonesian military officer posted to Cairo, befriended Wahid and kept him informed about the alarming developments. In August 1965, Indonesia's ambassador to Egypt asked Wahid to attend a conference in Bucharest for Indonesian students studying in Europe. It was well known that the conference was controlled by an Indonesian communist youth group. Shortly before, D.N. Aidit, the leader of the PKI, had challenged its youth wing to shut down the country's powerful anticommunist youth organization, the Indonesian University Students Association, or HMI. The Bucharest conference consisted of one diatribe after another against the HMI. "I was the only one to resist," says Wahid. "And I was booed every time I took the rostrum."

In Indonesia, the dam broke on 30 September 1965. On that day, a coup attempt launched from within the Indonesian armed forces (and subsequently blamed on the communists) set in train a series of events that toppled President Sukarno, brought General Suharto and the army to power, and resulted in the virtual annihilation of the PKI and its sympathizers. In the months that followed, five hundred thousand or more Indonesian communists and leftists and ethnic Chinese were massacred.

Wahid and his friends first heard about the coup over the radio and from newspaper reports. About a week later, the Indonesian ambassador returned from a trip to Jakarta with more detailed news. But what had happened and what was currently happening were still far from clear. (Indeed, much remains obscure up to today.) Wahid called a meeting of the students' association to talk things over. On the one hand, he says, "We were just trying to understand." He urged his friends not to rush to judgment and to try to see the communists in a human context. "It's not them or us," he remembers telling them. On the other hand, Wahid *did* oppose much of what the communists stood for. So when Colonel Iskandar asked him to compose

a rebuttal to a postcoup communist pamphlet for the association's newsletter, he did so.

Bit by bit, more news seeped in from home. There were newspaper reports and briefings from the Indonesian embassy and visitors from Indonesia, including emissaries from NU. It became clear that the anticommunist rampage had been intense in East Java. Wahid learned to his horror that *pesantren* youth in Jombang had participated in the ad hoc execution squads. One of his own cousins had gone "wild" in a killing spree. He asked himself, "How could things have gotten so out of control?" To him, Islam was the religion of peace. "I realized," he says, "that Islam can also be used to support a political agenda and, in that capacity, it can be destructive." (He never learned the fate of his Yogyakarta friend Saimo.)

Wahid's attendance at Al Azhar University was irregular at best. But in 1966 he received an Alamiyyah degree acknowledging that he had achieved the stature of a Muslim scholar, or *alim*. The certificate was awarded to him, he says, by one of his teachers without his ever having to take an examination. He now moved on to Iraq, a country that is the modern heir to one of Islam's great civilizations. Here under legendary kings such as Harun al-Rashid and others of the Abbasid caliphate (750-1258), Muslim Baghdad became a flourishing center of the arts and sciences. Wahid steeped himself in its aura.

As a student in the department of religion at Baghdad University between 1966 and 1970, Wahid found the intellectual stimulation that he had missed in Egypt. It was in Baghdad, he says, "that I began to think systematically." Here the Arabic Muslim classics were "studied empirically and dissected by the surgical knives of methodology." This he found exciting and rewarding. At the same time, Wahid pored over the great books of Western Orientalist scholarship. To his surprise, the university's library also contained many books about Indonesia. He read them all.

Outside the university, he sought out the wise men who gathered at the tombs of saints, including the tomb of Abd al-Qadir I-Jilani, founder of the Qadiriyya mystical brotherhood. He attended a famous Shi'ite passion play and pondered the cleavage between the Shi'ites, who dominated in Iraq, and Indonesia's Sunnis. And he immersed himself in the teachings of Iman Junaid al Bagdadi, whose formulation of Sufi meditation was the one adopted by Nahdlatul Ulama. Through all of this, Wahid says, "I found the source of my spirituality."

Wahid's years at Baghdad University coincided with a political revolution in Iraq. The monarchy had been overthrown bloodily in 1958. Other coups followed in 1963 and 1968, resulting in the ascendance of the Baathist Party under General Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr, who ruled with little tolerance for dissent and none for open opposition. Still, Wahid was intrigued by the positive power of Arab

nationalism. One of the rising stars who caught his imagination was Saddam Hussein.

Saddam had studied law at Cairo University and was later jailed for his political activities in Iraq. He subsequently escaped. Wahid admired the fact that Saddam had “courageously involved himself in revolutionary work” and that he promoted populist causes such as workers’ and farmers’ cooperatives. In the post-1968 government, Saddam became deputy chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council and was known to be intriguing with the armed forces and the security apparatus. It was during this period that Wahid was introduced to the brutal underside of Iraqi politics.

