

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Medan, North Sumatra  
Indonesia  
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Mr. W. S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York City, 36

Dear Mr. Rogers:

For the first time in the history of Islam in Indonesia, the ulama--the most respected teachers and scholars of the religious community--have spoken as a group on a political matter. It is an event of the greatest historical importance.

The Ulama Conference of 1953, held in Medan from April 11 to April 15, is a milestone in the post-revolutionary transition of Islam in Indonesia. In the first years of this century, the influence of Islam was segmented and limited to the religious life of the village masses. The next thirty years saw the gradual but fundamental reorientation of Islam in the growth of Moslem political and social organizations on a national level. Independence has now greatly accelerated the emergence of Islam as a national political and social force, especially through the activities of the Masjumi political party and the government Ministry of Religion.

Notwithstanding the many failings and shortcomings of Islam in the archipelago, I believe that the development toward unity and ideological self-sufficiency within the Moslem community is of greater long-term significance than the more sensational maneuverings of the small Indonesian Communist Party. The modest but definite success of the Ulama Conference is a major step in this development.

The functional meaning of the term ulama is as difficult to pin down as the meaning of the honorific "elder statesman" in American political life. Its literal meaning in Arabic is "the learned", specifically those who are learned in Moslem law and theology. Since there is no church organization in Islam, a role of great influence has traditionally been given to the scholars of the Moslem scriptures and law collections. In the age of Mohammad and the theocratic state of the first caliphs, the ulama did not exist as an institution, but the later centuries of decline and dissemination gave increasing authority to the "learned." Unlike the scholar-officials of Imperial China, the ulama are not tested, accredited, or certificated in any formal way. They are recognized not by the government, but by the community itself. Generally, the appellation ulama implies not only the possession of broad religious and legal knowledge, but also the application of that knowledge in guiding and instructing the Moslem community.

The term ulama was not in general usage in Indonesia before the

war, yet the regional titles for Moslem teachers were universally known: kiaji in Java, teungku in Atjeh, and sjech in other parts of Sumatra and in the northern islands. It is important to realize that these titles are by no means equivalent to ulama. Many modernists attribute the superficial penetration of Islam in many parts of Indonesia to the skimpy religious and general knowledge of these old-style religious teachers; the village teachers were rarely ulama in any real sense. The effect of the Ulama Conference was thus to emphasize and dramatize the fact that religious authority in Islam should be based on broad knowledge and education.

Observers at the conference could not help noting that a great percentage of the ulama in attendance are now officials of the various branches of the government Ministry of Religion. Thus, a mere glance at the conference roster brings two vital facts about Islam in Indonesia into focus: Firstly, the very fact of a national ulama conference means the recognition of a religious authority above that of the kiajis and sjechs in the villages; the isolated domain of the old religious leaders is being invaded, and a single Indonesian Moslem community is being created out of the many Moslem communities of former days. Secondly, that the informal structure of the Moslem religious community is closely intertwined with the formal structure of government at certain levels.

Almost every day during my three months of research in Medan, I have heard some Moslem say, "Islam and politics cannot be separated." The Ulama Conference is sufficient proof that Indonesian Moslems have no intention of allowing the two to be separated. The decisions of the conference have now been published in the form of fatwa (instructions) to Indonesian Moslems. The short, unequivocal statements on the General Election and the proposed Islamic Constitution for Indonesia will certainly become powerful weapons in the hands of the Masjumi and the smaller Moslem political parties in the coming months.

The separate instruction on the coming General Election illustrates the authoritative tone of the decisions reached:

THE CONFERENCE OF ULAMA...MEETING IN MEDAN,  
27 RAJAB TO 1 SJA'BAN, 1372 (April 11-15, 1953)

Instructs the Entire Indonesian  
Moslem Community that:

Every Indonesian citizen of Islamic Religion,  
male or female, who has the right to vote  
according to the General Election Law:

- a. IS REQUIRED to exercise the right to vote by registering and casting a ballot at the time of the election.
- b. IS REQUIRED to vote only for candidates dedicated to the implementation of the teachings and laws of Islam in the State.

