

***Syu'un ijtima'iyah* and the *kiai rakyat*:**

Traditionalist Islam, civil society and social concerns

The years 1983-1984 witnessed a major shift in the social and political orientation of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Muslim association. The NU represented the world of the *pesantren* and *kiai*, the traditional Islamic boarding schools and their teachers, who exerted a strong influence in rural Java and in some of the outer islands (notably among the Mandailing in North Sumatra, among the Banjarese of South Kalimantan, among the Sasak of Lombok and to a lesser extent among the Bugis and Makassarese of South Sulawesi). Initially established as an association for the defence of traditional religious beliefs and practices that were under assault on the part of modern-educated reformists, the NU had upon Indonesia's Independence become a political party that proved capable of mobilizing the votes of almost 20% of the electorate. In Suharto's New Order Indonesia, the NU remained the only party with a large, identifiable and loyal constituency at the grassroots, even after it had been obliged to merge with the other Muslim parties into the Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP, United Development Party) in 1973. After a number of clashes with the government over issues of religious concern (marriage legislation; formal recognition of 'heterodox' religious movements) and the sidelining of vocal NU politicians, the organization's 1984 National Congress decided that the NU should revert to its original character as a non-political religious and social association. Individual members might take part in formal politics (in any party they wished and not just in PPP), but they were not allowed to hold formal positions simultaneously in NU and a political party. NU was henceforth to give priority again to religious and social concerns.

It is these 'social concerns', for which the Arabic term *syu'un ijtima'iyah* was coined to make them sound more legitimate to traditionalist Muslim ears, that constitute the subject of this article. The adoption of this term implied that the NU, though primarily a religious association, also felt a moral obligation to serve the worldly needs of the community. There was, however, by no means agreement as to which worldly needs were to be served. Many of the *kiai*, trained to think in the categories of Islamic legal thought, associated the concept

primarily with the facilitation of Islamic obligations in everyday life: people needed guidance when they were to perform the hajj, they needed help to find out what food was licit (*halal*) and what illicit (*haram*), etcetera. A group of young NU activists, who already had some experience in community development and who gained the crucial support of a number of senior *kiai*, succeeded in imposing their view of *syu'un ijtima'iyah* as activities on behalf of the social and economic welfare of the community. One of these young activists was Abdurrahman Wahid, who in 1984 was elected as the general chairman of the NU and was to remain its strong-willed though not always effective leader for three five-year periods. During those fifteen years, a growing number of young people of NU backgrounds became active in various non-government organizations dealing with a wide range of issues, from small-scale economic projects to advocacy on behalf of villagers evicted from their land in 'development' projects, to critical discussions of religious textbooks, relating them to contemporary problems.¹

These NGOs were commonly funded by foreign sponsors, such as the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung (FNS), the Ford Foundation, USAID, the Asia Foundation, and smaller international aid agencies, which imposed restrictions on the kind of activities that could be carried out. Many of these NGOs would never have been established had it not been for the availability of funds and the sponsors' need for a local counterpart to carry out projects benevolently designed elsewhere. NGO activities of various kinds kept increasing through the 1990s and contributed to broadening the pro-democracy movement (Eldridge 1995; Uhlin 1997). Although NGOs most closely affiliated with the NU were not in the forefront of this movement, they were deeply affected by it, and in the years of post-Suharto transition they were drawn further into activities related to democratization – if only because of the availability of funding. The NU-affiliated student association Pergerakan Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia (PMII, Indonesian Islamic University Students), it should be noted, allied itself in the days of Reformasi with the secular and left-leaning student groups that demanded 'total reform', unlike the reformist Muslim student groups, which favoured a reformed New Order under Habibie.² Gradually student activism subsided after Suharto's resignation (see Sastramisjaja in this volume); many PMII activists joined or established NGOs or became

¹ For a more detailed analysis of the developments in the NU and of the power struggles these involved, see Van Bruinessen 1994.

² On the Muslim student activism in the Reformasi struggle, see Aspinall 1999; Widjojo et al. 1999; Madrid 1999. The PMII is not mentioned there as a major actor because it did not operate separately; its members were active in non-religious alliances such as Forkot in Jakarta.

active in NU's new political party, Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB, National Awakening Party).

Some observers have seen the flowering of Muslim NGOs and other associational activities in the 1990s as signs of a vibrant civil society in the making, showing that Islam and liberal democracy are compatible. Others have been more sceptical and, noting the omnipresence of a few large foreign donors, wondered to what extent this activity represents an authentic civic spirit.³ It is undeniable, however, that by the very fact of their existing these NGOs have transformed the awareness of a large part of the NU's constituency. Numerous young men and women have undergone training programs in one or more NGOs, which has to some extent empowered them and widened their mental horizons. Discourses of human rights, women's rights, and accountability of authority have filtered down to the grassroots level in districts dominated by NU. It is probably true that all these NGOs have not brought about the 'development from below' and community participation that the early pioneers had hoped for, and that many of the present NGO activists have opted for this work because constitutes an easy and (presently, at least) relatively well-paid form of employment rather than out of idealism. However, some of the activities initially introduced through NGOs have been adopted, and are carried out more effectively, by some individual religious teachers with a strong social commitment. To distinguish them from their colleagues who are exclusively occupied with strictly religious teaching or with the entrepreneurial interests of their business partners, these teachers are sometimes dubbed *kiai rakyat*, 'people's *kiai*'.