He had become acquainted with a certain sheikh named Aziz Badri, who instructed students at a small mosque. One day, Aziz was taken away by the security people, says Wahid. “He was returned in a coffin.” The authorities said that Aziz had died in a car crash and warned the family not to open the coffin. His relatives were in a quandary. Had the body been cleansed for burial in the proper Muslim way, they wondered. Secretly they opened the box to find Aziz Badri’s body covered with burns from an electric iron. Wahid was shocked by this evidence of torture and his “first inkling of Saddam Hussein’s temperament.”

After finishing his course in Baghdad in 1970, Wahid hoped to enroll in a European university for graduate studies. He set off on a journey to explore the possibilities, visiting in turn the universities of Cologne, Heidelberg, Paris, and Leiden. Each one, he discovered, had stringent language requirements that he could not meet without investing in years of additional study. (To take Classics at Cologne, for example, he would have to qualify not only in German but also in Hebrew as well as in Greek or Latin.) So he became an itinerant scholar instead, moving from one university to another, “half a month here, half a month there,” and lodging with local resident Indonesians.

He landed finally in Holland, where he lived for six months and founded a Muslim students association for Indonesian and Malaysian students living in Europe. (“It still survives,” he says.) To help pay his expenses, twice a month Wahid went to the docks to find work loading and unloading ships. Sunday was the best day, he discovered, since the pay was twice that of a normal weekday. Moreover, on Sunday night wages doubled again. With such a windfall, he says, “working one day was enough.”

Wahid’s sojourn abroad came to an end in June 1971 when he returned at last to Java. In the seven long years of his absence, Shinta Nuriyah had completed her university studies at the National Institute for Islamic Studies (IAIN) in Jogjakarta. The two had been corresponding avidly all the while, using Javanese, the native tongue they shared. “By the time I came back,” he says, “we already knew each other very well.” In fact, legally speaking, they were already

married. This had come about in 1968, when Wahid's brother expressed a desire to get married. By custom he could not marry ahead of his older brother, however. The problem was solved when Shinta and the respective families agreed to formalize her legal union with Wahid, with the groom in absentia. Thus, when marriage rites were finally performed for Shinta and Wahid on 29 September 1971, it was largely a formality. Alissa, their first of four daughters, was born the following June. (She was followed by Zannuba in 1974, Anita in 1977, and Inayah in 1982.)

Wahid now possessed intellectual credentials to match his famous lineage. His youthful wanderings over, and a married man of thirty-one, he embarked on his mature career. He did so in a country that had changed dramatically in his absence. The political turbulence that had marked the years of his youth had been stilled. The army and General Suharto, now president, had imposed a New Order. The country's once nascent communists had either been slaughtered or incarcerated or were simply lying low; their party was now illegal. Some of the old political parties still existed, however, and Nahdlatul Ulama was among them. In elections held in 1971, it pitted its strength against Golkar, a new party dominated by President Suharto and made up of the country's "functional groups" and civil servants. Thus, although NU's leaders had generally welcomed the New Order's rise to power, the 1971 elections placed them in clear opposition to it. NU won nearly 19 percent of the vote, the strongest showing by any religious party. But Golkar swept the election. Afterwards, Suharto replaced his Nahdlatul Ulama minister of religious affairs with someone from another party—a harbinger of things to come.

Tension between the government and NU and other Muslim groups was exacerbated in 1973 over issues surrounding a new marriage law. In the same year, the government required all Islamic parties to unite into a single party, the United Development Party (PPP). Nahdlatul Ulama was thus paired with its rival Muhammadiyah. All remaining parties were united in another single party, the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI). Strict rules governed the activities of these two government-formed "opposition" parties. They were forbidden to campaign openly except for a brief period prior to elections, for example, and the government held veto power over their candidates. Yusuf Hashim, Wahid's uncle, became vice-chairman of PPP, which won 29 percent of the vote in the national elections of 1977—not nearly enough to weaken the hold of Suharto's Golkar. In the following elections of 1982, Yusuf Hashim himself was disqualified as a national assembly candidate.

As the New Order government became ever more domineering and entrenched, the leaders of Nahdlatul Ulama found themselves in a dilemma. They asked themselves: What is best for us? To compromise and collaborate, or to dissent and oppose? This was an

issue about which Wahid would eventually have much to say. For the time being, however, he devoted himself primarily to teaching.