Although the ulama attended the conference as individuals, the plain fact is that the very great majority of them are members of the Masjumi political party. The effect of the fatwa on the General Election is to give religious sanction and backing to the Masjumi political campaign. Masjumi critics therefore charge that

the religious position of the ulama is being used for purely political purposes. The usual answer, of course, is that "Islam and politics cannot be separated" and that the ulama are by no means obliged to limit their attention to purely religious matters.

An interesting debate arose during the conference concerning the fate of those Moslems who do not vote according to the instructions of the ulama. One speaker recommended that they be declared kafir, or unbelievers. Another compared Islam to an organization and proposed that all "members" who fail to fulfill their obligations be "expelled." Both suggestions were strongly opposed by moderates and rejected by the conference.

I have asked several Moslem scholars whether the fatwa were to be considered "binding" on Indonesian Moslems, in view of the moderate stand taken on the issue of voting. They answered that the rendering of fatwa is a responsibility which the ulama cannot shirk. Moslems are similarly bound to listen to the consensus of opinion of the religious scholars, but they can decide on their own course of action as their consciences dictate. Thus, the ulama are entrusted to advise, but not to judge human conduct; judgment is entirely in the hands of God.

My impression is that this subtle--and somewhat modernistic--definition of the authority of the ulama has little meaning in the villages where the religious leaders are highly respected and greatly feared. The strong wording of the fatwa on the General Election implies that the ulama themselves realize that their words will be presented to the villagers as binding directives and not merely as expert advice.

The generally moderate tone of the Ulama Conference was further displayed in the simple seven point statement of principles for the proposed Islamic Constitution for Indonesia. The final consensus of the ulama was that the details of constitution-making should be left to legal experts in a future constitutional assembly. Although their statement would allow considerable latitude in the definition of a future Islamic State in Indonesia, it is not in the least ambiguous:

#### ESSENTIALS OF AN ISLAMIC CONSTITUTION

1. Sovereignty is wholly in the hands of Allah, and power to regulate the State of Indonesia is entrusted by Allah to the People of Indonesia, to be exercised through parliamentary means within the limits of Islamic law and for the spiritual and material well-being of humanity.
2. The foundation of the State is Islam.
3. The legal basis of the State is the Koran and Hadith.
4. The form of the State is republican.
5. The Chief of State is an Indonesian citizen of Moslem faith.
6. Human rights:
  - a. The State fully guarantees the basic human rights, among them:

freedom of person, religion, thought and opinion, organization and assembly, and the freedom to possess private property.

b. Each person (male or female) is entitled to equal and just treatment in law, social affairs, education, and economic and social affairs.

7. The economy is regulated by the State for the advantage and well-being of the entire people.

The statement does not mince words, and it can be hoped that it will add substance to the debate now raging over the desirability of an Islamic State.

The statement of equal rights for women is especially noteworthy, as are the absence of any mention of the Sja'f'i school of Moslem law, the stress on human rights in general and the separate article on government guidance of the economy. All these may be considered in line with the thinking of the modernist, mildly socialist group among Moslem leaders.

The refusal of the conference to enter into a more detailed discussion of the Islamic State may well have been a matter of principle, yet I gained the impression from the proceedings that it was also a matter of practical necessity. In talks with some of the most informed Moslem leaders, I have found only the most rudimentary idea of how the Islamic State they so enthusiastically propose will function in Indonesia. For this very reason, the Pakistan Constitution, when completed, is bound to have a profound effect in Moslem circles in Indonesia. In the meantime, the proposal for an Indonesian Islamic State will continue to sound like empty campaigning to many nationalists until its basic concepts are given a clearer definition. Many will continue to see that definition in the harsh theocracy of the Darul Islam rebels in West Java and South Sulawesi. The statement of the Ulama Conference is a first step, but it is only a beginning.

A third major point debated was the proper role of the ulama in Indonesia society. I have discussed this point at some length with Ghazali Hasan, the dynamic young Moslem leader who organized and planned the Ulama Conference. I believe his viewpoint, which I have paraphrased below, brings out a vitally important aspect of Islam's current development in Indonesia:

"Last year, I began to see indications that Islam was declining in influence in the villages. Conditions were such that a party could rise and prosper on an anti-Islamic program. Too many of the ulama had left their communities to take jobs in the Religious Affairs Offices in the cities. Something had to be done to awaken the ulama, for they were asleep, ignorant of the real decline of Islam. I got the idea of a conference of ulama from all over Indonesia as an answer to this problem. At first, many of the parties opposed the idea. They were afraid that we would form a new party. But what we need is not more, but fewer parties. I went ahead."