These *kiai rakyat* and their less common female counterparts, the *nyai rakyat*, are individuals who are trusted because they have roots in the communities where they are active, who have some authority due to their knowledge of religious scripture, and who show a commitment to the interests of the *rakyat*, the common people, rather than the entrepreneurial class and the local power holders. They are among the most effective agents of social welfare, much more successful than most NGOs. However, their presence owes much to earlier NGO initiatives.

Nahdlatul Ulama: from interest group of a religious elite to mass organization

The NU was founded in 1926 by some of the leading *ulama* and traders of East Java to represent their interests as a group and to defend traditional religious practices perceived to be

³ This optimistic view is strongly present in Robert W. Hefner's writings of the 1990s, notably Hefner 1998 and 2000. For a critique relevant to the discussion here see Sidel 2001.

under threat in the East Indies as well as in the Middle East. The direct reasons for its establishment were both national and international. The conquest of Mecca by the Wahhabis and the abolishment of the Caliphate by Republican Turkey, both in 1924, were experienced as major blows to traditional, non-reformist Islam. In the Indies the representatives of traditional Islam found themselves gradually marginalized in a series of national Muslim congresses that took place in the mid-1920s (Van Bruinessen 1995). Many of the founding members were former students of Kiai Haji Hasjim Asj'ari of the *pesantren* at Tebuireng in Jombang, the most prominent *kiai* of those days, and most of them appear to have been teachers in their own right, as indicated by the title Kiai Haji (usually abbreviated as KH). The organizer of the group was KH Wahab Chasbullah, a teacher with strong political instincts, who had already founded a number of more ephemeral organizations in the preceding years. The name chosen for the association, which meant 'Awakening of the Ulama', was a direct reference to developments in the Arab world, where the term *Nahda* referred to the national awakening of the Arabs. The name also reminded of an earlier association established by Kiai Wahab, the Nahdlatul Tujjar, 'Awakening of the Traders'. It is not unlikely that there was a considerable overlap in the membership of both associations.

We get an indication of the social basis of the new organization from the composition of the first committee.⁴ This included *ulama* as well as non-*ulama* but the former predominated. Many but not all of the *ulama* had their own *pesantren* and were therefore *kiai* in the strict sense. The non-*ulama* were modest businessmen from Surabaya, traders and urban landlords. Many of the *kiai* were themselves in fact also small-scale traders or landlords, for there was hardly another way to finance the *pesantren*. A web of clientelistic relations between *kiai* and local traders and other entrepreneurs has always remained crucial to the *pesantren* world, and it became a major aspect of the internal dynamics of the NU.

Besides these two categories of members, the NU drew into its orbit a rapidly growing mass of followers. Each of the *kiai* brought with him his personal following, consisting of the families of his *santri* (students in the *pesantren*) and the wider circle of villagers for whom he more or less regularly performed religious services. It was at least in part their desire to 'protect' this following from the undermining influence of the increasingly well-organized Muslim reformists that drew the *kiai* to the NU. Dutch observers noted that the NU could raise far larger crowds than any of the reformist or nationalist associations; but these were the followers of charismatic

⁴ The members of this committee, 44 in all, are listed in Anam 1985:69-70. The professions of some of them can be ascertained from other documents reprinted in the Appendices of the same book.

religious leaders, not active participants in a social movement. It was only much later, when the NU became a political party, that it began to think of these rural followers as potential members. The followers of the member *kiai*, and all those who shared a similar religious orientation, formed a constituency, on behalf of whom NU spoke and acted but whom it did not claim to represent until much later.

The Japanese occupation and the struggle for independence politicized the *kiai* and transformed their relations with their followers. The Japanese attempted to co-opt Muslim leaders rather than (as the Dutch had done) the indigenous aristocracy and civil service, correctly perceiving that the rural *kiai* were the most influential intermediaries with the rural masses. The Japanese-run Bureau of Religious Affairs (Shumubu) organized training courses for the *kiai*, teaching them history, civics, gymnastics and Japanese, which for most of them was their first experience with a different type of education. Towards the end of the Japanese period, *kiai* were also given military training, to lead the irregular units that were formed in preparation for guerrilla war against the returning Dutch and their allies (Benda 1958). During the Revolution, the irregular Hizbullah and Sabilillah units, many of them led by *kiai*, constituted a significant part of the national forces. Parts of Hizbullah were later integrated into the Indonesian armed forces, but the *kiai* and most of their rural followers were demobilized. Many *kiai* retained, however, close relations with the military, based on shared experiences in the Revolution.

In the 1955 elections, the NU performed much better than its leaders appear to have expected. In its own circles it did not find sufficient people with the required degree of modern education to fill all the seats it had won, so that it had to recruit sympathetic outsiders as well. In the 1950s and early 1960s both the *kiai* and most of the party organizers and the supporting businessmen only had a *pesantren* religious education (later this changed). Muslim graduates of modern schools and universities tended to gravitate towards Masyumi, the other major Muslim party, which was dominated by reformists. The recruitment of relative outsiders as the NU's political representatives strengthened a division between the political and religious leadership that had existed from the beginning. The division was never strict, however: many children of *kiai* did pursue a modern education besides or instead of a *pesantren* education and entered politics with the inherited charisma of their fathers.