In 1971, he joined the faculty of Hashim Ashari University, a center for higher learning in the Islamic sciences that had been founded by Yusuf Hashim at Tebuireng in 1969. There Wahid taught theology and other advanced subjects. Beginning in 1974, he also became secretary of Pesantren Tebuireng, in effect the school's operating manager. During the same years, moreover, Wahid established himself as a prolific writer of newspaper and magazine columns, developing a style that combined lively language and humor with serious topics. (This sideline became a boon. "I've made my living from writing ever since," he says.)

Just as Pesantren Tebuireng was a family affair, so was Nahdlatul Ulama. Wahid's maternal grandfather, Kyai Bisri Shamsuri, now occupied the organization's highest post. He began to draw Wahid in. By the early 1980s, Wahid had become first secretary of NU's Religious Council and was intensely involved in its discussions and debates. President Suharto still feared the opposition of Indonesia's large Muslim organizations and acted relentlessly to undermine their residual authority. As a result, NU remained locked in an antagonistic relationship with the government. At the same time, it was also locked in an uncomfortable political partnership with Muhammadiyah in the PPP. NU's leaders felt frustrated and trapped.

Then, in 1983, a crisis. In that year, the government announced that all Indonesian organizations must adopt Pancasila as their *asas tunggal*, or "sole basis." Pancasila is the Indonesian state doctrine, originally formulated by Sukarno and adopted as part of the constitution in 1945. Stated simply, its five principles are: (1) belief in one God; (2) humanitarianism; (3) national unity; (4) democracy through consultation and consensus; and (5) social justice. As a testament of national ideals, these broad principles troubled no one; indeed, they were widely revered. (Sukarno had agreed to place "belief in one God" first, in deference to Muslim leaders such as Wahid Hashim.) But for NU and other Muslim groups, *Islam* was the fundamental doctrine of their organizations. (As was Christianity for Christian groups.) So when President Suharto required all organizations to adopt Pancasila as their sole basis, he was striking a blow not only at their independence but also, it seemed, at their deepest beliefs. How can we reject Islam in favor of Pancasila? they asked. Bitter arguments ensued.

Within NU, Wahid was assigned to talk with the government, while Ahmad Siddiq, a senior *kyai*, was entrusted to confer with the *kyais*. The *kyais* agreed that if their organization could have only one basis (*asas tunggal*), then that basis must be Islam. Wahid perceived that the crux of the problem was the all-embracing meaning attached to *asas tunggal*. He pondered this and took it up with Ahmad Siddiq and other NU insiders as well as with some Christian clerics.

“In the end, I worked closely with the Catholics,” he says. “And we decided to have a new understanding of *asas*.” Wahid then approached the government with this compromise: We will acknowledge Pancasila as “the legal and constitutional and ideological basis—the *asas*—for our organization,” he said. “But Islam will be our *aqidah*, or creed.” Wahid’s and Siddiq’s solution rested upon making a distinction between the “political realm” of laws, organizations, and ideologies, on the one hand, and the “cultural realm” of beliefs and creeds, on the other. When the government agreed that NU could have both an *asas* and an *aqidah*, the impasse was resolved. At its national congress in 1984—at which Siddiq and Wahid were elected to the organization’s two highest posts—NU became the first of Indonesia’s religious organizations to adopt Pancasila as its organizational basis. The others followed.

Although some critics viewed NU’s decision as little more than a deft capitulation, Wahid saw it in a positive light, for he did indeed embrace Pancasila. Its principles comported entirely with his own vision for Indonesia. For this reason, he believed that setting Muslims against it in a power struggle with President Suharto was self-defeating. In the long run, Pancasila was an ally.

At the same 1984 national congress, NU took another dramatic step, also largely at Wahid’s instigation. For several years, the organization’s involvement in partisan politics had yielded few positive gains. Given the country’s current power structure, there was virtually no chance that NU could advance its interests through elections. Just the opposite, it seemed, since being in politics subjected its members to regular harassment by the authorities. And as oppositionists, many NU members were cut off from government funds for education and development. In addition, NU’s links to the PPP were troubled. “We were demoralized,” Wahid says. Moreover, the most fundamental interests of NU’s *kyais* were not truly political: “They lay in the preservation of the *pesantrens*, mosques, religious congregations—those things.” The time had come, said Wahid, for NU to get out of politics.