The wholesale departure of Moslem leaders from their local communities to assume jobs in the Ministry of Religion is indeed a development of first importance. Wherever I have gone in Java and Sumatra, I have found the important Moslem scholars and writers sitting behind desks in government offices. An Indonesian friend of mine put it this way: "Before the war, the ulama spoke directly to the people. The people of the village would come and say 'Hay Papa, what about this problem?'"

The influence of the ulama was very great. Now they work in an office forty miles away and write all the answers in little brochures which no one wants to read and which the village people can't read anyhow."

The conference instruction on the role of the ulama did not mention the problem of government employment, and I have found few ulama who consider the matter a problem in any sense. The local effects which disturb Ghazali Hasan so much are most likely temporary, for the Islamic schools in Indonesia are full of future religious scholars and leaders. The effect of government employment and bureaucratic life on the ulama themselves is another matter; it is bound to influence and change the attitudes of those men who are most influential in forming opinion in the Moslem community. The change in status of so many Indonesian ulama and its effect on the Moslem elite and ideology in Indonesia would make an extremely interesting and profitable topic for further study.

The striking feature of the fatwa on the role of the ulama is that it stipulates not only the responsibilities of the ulama in their communities, but on the national level as well. The "learned" are instructed to bring their influence to bear on the leaders of all Islamic organizations and to urge all Moslems to participate in Islamic organizations. This recognition of a new role for the ulama in view of the rise of national Moslem organizations seems proof enough that the ulama had their minds on current problems during the Medan conference. Further evident of this is the great stress placed on general as well as religious education in the statement on Moslem schools.

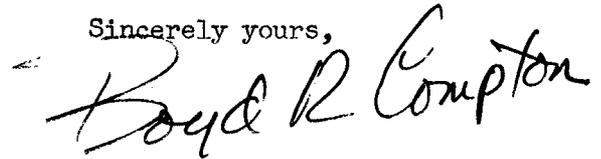
The place of the Ulama Conference in history is assured, for it was a unique and significant event in the internal development of Islam. The immediate political effect of the conference is harder to judge. Many of my more westernized friends in Medan do not even know that a conference took place; I am sure that their ignorance is shared by most nationalist intellectuals in Indonesian cities. The great contradiction in this situation is that the Ulama Conference was strongly influenced--if not actually guided--by modernist Moslem thought, itself a product of the cities. Yet the message of the conference is designed primarily for the rural villages where Islam must find support in the political battles ahead.

No one has publically contested the right of the Ulama Conference to issue fatwa to the Indonesian Moslem community as a whole, yet the conference roster shows that only 18 of the 217 participants came from Java. Technically, this fact does not weaken the authority of the conference, for that authority is based on consent and acceptance, in line with the usual practice in Islam. This geographical disparity, however, does highlight the disturbing trend toward a split between east and west in cultural and political matters in Indonesia. Islam's greatest strength is in the extreme west, and its greatest weakness is in East Indonesia. The political importance of this fact may be brought into much sharper focus when and if a General Election reveals the roots of political power in Indonesia.

The most striking proof of the potential effect of the conference instructions came in June, when the Attorney General--known as a member of PNI and a confidant of President Sukarno--issued an order forbidding the discussion of political matters in mosques and religious schools. The order was quickly rescinded under a wave of Moslem protest, yet I think it stands as clear proof that Indonesian nationalists have the greatest respect for the power of the ulama in rural Indonesia. The final test of

their influence will come during the General Election, when the village people chose to vote for or against the Masjumi Party. It will then be possible to see whether Islam has indeed lost ground in Indonesia, or whether its development has merely been accelerated on a new level. In my opinion, the Ulama Conference of 1953 presents a picture of Islam growing rapidly toward unity and political consciousness under generally moderate leadership.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Boyd R. Compton". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the right of the typed name below it.

Boyd R. Compton.

Received New York 9/21/53.