The NU's participation in electoral politics and the division of labour between *kiai* and politicians resulted in intricate networks of patronage that increased in importance in the New Order period, when the government had more money to spend and patronage to dispense. The

kiai delivered their followers' vote and in exchange they expected the politicians to provide them and their business partners with facilities, access to decision-makers, tenders, development projects, legislation favourable to *pasantren* and *pasantren* education, and so on. Many *pasantren* had long been supported by sympathetic local businessmen, including Chinese entrepreneurs; in some cases this support was quite substantial. Traders, contractors and other businessmen were also prominently present in NU's district-level committees. A *kiai*'s recommendation – he could mention a certain business in conversation, or even in his public sermons⁵ – had great economic value to businessmen, for many people were likely to follow his advice. Services rendered to the *kiai* or to the NU organization were a good investment that could, thanks to the NU's representatives in parliament and other organs of the state, bring returns in the form of government contracts and other favours.

The *kiai* were important to the businessmen, the politicians and the local government for the influence they had over the *rakyat*, the common people (or at least over a segment of them). They were not simply religious teachers but intermediaries with the unseen world. A prayer spoken by a *kiai* was believed by many to be more powerful than of a common person. Visiting a *kiai*, kissing his hand, eating the remnants of his meal, keeping a photograph of him at home: many believed that such forms of closeness with the *kiai* brought religious merit, and some believed them to be magically effective. Besides other pastoral functions, many *kiai* engaged in healing, counselling, and rituals to ward off danger. Within each community, the degree to which people believed in a *kiai*'s spiritual superiority and his ability to negotiate with the supernatural would have varied; some being firm believers, others sceptics, and perhaps the majority suspending judgment but remaining cautious. Some *kiai* counted their followers in the hundreds, others in the tens of thousands. Within the NU, there was a clear hierarchy among the *kiai*, based on descent (one inherited prestige from his father; someone whose father had not been a *kiai* had little hope of being recognized as one himself) and on number of students and followers (compare Van Bruinessen 1994, 2002).

NU as an organization had a considerable additional advantage to the *kiai*, for it consolidated and integrated their following. In the colonial period the NU had already established its own youth organization and women's wing, which provided new forms of sociability and bonding, and taught many people new skills. After independence, the NU established its own trade

⁵ Besides the Friday prayer in the mosque, which is a formal occasion, most *kiai* regularly deliver homilies on other occasions, including open-air speeches that may draw thousands of listeners. One *kiai*, now deceased, was famous for always finding an occasion to mention a certain brand of clove cigarettes.

union and peasant union; local and district branches organized various activities, from drum bands and sports events for the young to political meetings for the adults. Competition with other parties, especially the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI, Indonesian Communist Party) provided strong bonding (Walkin 1969). The politicians and organizers in the NU needed the *kiai* as legitimizers, but in return the *kiai* saw their following consolidated and easier to mobilize due to the new activities introduced by the party NU. The followers were to some extent empowered by taking part in these joint activities and by the idea that, as voters and as ‘members’ of the NU they were theoretically the equals of any other person – although none would dream of actually behaving as equals towards a *kiai*.

At the district level, the *kiai* and allied businessmen constituted the NU elite, acting as brokers between the *rakyat* on the one hand and the Jakarta politicians as well as the regional government on the other (compare Geertz 1959). Although the composition of the NU’s district and regional committees was largely a matter of negotiations within the elite, some commoners were also recruited into the committees, allowing for some social mobility. At most places, the relations between *kiai* and followers, or between the NU organization and its constituency, were quite hierarchical; but from the 1970s onwards, the NU was the only non-government institution that continued to have access to the *rakyat* at the grassroots level. The New Order’s ‘floating mass’ policies forbade political parties and associations to be active below the *kabupaten* (district) level, effectively cutting them off from the grassroots. The NU too had to give up its formal representation at the lowest levels, but through the *kiai* and *pesantren* remained in closer contact with ordinary villagers than any other organization.⁶

The concept of pesantren-based community development: a government view

It was not surprising that advocates of community and economic development at the grassroots thought of the *pesantren* as an appropriate vehicle for such efforts. It was, after all, an authentic and socially rooted institution, one of the few with access to the people for whom ‘development from below’ was intended. Independent from but not opposed to the government, the *pesantren* appeared well placed to act as the interface between state and local communities. Clifford Geertz had, in an early essay, drawn attention to the role of the *kiai* as a cultural broker (Geertz 1959); in the early years of the New Order it was both the government and the first large NGOs that

⁶ A more detailed history and social analysis of the NU and its constituency are given in Van Bruinessen 1994.

perceived a potential role for the *pesantren* in development activities and attempted to turn (some of) the *kiai* into agents of change.

The first attempts to gear the *pesantren* to the objectives of development came from the Ministry of Religious Affairs under its first New Order minister, A. Mukti Ali (in office from 1971 to 1978).⁷ Under Sukarno, the ministry had been largely controlled by the NU and all ministers were prominent NU personalities. Mukti Ali, a reform-minded professor with a degree in comparative religion from McGill University, was the first non-NU person to lead the ministry since the early 1950s. Many perceived that he had been given the task shaking up this institution and of breaking up the monopoly of the NU over the administration of religion. Unlike most other reformist Muslims, Mukti Ali had a direct acquaintance with the *pesantren* world; he had studied in the famous *pesantren* of Tremas in Pacitan. He also had quite definite opinions as to what was valuable in the *pesantren* tradition and what had to change. One of the changes he considered most urgent concerned the curriculum, which had to be made more relevant to the modern age. Most *pesantren* had in fact gradually introduced various general subjects into the curriculum, besides the core of religious teachings. In 1974, Mukti Ali signed a joint decision with the ministers of the Interior and of Education to raise the status of *pesantren* and other religious schools (*madrasah*) with a partly general curriculum to that of general schools of similar levels, thereby improving the value of a *madrasah* diploma and facilitating mobility.⁸ This measure implicitly amounted to a radical intervention in the *madrasah* curriculum, for the new status was conditional upon a standardized curriculum with no less than 70% general subjects and 30% religious subjects. Old-fashioned *pesantren* that did not offer a *madrasah*-type of education were not affected as those *pesantren* did not issue diplomas anyway. The other *pesantren* were also free not to adapt their curriculum, but this meant that their graduates would be at a disadvantage compared with those of *pesantren* that did comply.