He and Siddiq formulated the decision to do so as a return to the organization’s original 1926 charter. Instead of politics, NU would now concentrate on religious, educational, and social programs. While appearing again to be a capitulation to Indonesia’s domineering government, this decision was liberating in Wahid’s view. By eliminating itself as a contender for power through elections, NU had escaped from the narrowly circumscribed realm of New Order “politics” and placed itself instead within the broader, freer realm of Indonesian “society.” Thus, in the years to come, as Wahid became a vocal advocate of reform, he would cast himself not as a politician but simply as the leader of a socioreligious organization—albeit one with more than thirty million members. As Java’s best-born *gus*, this was a part he was born to play.

Officially speaking, however, Wahid occupied only NU's second highest position. As chairman of its administrative arm, the Tanfidziyah, he was its managing director. But he also held an ex-officio seat on the governing Religious Council, or Syuriah, and was the confidante of its nonagenarian chairman Ahmad Siddiq. So positioned, Wahid now emerged as the most dynamic thinker and actor among NU's senior leaders.

Among Indonesia's religious organizations, NU is usually construed as "traditional." This is because it eschewed the call of Islam's late-nineteenth century modernists to strip the religion of centuries of intervening interpretation and to return to the original Truth of the Koran and the *hadith*. Instead, NU's *kyais* continued to believe that God's Truth was subtle and, although unchanging, amenable to fresh examination as times and circumstances changed. In this process, the wisdom of great thinkers was invaluable. Hence, they continued to consult the hallowed Yellow Books by al-Shafii, al-Ghazali, al-Suyuti, and other revered authorities that formed the basis of a *pesantren* education. Critics of NU's approach said that its present-day theologians, jurists, and philosophers were victims of *taqlid*, an unthinking reverence for hoary authorities of the past. This is a common error, Wahid admits, but it is not an error that characterizes the best of the *pesantren* tradition. Properly plumbed and with the application of *ijtihad*, or rationality, he says, the old texts can produce new insights. In Wahid's case, such insights were also informed by years of voracious, eclectic reading and travel and his exposure to Western liberal ideas.

In the 1970s, Wahid was one of a handful of young Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia who were contending with a common set of problems. (Many of the others were Western educated and some held Ph.D.'s from North American universities. Wahid was unusual in this group because his Western education was largely self-taught.) Among the issues they grappled with were two of overarching importance: the first concerned what it means to be an Indonesian Muslim; the second concerned the proper relationship between Islam and the state.

A school of thought often associated with Indonesia's modernists asserted that although Islam expresses itself through many cultures around the world and is therefore everywhere different, this should not, properly speaking, be so. The differences, the embellishments, the local customs—argued adherents of this school—represented mutations of the One True Religion. Such "mutations" were particularly rife on Java, where Islam had rooted amid a deep and variegated Hindu-Buddhist culture and taken on many of its mysticism-tinged colorations. Such syncretisms should be rooted out, the modernists said. Nahdlatul Ulama's founders disagreed. Just as they continued to rely upon the authority of their old books, they also defended their old practices such as pilgrimages to the tombs of

saints and mystical rites, which they associated with their cherished Sufi orders.

Wahid certainly agreed with this point of view. He believed that many Javanese practices stigmatized as mysticism by the modernists actually had their origins in Sufi teachings, which were introduced to Java hundreds of years ago. Thus, even though they now seemed thoroughly Javanese—because, for example, the chants and prayers were spoken in Javanese, not Arabic—they had been fully Muslim to begin with. And even if certain practices did have their roots in Java's pre-Muslim religion, he added, they were not necessarily invalid, since they reflected the parallel but separate development of compatible religious visions. Wahid explained such processes using modern concepts. The interaction of Islam with local cultures around the world does not really change the essence of Islam, he said. It simply changes "the manifestation of Islam" in different cultural contexts. In other words, indigenization is a natural part of the history of Islam. Think of Islam as a huge river, he said. The practices that make Indonesian Islam distinctive are not outside the river, they are flowing within it.

As for the state, Indonesia's founders deliberately created a secular state in which no one religion was enshrined as the national religion. In a famous moment during the writing of the country's first constitution, they eliminated a passage that would have obligated the government to impose the Islamic law codes (*Shari'ah*) upon Muslims—at the same time elevating "belief in one God" to become Principle Number One of the Pancasila. (Wahid Hashim had assented to this compromise.) These decisions reflected the cultural realities of their nation-in-the-making; Indonesia was dauntingly diverse. Only the utmost commitment to tolerance would make unity possible.

Wahid passionately agreed with this principle. As Nahdlatul Ulama's chairman, he resisted all efforts by Indonesian Muslims, including NU members, to transform Indonesia into an Islamic state or to gain a privileged position for Muslims as a matter of law. An Islamic state in Indonesia, he argued, "is treason against the constitution because it will make non-Muslims second-class citizens. But an 'Indonesian society' where Muslims are strong . . . I think that is good." Instead of committing the government to enforce their religious laws, Indonesian Muslims should construe such laws as "social ethics" and implement them "through their own volition." If they did, Indonesia would be infused with the best values of Islam without denying any non-Muslim citizen his or her right to equal status under the law. This, he said, along with efforts to achieve equitable economic growth, would create the conditions necessary to promote democracy in Indonesia.

Wahid also addressed larger questions dealing with the nature of a true Islamic society. "How does it happen," he asked, "that pov-

erty is so prevalent among the Islamic peoples? Why, in the name of Islam, do unjust states persecute innocent people and mete out to them severe punishments? Why have women's rights been denied in Islamic communities throughout the centuries?" And how does one explain the fact "that Muslim mass leaders everywhere accommodate oppressive military governments . . . giving them legitimacy in the face of 'Communist threat' or 'the danger of Atheism'?" Wahid searched the Scriptures for answers and concluded that "the fundamental right of man to obtain a dignified life is meticulously formulated in both the Koran and the Prophetic traditions." Islam was "a liberating religion." Alas, over the centuries, the compassionate nature of the Prophet's teachings had been buried under a stifling tradition of legal formalism; the search for justice had given way to an obsession with rules. Among the Sufi scholars who challenged this tradition was Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111), someone particularly venerated by Wahid's famous grandfather Hashim Ashari and his disciples. Drawing upon al-Ghazali's teachings and others, Wahid concluded that what Islam truly enjoined its followers to do was "establish and develop a society in which justice, love, and compassion are the main ingredients."

As NU's national chairman, Wahid guided the organization to become a vital component in this hopeful process. For example, to promote tolerance between Muslims and non-Muslims (and between devout Muslims and the not-so-devout), he suggested that Indonesian Muslims need not adopt the Arabic and self-consciously Islamic phrase *As-salam alaykum* to greet each other. The traditional Indonesian *Selamat pagi* (Good morning) was just fine, he said. He openly expressed respect for schools of Islam that traditionally are anathema to NU's people, such as Mu'tazilah rationalism and Shia Islam. (He even suggested, provocatively, that certain Javanese Muslim practices have Shia roots.) He promoted the acceptance of women as judges in the religious courts, argued against the traditional Muslim custom of polygamy, and placed the weight of NU's religious authority behind the government's family-planning program. He publicly collaborated with Christians and other non-Muslims on matters of public interest and was known to speak frankly of Muslim shortcomings before Christian audiences. He warned Muslims to guard against stigmatizing Chinese Indonesians and against paranoid fantasies about a conspiracy to convert all Muslims to Christianity. Moreover, he consistently resisted and opposed efforts to favor Islam through the machinery of government.

A telling incident occurred in October 1990. A weekly entertainment magazine called *Monitor* conducted a popularity poll in which the Prophet Muhammad ranked eleventh. When the magazine's Christian editor (unwisely) published this fact, the magazine's offices were stoned, the *Monitor* was shut down, and its editor was jailed for blasphemy. Wahid stood virtually alone in condemning all this.

“It’s the duty of intellectuals to combat pressures to curb free speech, not the other way around,” he said.

Wahid also insisted that NU advance the material welfare of its members, and at “the lowest strata of society.” Increasingly, he tried to steer NU’s *kyai* away from a preoccupation with the minutiae of religious practice to the transformative potential of self-reliant community development. What he envisioned was thousands of NU villages creating cooperative-credit societies; installing clean water and sanitation systems; improving the health and welfare of their children; setting up livelihood projects and small enterprises and industries—all under the guidance of Nahdlatul Ulama and its local *pesantren*. In 1990, Wahid negotiated a joint venture between NU and the privately owned Summa Bank in order to capitalize such endeavors through a network of thousands of people’s credit banks.

An economic and social transformation at the grassroots level, Wahid said, would eventually transform Indonesian society at large—creating conditions favorable to a more equitable distribution of wealth, the preservation of natural resources, the rule of law, and the establishment of “a truly democratic government.”