To make it easier for *pesantren* to offer a standardized *madrasah* curriculum, the 'joint decision' provided for government assistance in the form of the assignment of additional teaching staff at the cost of the Ministries of Education (for general subjects) and Religious Affairs. These

⁷ The following observations on Mukti Ali's efforts to make the *pesantren* more development oriented are based on a series of conversations Martin van Bruinessen had with him in 1993 and 1994 and discussions with numerous *kiai* in the years 1991 to 1994.

⁸ The 'Decision of Three Ministers' was signed by Amir Machmud (Interior), Sjarief Thayeb (Education) and A. Mukti Ali (Religious Affairs). The Minister of the Interior was involved because teachers at state primary schools are appointed by the local government and receive their salaries from the Ministry of the Interior.

teachers were obviously less dependent on the *kiai* than those he had chosen and paid himself. It could and did moreover happen that the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which no longer was an NU stronghold, assigned a reformist teacher to an NU-affiliated *pesantren*. It is not difficult to imagine the conflicts that arose in such situations. Not only did the *kiai* appear to be losing some of their cherished autonomy, some also argued that the streamlining of *madrasah* education and the granting of diplomas was a threat to the self-reliance of the *santri*. There were a few *kiai*, such as Kiai Hamam Dja'far of the 'development' *pesantren* of Pabelan (about which more below), who in spite of a modern curriculum deliberately refused to give their graduates diplomas, lest these would feel tempted to become civil servants.

Mukti Ali's ideal, however, was not that the *santri* should switch to secular education and become civil servants, but rather that they should return to their villages as useful persons, contributing to the moral and economic development of those villages. To this end, he believed, the *pesantren*, and especially those that did not offer a *madrasah* curriculum, ought to teach their *santri* practical skills besides religious knowledge. The department started a project of training in simple technical skills and income-generating activities (such as fish-breeding in ponds and chicken-farming) in selected *pesantren*. Other pilot projects pioneered by the ministry concerned simple health care activities and scouting. These projects were not very successful, if only because very few *kiai* were enthusiastic about the idea. Kiai Bisri Syansuri, the NU's highest religious authority (Rois Aam), virtually sealed the end of the experiment by his scathing comments. He wondered aloud where for heaven's sake the minister had got this idea of turning *pesantren* into chicken farms.⁹ In several of the *pesantren* where these projects were nonetheless carried out, conflicts of authority arose between the *kiai* and the program directors. These conflicts reflected not only disagreements about the implicit objectives of the program but also a clash between two different types of authority, with ultimately conflicting worldviews.

Pesantren-based community development: non-government efforts

The first private initiatives for development-related activities in and around the *pesantren* also originated from outside the NU. It was the Jakarta-based research institute Lembaga Penelitian, Pendidikan dan Penerangan Ekonomi dan Sosial (LP3ES, Institute for Social and Economic

⁹ Mukti Ali thought that Kiai Bisri's reaction may have been so negative because the initiative came from outside the NU (interview, 22 -1-1994). Those years NU leaders understandably were suspicious of new initiatives issuing from the ministry, which they perceived as being purged of NU influence. In retrospect, many others also believe that Mukti's interventions, however well meant, had a negative impact on the intellectual level of *pesantren* education.

Research, Education & Information) that, in search of access to the grassroots and of bottom-up development, first thought of the *pesantren* as a potential channel. LP3ES was established in 1971 and soon became one of Indonesia's most important non-governmental organizations involved in development activities. It had grown out of an aid project of the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung (affiliated with Germany's Liberal Party) that had been initiated in 1969, and the FNS always remained the most important foreign sponsor of this institute. The staff of LP3ES were recruited from among the New Order activists loosely known as 'the generation of 66'; most had family or personal connections to either the Masyumi or the Socialist Party of Indonesia (PSI), the country's most 'westernized' parties (both of which had been banned under Sukarno and were not legalized again). They came from social backgrounds far removed from the *pesantren* world, and their linking up with the *pesantren* was not at all a self-evident process.

It was at a seminar on participation in development, organized jointly by LP3ES and the weekly magazine *Tempo* (another venture of young New Order intellectuals), that the *pesantren* was first mentioned as a potential channel for local-level development efforts. LP3ES subsequently initiated a research program on the *pesantren* and its development potential, and M. Dawam Rahardjo, a young economist who was to develop into one of Indonesia's most prominent liberal Muslim intellectuals, was put in charge. Dawam was the only person at LP3ES who had at least a minimal acquaintance with the *pesantren* world. In his youth he had spent a brief period in the well-known *pesantren* of Krapyak near Yogyakarta, and as a leading member of the Muslim students' organization Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam (HMI, Islamic Students Union) he had come to know at least some people with more solid *pesantren* backgrounds. Aware that for access to the *pesantren* he would need support from NU circles, he recruited the co-operation of one of the very few prominent NU personalities who had been active in the student demonstrations of 1966, Zamroni. The student activists at that time had chosen Zamroni to become the chairman of their common action front Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Indonesia (KAMI, Indonesian Student Action Front), precisely because of his NU affiliation. This background made him an excellent middleman between the New Order enthusiasts at LP3ES and the NU's constituency. Through Zamroni, several other young NU people were recruited into the project.

Dawam Rahardjo's point of departure was a rather positive appreciation of the *pesantren* and its potential, about which he was more optimistic than most of his peers. He had read and admired Rabindranath Tagore's ideas on education, and he was also acquainted with the ideas of the

Indonesian nationalist Dr Soetomo, who even before independence had praised the *pesantren* as an indigenous and independent institution of basic education.¹⁰ The rather similar though more radical ideas of Ivan Illich were then as yet unknown in Indonesia but were to gain a certain popularity in the 1980s. As he recalled his views in retrospect, Dawam thought of the *pesantren* as a 'centre of excellence' relative to its rural surroundings, and he believed that the *kiai*, as part of the rural elite, was well placed to act as an 'agent of change'.¹¹

There were in fact a few historical examples of *pesantren* acting as agents of change, and these were later often cited as sources of inspiration. Upon returning from Mecca in the late eighteenth century, Muhammad Arsyad al-Banjari not only established a mosque and school at Martapura (in South Borneo) but also dug a long drainage canal and opened up a vast area for cultivation. In Java too, *pesantren* were often established far from the inhabited world, thus opening up forest. Alternatively, they followed the sugar estates and sugar mills in their southward expansion and attempted to impose their moral norms on frontier society (compare Fox 1989). Hasjim Asj'ari allegedly established his *pesantren* Tebuireng (which means 'black sugarcane') deliberately close to the Cukir sugar factory, in an area rife with robbery, gambling, drunken fights and prostitution, and little by little succeeded in driving out the worst excesses of sin, or perhaps just the sinners, from the area.¹²

Placing themselves on the standpoint that they should first see what they could learn from the *pesantren* and discover what its needs were before making any concrete plans for action, Dawam and his associates started with a survey of various types of *pesantren*. They investigated contents and methods of education, patterns of authority in the *pesantren*, the recruitment of students (*santri*) and the relations of the *pesantren* with the wider society.¹³

¹⁰ See the polemical exchanges on 'national education' between Soetomo and the 'Westernizer' Sutan Takdir Ali Sjahbana of 1935-1936, reprinted in Mihardja 1977, especially Soetomo's article 'Nationaal-Onderwijs-Congres' (1977:43-51). Soetomo praised the *pesantren* as an institution that inculcated a co-operative spirit, and where children of diverse social backgrounds met on equal footing. Soetomo, who was of *priyayi* background himself, came to his positive appreciation of *pesantren* education through his contacts with Wahab Chasbullah, see Soebagijo 1972:24.

¹¹ Compare the similar analysis of Clifford Geertz, who a few years earlier had identified the *kiai* as a strategically located middleman between village society and the wider world (Geertz 1959).

¹² In a conversation with Dawam Rahardjo on 26 August 1992, he singled out these two cases as evidence of the *pesantren's* potential as an agent of change. Both had by then become standard examples, repeated and gradually embellished on many occasions.

¹³ The first results of this research were published in Rahardjo 1973; Prasadjo et al. 1974; and Rahardjo (ed.) 1974.

As a next step, LP3ES attempted to improve communication between modern urban intellectuals and the *pesantren* world, recruiting *pesantren* people into the project. Nashihin Hasan and Abdullah Syarwani were among the first activists recruited from *pesantren* (the latter had until then been an administrator, *sekretaris pondok*, at Tebuireng) and they were to play important roles in the community development efforts of the late 1970s and 1980s. A somewhat later recruit was Abdurrahman Wahid, who was to become a central figure in the developments of the 1980s and 1990s. As a grandson of both Hasjim Asj'ari, the towering figure among the NU's founders, and Bisri Syansuri, the organization's second spiritual guide, and the son of Wahid Hasyim, who had been the NU's chief political leader at the time of the Revolution, Abdurrahman enjoyed great respect and legitimacy as a future leader in NU circles. He had returned from studies in the Middle East in 1970 and was teaching at the family *pesantren* in Tebuireng, when LP3ES persuaded him to come and work with them in Jakarta for the *pesantren* project. He seemed the ideal bridge-builder and an invaluable asset to the project. He helped identify a number of *kiai* who were likely to co-operate, and he introduced the activists to them. Soon, however, he was involved in so many other activities in Jakarta that his direct involvement in the project remained rather marginal.¹⁴

LP3ES' first practical experiments with *pesantren*-based development projects began in the late 1970s in the *pesantren* of Pabelan. The *kiai* of Pabelan, Hamam Dja'far, had studied at the modern *pesantren* of Gontor (on which see Castles 1966), and he modelled method and contents of education at Pabelan on that of the mother *pesantren*, placing great emphasis on the *santri*'s self-reliance. Though of NU background himself, he made an effort to maintain equally good relations with reformist Islam and steered an independent course; in the village, he similarly attempted to maintain a balance between two conflicting factions. *Kiai* Hamam opened his *pesantren* to the activists of LP3ES and enthusiastically co-operated with various experiments, prominently including the introduction of 'appropriate technology' for clean water supply and various agricultural purposes. Through most of the 1980s he remained one of the most prominent 'development *kiai*' and Pabelan the showcase to which many foreign observers were taken.¹⁵

¹⁴ Personal incompatibilities between Abdurrahman Wahid and Dawam Rahardjo soon surfaced. This brief period of co-operation, in which both felt let down by the other, left them with hurt feelings which have soured their relationship ever since. In spite of quite similar ideas and attitudes they have been unable to work together. As they came to play increasingly important public roles, their personal animosities have also affected the organizations of which they were prominent members.