This was Wahid’s vision for the future. For the time being, however, it was important for NU to maintain friendly ties with President Suharto’s New Order government. This mattered to NU constituents who hoped to partake of the government’s huge patronage outlays—for construction projects, for example. (A great many NU members are small businessmen.) And Wahid did not wish to provoke the government into steering development funds away from NU-linked villages and towns. He was therefore frankly accommodationist. This strategy reflected the Sunni political tradition of recognizing and cooperating with any *de facto* government for the good of believers. (Wahid’s grandfather Hashim Ashari, for example, had in 1935 acknowledged the Dutch as the legitimate rulers of the Indies.) In this spirit, in 1988, Wahid accepted an appointment to the People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR), the senior body that rubber-stamped Suharto’s state policies and his periodic reelection as president. And he did so as a member of Golkar, Suharto’s party. Moreover, on occasions when Wahid did criticize the government openly—as he did over the environmental impact of a huge World Bank-funded hydroelectric dam at Kedung Ombo—he sometimes backed down later and apologized. In the Kedung Ombo case, he did so personally to the president.

As NU’s putative leader, Wahid’s role is extremely complex. To say that he is NU’s executive director, for example, implies a degree of organizational structure that NU does not truly possess. Among its millions of members, the most important are the country’s six thousand or so *pesantren*-based *kyais* and their senior colleagues—the scholar-teachers and spiritual leaders of the *pesantren* world. They are linked to each other by ties of kinship and student-teacher

fealty and through their shared commitment to the values and traditions of *pesantren* Islam. But they certainly do not agree with each other on all religious and political matters; discussion and debate is a fundamental element of their subculture. Where NU matters are concerned, there are profound differences of opinion as well as powerful competing factions led by senior *kyais*. NU members formulate and express their ideas through a hierarchy of local, district, and provincial councils, culminating in nationwide meetings of senior *kyais* (during which questions of religious law and practice are adjudicated) and, every five years or so, a rambunctious national congress. At such meetings, power struggles within the organization are waged and resolved, although never wholly buried. In the process, NU charts its course.

To move the organization, therefore, Wahid cannot dictate. He must persuade its members high and low that his agenda is the correct one. He spends great amounts of time visiting NU branches, explaining his views and programs and responding to local complaints and issues. Such lobbying intensifies as national meetings approach. But Wahid also employs his considerable talent for persuasion in the wider realm of Indonesia's civil society. He is a prolific writer whose engaging columns and essays in magazines and newspapers carry his complex message to tens of thousands of influential readers, a great many of them unaffiliated with the *pesantren* world and NU. He addresses mass rallies. He spends endless hours caucusing quietly with students, writers, and intellectuals. He is interviewed for radio and television. He hobnobs with the country's glitterati and its political elite and is called to speak with the president. Gus Dur, in other words, has become a public figure. His portly frame and smiling, bespectacled face are instantly recognizable to millions of Indonesians.

In this multifaceted public role, Wahid's high lineage gives him exceptional authority. His own deep learning, intellect, and wit, even his quiriness, comport with Javanese expectations for such special people. It is in this sense that Wahid is truly charismatic: For millions of Javanese Muslims, he possesses a spiritual aura that is akin to magic—to be near him, to hear his words, to touch him confers a blessing (*barakah*).

Nahdlatul Ulama is an organization with highly conservative instincts, however, and Wahid's progressive ideas have frequently disturbed the rank and file. So, despite his stature and popularity, his leadership of the organization has been marked by controversy and by repeated attempts to replace him. Some *kyais* and NU politicians with favored ties to the PPP never forgave him for pulling NU out of the party. Others faulted him for usurping the authority of senior *kyais* and the Religious Council. (Until 1991, Wahid had a critical ally in Ahmad Siddiq as chairman of the council; and eventually he succeeded in promoting to the council *kyais* sympathetic to his views.)

Still others accused him of meddling in branch affairs, of being a publicity seeker, of being disloyal to Islam for consorting so openly with Christians. His refusal to condemn *Monitor* magazine infuriated many, as did his participation on a panel of judges for a film festival. Some said that his encouragement of critical analysis of *pesantren* Yellow Books was leading NU youth to shocking ideas, that his praise for taboo Muslim sects such as the Shi'ites was a betrayal of his *pesantren* roots, and so on. Indeed, at one national congress in 1989, a highly agitated delegate accused him publicly of being out to destroy Islam.