¹⁵ For interesting observations on the relationship of the *pesantren* and the surrounding village, and on the various projects carried out in Pabelan, written by a former *santri* of this *pesantren*, see Hidayat 1985.

With Abdurrahman Wahid's help, the project then spread to a number of NU-affiliated *pesantren*. The large *pesantren* An-Nuqayah in Guluk-Guluk (East Madura) and Maslakul Huda in Kajen (Central Java) were the most auspicious choices, for they had socially engaged *kiai* (KH Abdul Basith and KH Sahal Mahfuzh), who actively took part in the experiments. In both *pesantren*, the development efforts were directed at the extremely poor surrounding population and only secondarily at the *santri* themselves. Other NU *pesantren* that received some help from LP3ES in the beginning years included those at Tebuireng (which founded a student library), Cipasung near Tasikmalaya (clean water supply), Paiton (Probolinggo) and Blok Agung (Banyuwangi).

In spite of a later discourse associating NGOs with a 'bottom-up' approach as an alternative to the government's 'top-down' development policies, LP3ES's projects were largely parallel to, or extensions of, government programs. In fact the *pesantren* program almost seemed a replication of another LP3ES program that targeted small entrepreneurs. The programs had three components in common: the development of (entrepreneurial) skills and attitudes, the introduction of appropriate technologies, and income-generating activities. The last-named component of the *pesantren* program essentially replicated Mukti Ali's program. For the appropriate technology part of the program, LP3ES co-operated with a group of student activists and graduates of the Bandung Institute of Technology, who after the suppression of the last wave of political student protest in the late 1970s had set up an NGO for appropriate technology, the Yayasan Mandiri ('Self-reliance Foundation'). The Mandiri activists, several of whom lived and worked for extensive periods in *pesantren*, attempted to introduce the various techniques with which they were acquainted, most successfully the use of ferro-cement for roofs, and several types of pumps for the provision of clean water. Another large community development NGO, Dian Desa, also contributed some appropriate technology, notably earthen stoves. The entrepreneurial training component of the project consisted, among other things, of the establishment of co-operatives in the *pesantren*. In Kajen and Guluk-Guluk, loans and savings co-operatives (*usaha bersama simpan pinjam*) were also established in the surrounding villages as a means of training the villagers in capital management.¹⁶

Thanks to generous foreign funding, the number of small community development projects

¹⁶ Overviews of the various *pesantren*-based programs are given in Saifuddin 1988:36-47 and in the contributions by Mudatsir, Basyuni and Sulaiman in Rahardjo 1985.

carried out in and by *pesantren* gradually increased. The Friedrich Naumann Stiftung placed great hopes in the *pesantren* and concentrated its aid in *pesantren*-based projects, initially through LP3ES and from 1983 on, for bureaucratic reasons, through a new, more specialized NGO named P3M.¹⁷ P3M stands for Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat, 'Association for the Development of Pesantren and Society'. Among its founders we find some of the people who were also involved in the LP3ES project, but P3M is more like a joint venture of NU and Masyumi circles, without the sprinkling of 'secular' and non-Muslim intellectuals that one finds at LP3ES. Although P3M emphatically is not affiliated with the NU, the target group of its activities more or less coincides with the NU's constituency, and several *kiai* are members of its board. Young NU intellectuals active in P3M, of whom Masdar F. Mas'udi is the most prominent, broadened the range of activities to include critical discussion of the traditional texts studied in the *pesantren* in order to develop a religious discourse more relevant to the problems of contemporary society. Their ideas on the needs of the *pesantren* world were clearly reflected in the journal published by P3M, *Pesantren*, which showed a greater interest in the intellectual and cultural traditions of the *pesantren* than in economic development as such. Tensions between the objectives of the foreign sponsors, for whom the *pesantren* was primarily a means to reach the rural poor, and those of the young NU intellectuals, many of whom were at least as interested in critical engagement with their own tradition and intellectual development, were unavoidable and repeatedly surfaced.

Syu'un ijtima'iyah, the kiai and the activists

The adoption of the concept of *syu'un ijtima'iyah* by the leading *ulama* of NU in 1983 and its incorporation into the statutes of the organization at its 1984 congress in Situbondo strengthened the hands of the proponents of community development. Several of them were elected into the new board, including Abdurrahman Wahid, who was to remain the general chairman for three five-year periods and strongly endorsed the efforts to make the NU more relevant to the social and economic wellbeing of its constituency. The new NU board established its own NGO for community development, Lakpesdam, which was given the task to put the Situbondo recommendations about *syu'un ijtima'iyah* into practice.¹⁸ Its staff was recruited from NU

¹⁷ Another large foreign sponsor, the Dutch NOVIB, separately financed a few projects in Masyumi-affiliated *pesantren*, most importantly the 'agriculture *pesantren*' Darul Fallah in Bogor.

¹⁸ The name Lakpesdam is an acronym for Lajnah Kajian dan Pengembangan Sumberdaya Manusia,

persons with previous experience in community development (at LP3ES or other NGOs) and from the student association PMII. Lakpesdam's initial activities were not different from those of many similar Indonesian NGO's in this period: it gave training in management and leadership, attempted to stimulate new income-generating activities in agriculture and home industries, and set up co-operative societies. The Asia Foundation provided external financial support for most of its activities, and, unsurprisingly, the selection of activities tended to reflect current fashions advocated by the funding institution.