Where he can, Wahid mends fences. For example, when his insistence that Indonesian Islam need not be "Arabized" by the pious intonation of phrases such as *As-salam alaykum* infuriated his former mentor at *Pesantren Krapyak*, Wahid begged for his forgiveness. But generally, he confronts his critics head on and explains, explains, explains—doing so gently with humor and reason, and by invoking the authority of the Scriptures and Yellow Books.

NU's joint venture with Summa Bank is a case in point. Summa Bank was owned by a Christian Chinese family, the Soeryadjayas. This rankled many Muslims because the Chinese are popularly perceived as the economic "enemies" of ethnic Indonesians—this because, as a small minority, they control such a large share of the country's economy. This dangerous prejudice is deeply ingrained. Wahid defended the merger for precisely this reason. "We need to alleviate fear of Chinese financial networks if Muslims are ever going to get the funds they need to progress," he said. "The best way is to go into business with them."

A second objection was that, as a conventional bank, Summa Bank charged interest on its loans. Many Muslims consider this a violation of the Koran's prohibition of usury (*riba*). But Wahid was ready with a well-reasoned reply. In forbidding usury, he said, the Prophet intended to protect his followers from predatory economic practices in which only one party profited. But interest was not necessarily usury. If rates are reasonable, bank loans can benefit the borrower as well as the lender. This is the key to its acceptability: "If it benefits the client, then it's not prohibited." Moreover, he argued, interest paid to a bank can also be construed as a form of profit sharing (*mubarakat*), which Islam does not prohibit. When this rationale was greeted with bitter criticism in some NU circles, Wahid hastened to point out that there was nothing new about it. Hashim Ashari himself had enunciated it in 1938. (When a new strictly Muslim bank was founded in 1992, the Bank Muamalat Indonesia, Wahid did not support it.)

Resistance from within NU ranks has led to setbacks for Wahid. Conspicuous among these has been his *pesantren*-led development programs. They did not flourish as he hoped. Many rural *kyais* found them too much at odds with the *pesantren*'s traditional role of school-

ing. NU's subsequent development efforts have therefore been less *pesantren*-centered. Unfortunately, Nahdlatul Ulama's joint venture with Summa Bank also ended badly when the bank failed a year or two later. Wahid was able to save the people's credit banks through a new partnership with the *Jawa Pos*, a Surabaya-based newspaper.

In the late 1980s, President Suharto began to take a more conciliatory tack toward Indonesia's organized Muslims. This is believed to have been prompted by his cooling relationship with his own army officer corps, once the staunchest pillars of his regime. He now supported the move to recognize and strengthen Islamic courts and to add more Islamic content to the curriculum in national schools. He permitted Muslim girls to wear the distinctively Muslim head-covering *jilbab* scarf to school—formerly prohibited. He patronized a month-long Islamic cultural festival in Jakarta, funding it through a government-backed private foundation. He upheld the jail sentence meted out to the *Monitor's* editor for insulting the Prophet. And for the first time in his life, he made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Tens of millions of Indonesians watched him do so on state television.

Suharto's strategic shift to Islam was sealed in late 1990 with the creation of the All-Indonesia Association of Muslim Intellectuals, popularly known by its Indonesian acronym ICMI. Led by Muslim technocrat and Suharto friend and cabinet minister Bachruddin Jusuf (B. J.) Habibie, ICMI seemed to invite Muslim intellectuals and activists into the corridors of power. They joined the new organization in droves—"academics, journalists, bureaucrats, and all the intellectuals except for a small minority," recalls Wahid. On its boards, cabinet ministers sat side by side with scientists and the cream of Indonesia's Islamic intelligentsia. Many of them shared the view that ICMI represented a new and higher stage in the organizational life of Indonesia's Muslims. The prominent scholar Taufik Abdullah, for example, wrote admiringly that ICMI bridged "the social and doctrinal gaps among Muslim intellectuals . . . and managed to recruit *ulama* [scholars] from both the 'modernist' and 'traditionalist' factions." In a relatively short period of time, the organization had fifty thousand members and branches throughout the country.

As one of Indonesia's preeminent Muslim leaders, Wahid was of course invited to join ICMI. Minister Habibie himself urged him to become vice-chairman of the board of advisers. He refused. Contrasting ICMI's elites with the legions of not-so-well-off people who filled the ranks of NU, he said, "Let me take care of the peddlers, not the ones with stores."