After an initial period of high hopes and confidence in the 'emancipatory' potential of the *pesantren* (reflected in various contributions to Rahardjo 1985), followed one of disappointment and scepticism among many of the younger activists who participated in these projects and felt hindered by the hierarchical relations in the *pesantren* world. Serious doubts were raised about the chances of success of such projects through the *pesantren*.¹⁹ In many cases there appeared to exist blatant conflicts of interest between the *kiai* and the *pesantren* on the one hand and the surrounding village population on the other. Many *kiai* attempted to use the projects to consolidate or strengthen their hold over the commoners and to benefit economically as well. Many of the activists, on the other hand, dreamt of serving the interests of the poor; some even of overturning the existing social order. They discovered to their disappointment that the *kiai* had no desire to take part in that sort of social transformation and had a stake in maintaining and if possible strengthening their own position of authority and economic power. The hierarchical organization and moral universe of the *pesantren* cannot easily be reconciled with bottom-up development and empowerment of the weak.²⁰

In the late 1980s and 1990s there were repeated occurrences of peasant resistance, when the government evicted them from their land for large-scale development projects without reasonable compensation. Student groups and various NGOs, including NU activists, rallied to support these peasants and attempted to mobilize national and international public opinion on

'Committee for Study and Development of Human Resources'. At the provincial level, similar bodies were established, which operated independently of the national one, such as LKPSM in Yogyakarta.

¹⁹ See the sharp criticism in Kuntowijoyo 1988. This author, a widely respected Muslim historian, is not affiliated with the NU, and many were unhappy with his criticism. Several of the young men who have actively taken part in these projects are, however, even more critical.

²⁰ These observations are based on numerous conversations, over the years, with persons who were in one way or the other involved in the community development effort, notably KH Abdul Basith, M.M. Billah, M. Dawam Rahardjo, Driyantono (Toni Pangu), Fahmi D. Saifuddin, Habib Chirzin, KH Hamam Dja'far, Helmy Ali, KH Jusuf Hasjim, Mochtar Abbas, Mun'im Saleh, and Said Budairy. A more extensive description can be found in Van Bruinessen 1994, Chapter 8.

their behalf. These cases raised the awareness that economic development involved conflicting interests and that activists cannot avoid taking sides in them. Among young NU people, there was increasing unease with the connivance of many *ulama* in violations of poor villagers' rights.

Through international NGO networks and through Indonesian students pursuing advanced degrees abroad, local activists became acquainted with action models and modes of thought that were in vogue in other parts of the world. Paulo Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed' and Latin American liberation theology, both of which were first known and acquired a following among left-leaning Indonesian Catholics, appealed strongly to the NU-affiliated activists because they appeared to offer an appropriate framework for 'bottom-up' development in which the interests of the oppressed had priority. Many Muslim students and activists, especially of traditionalist (NU) background, felt that a Muslim theology of liberation was necessary in order to provide religious arguments legitimizing social action aiming at a radical transformation of society.²¹ The activists' interests converged with those of the young intellectuals who were drawn towards a critical re-evaluation of the *pesantren* tradition and the search for more relevant interpretations of well-known classical texts.

P3M had initiated a series of seminars in which open-minded *kiai* were brought together with specialists in various fields, from rural sociology and economics to law and medicine, and where contemporary issues were discussed to which the *kiai* were challenged to find relevant Islamic answers. This included grave moral issues such as those surrounding organ transplants and euthanasia but also, and more especially, political questions including land expropriations by the state, the nature of popular representation, and women's rights. The organizers made great efforts to develop, and find endorsement for, 'progressive' perspectives. Parallel with these seminars, the student association PMII took up these issues in the training courses for its own members. Various informal discussion groups of PMII activists transformed themselves in the course of the 1990s in formal NGOs, which enabled them to find external funding for their activities. LKiS in Yogyakarta and èLSAD in Surabaya are the most prominent and successful of this generation of

²¹ Early formulations of the demand for such a theology and an indication of what it might look like, are to be found in Fakih 1987, 1989 and Abdurrahman 1988. The latter was presented at a seminar organized by Yogyakarta's LKPSM that explicitly sought to develop a 'theology of development (*pembangunan*)', the current euphemism for liberation theology (which had been banned by the regime as a dangerous ideology). These authors, Mansour Fakih and Moeslim Abdurrahman, were not themselves active in NU circles (Abdurrahman was in fact affiliated with Muhammadiyah), but they were to remain highly influential among the younger NU activists as critical thinkers and proponents of empowerment of the powerless. Abdurrahman's later writings (1995, 2003) are a clear and well-formulated example of the critical Muslim thought as it developed in the nineties.

NGOs;²² they have no formal connection with the NU, which has allowed them to operate more independently than the earlier NGOs.