But Wahid had other objections to ICMI as well. B. J. Habibie, for one. Habibie, a German-trained engineer and architect of Indonesia's aircraft industry and other government-subsidized high-tech enterprises, had posited himself as an exemplar of Islamic com-

petitiveness vis-à-vis the Christian world. In a community harboring centuries-long resentments about having “lost” to the West and thirsting for heroes, Habibie had achieved almost cult status. Wahid believed nothing good could be gained from fanning the flames of such an “us-against-the-world” mentality. Moreover, certain ICMI-affiliated militants hoped, Wahid says, “to Islamicize everything in our life.” They looked approvingly at nearby Malaysia where the power of government was being used systematically to transfer wealth from non-Muslims to Muslims and, in some states, to enforce an Islamic penal code that, in Wahid’s view, would “return us to the Dark Ages.” Among the provisions of this code is the law against *khalwat*, the inappropriate physical proximity of unmarried men and women. To make his point, Wahid likes to tell the story of the Malaysian man who was arrested for dictating to his female secretary while sitting alone with her in an automobile.

But there was yet a bigger problem with ICMI. This was President Suharto’s attempt to seduce Indonesia’s Muslim community, through its leaders and activists, to become part of his own power structure and, in doing so, to wed Islam to the New Order state. Taufik Abdullah called it, “the Muslimization of the power center.” Wahid had been working against exactly this for years.

Wahid’s snub of ICMI was an embarrassment for the president. Wahid followed it with another provocative move. In April 1991, he became founding chairman of the Democracy Forum, a discussion group made up of Muslim and Christian intellectuals committed to democracy in Indonesia. Wahid explains that the impetus for the Forum was ICMI itself and its openly sectarian agenda. The group’s goal was not to clamor openly for democracy but to foster an environment favorable to its growth. After a few meetings, Wahid says, the group foundered as it took up discussions about “what kind of democracy we’d like to have. We couldn’t find anything we could agree on.” But it soon found a focus in the rule of law. In particular, it called for a judicial review of current Indonesian laws that patently violated the country’s own constitution, especially its guarantees of free expression, association, and movement, and equal protection under the law. In Indonesia, democracy will have to grow “from stage to stage,” Wahid believes. “Achieving sovereignty of the law would be quite a big achievement for us.”

The year 1992 brought a new round of carefully staged New Order elections. ICMI’s cozy ties to the government yielded a high profile for its members in the newly configured assembly and the cabinet. Wahid instructed NU members to vote for whomever they pleased and shocked the government by refusing to join the chorus of Muslim leaders in support of a new term for President Suharto. Instead, at Nahdlatul Ulama’s anniversary mass meeting in March 1992, Wahid pledged the organization’s unconditional loyalty not to

the president but to the *principles* of the Indonesian state as embodied in Pancasila and the constitution.

By doing so, Wahid protected NU from overt reprisals, since President Suharto had repeatedly called upon Indonesians to do just this. But by refusing to endorse Suharto personally and by explicitly reminding everyone that democracy was one of the principles of Pancasila, he also committed a powerfully subversive act. This was wresting control over the interpretation of Pancasila away from the Suharto regime and restoring it to the sphere of free public discourse. The New Order had used Pancasila to promote obedience and conformity; Wahid was redeeming it as a charter for tolerance and plurality.

Plurality is the essence of Indonesia, Wahid says. No one group can claim to be uniquely Indonesian. Just as today's Indonesian cuisine has evolved from centuries of blending local foods and cooking techniques with those borrowed from China, India, and Holland, the nation itself is a stew made up of diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural elements. Hence, the need for a tolerant secular state, not a religious one. And the need ultimately for democracy. It is not only Indonesia's particular national character that demands this, he believes, but also the humane authority of Islam itself.

Now in his fifties, Wahid has founded a *pesantren* of his own; he is a *kyai*. Although his eyes are failing, he still reads voraciously and, when he can, he relaxes by listening to Beethoven. (He claims the best collection of recordings of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in Indonesia.) But Nahdlatul Ulama and his country's complex problems still demand the lion's share of his attention. As Indonesia awaits the inevitable end of the New Order, Wahid's quiet but persistent plea for tolerance and democracy helps mitigate against the cries of those with more sectarian claims on the future. The shoals of Indonesian politics are treacherous, he knows, so he continues to move nimbly. A recent small event is typical. While speaking about events in East Timor and elsewhere, he touched upon human rights violations perpetrated by members of Indonesia's powerful military. These men should be punished more severely than civilians, he said. But they are not.

"I agree that we should feel indignant about this matter," said Gus Dur characteristically. "But without shouting, of course."

September 1993

Manila

J.R.R.

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