Unlike the earlier NGOs, which had focussed on rural and community development, these new NGOs were mostly involved in empowerment and ‘awareness-raising’ through training programs, discussion circles and publications, and in advocacy. Human rights, economic rights and women’s rights were prominent themes; the latter especially proved attractive to sponsors, so that a number of specialised women’s NGOs emerged, while other NGOs like P3M, Lakpesdam and LKiS also carried out gender-related programs. The idea of a Muslim or Islamic feminism, still alien at the beginning of the 1990s, rapidly gained currency in the course of the decade (compare Feillard 1997). By the end of the decade many young thinkers were making efforts to develop Muslim discourses that were more woman-friendly than the traditional one in which women only had duties towards their husbands. *Fiqh al-nisa*, ‘Islamic legal thought concerning women’, which was based on a moderately feminist re-reading of classical sources, provided the religious justification for carrying out programs on women’s reproductive health (funded in the framework of a world-wide campaign) through *pasantren*-based networks.²³

By the mid-1990s, the promotion of civil society had become a high priority among international NGOs, coinciding with the shift from rural development to ‘awareness raising’ in the NU-based NGOs. Lakpesdam, LKiS and other NGOs were enabled to expand their training courses, in which they not only disseminated the concepts of basic human rights, gender relations and women’s rights, and civil society, but also obliquely Marxist-inspired modes of analysing social inequalities and a progressive (and anti-establishment) restatement of basic principles of Islam.²⁴ In the final years of the New Order, the training courses organized by LKiS for university

²² LKiS (Lembaga Kajian Islam dan Sosial, Institute for Islamic and Social Studies) and LSAD (Lembaga Studi Agama dan Demokrasi, Institute for the Study of Religion and Democracy) also were highly influential through their publications, a book series and the journal *Gèrbang*, respectively. They were the major contributors to a new discourse sometimes called ‘post-traditionalism,’ which is informed by a hybrid mix of classical Islamic texts, contemporary Arabic philosophers, neo-Marxist and poststructuralist thought (see Salim and Ridwan 1999; Effendi 2000).

²³ The program on women’s reproductive health was one of the largest and best-funded that P3M carried out in the 1990s; other NGOs also took part in this program, funded by the Ford Foundation. The program is described in Marcoes-Natsir and Hasyim 1997, which is also a training manual. These authors are two of the most prominent proponents of Indonesia’s Muslim feminism. On the development of *fiqh al-nisa* see Effendi 2000, Chapter 7.

²⁴ An excellent description and analysis of the critical religious thought developing in these circles is given in Effendi 2000. Robin Bush (2002) gives a useful description of various trainings in Chapter 3 of her thesis.

students were arguably the only public forums where the political and economic order were systematically (though obliquely) criticized. Reformist Muslims had largely been co-opted with promises of a greater share in the established order through bodies like the semi-state Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia (ICMI, Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals) and the gradual Islamization from above. After Suharto was forced to step down, they put their hopes in Habibie's presidency, unlike the NU-based activists, who together with the secular opposition called for a more pervasive 'reformation'.

The post-Suharto period provided many possibilities for more overt political activities. Many young NU cadres, including former NGO activists, joined the new NU-affiliated PKB. At the same time, however, NGOs not only continued but vastly expanded the range of their activities, while numerous new NGOs were established. The availability of seemingly unlimited – mostly American – funding for the strengthening of civil society and the dissemination of basic skills and attitudes essential to democratization resulted in a mushrooming of NGO activities in such areas as basic civics education, inter-group tolerance, acceptance of religious and cultural pluralism, legal drafting, and accountability, in addition to the earlier programs of awareness-raising and development of progressive religious thought.²⁵ The NGO world became a significant segment of the labour market for young university graduates. Many activists continued to be motivated by idealism and the belief in a better and more just world, but many others were more pragmatic; in most of the NGOs, managerial considerations and the need for organizational continuity, besides most importantly the availability of foreign funding, determined which projects were carried out. As a result of political liberalization and the structure of funding, the NU-based NGOs largely moved out of the *pesantren* environment into larger arenas, occupying themselves with other issues ('democracy') than the welfare of the rural poor around the *pesantren*.

The political liberalization also brought the *kiai* back into the political arena, from which most had withdrawn in 1984. Many *kiai* played active roles in the PKB, which was established by Abdurrahman Wahid as the vehicle for the political ambitions of the NU constituency, and which had the effect of redirecting much human and economic capital away from educational and community-oriented activities to the struggle over resources at the national and provincial levels.

²⁵ On some of these activities, see: Salim and Ridwan 1999; Bush 2002, Chapter 5; Ida 2004. On NGO activities in this period in general, Hadiwinata 2003.

Other parties also courted the *kiai*, who were believed to be able to influence the voting behaviour of their followers; during the election campaigns all major contenders paid high-profile visits to large *pesantren*, dispensing considerable sums of money and making even greater promises. Some of the most prominent *kiai* were made to believe that they were the real king-makers; many others aspired to similar roles, even if at the district level only. The NU's 2004 congress consolidated a change that had set in with the demise of the New Order, consisting of a reorientation towards elite politics and away from social activism (compare Van Bruinessen 2002). Progressive voices were marginalized whereas religiously and socially conservative factions became dominant in the organization. Lakpesdam, which had been the base of social activism within the NU, was purged of personnel too closely associated with the previous radicalism and brought under direct control of the board.

The kiai (and nyai) rakyat

The contribution of the *pesantren*-based community development projects to the welfare of poor villagers may, as many critics have claimed, have been disappointing, and most of the important *kiai* of large *pesantren* may have shown little sympathy for efforts to empower oppressed groups, but that is not the entire story. There is a small but growing number of less prominent *kiai* who successfully combine their role of religious authorities and ritual specialists with pastoral functions of a type that previously did not exist and who deliberately act as agents of (social, economic and moral) change. Whereas most NGOs have remained somewhat alien to the communities in which they worked, these *kiai* (and occasionally *nyai*, the female equivalent) typically are members of the community themselves and it is through their roles in various rituals, which may at first sight seem at odds with 'progressive' ideas, that they can be effective as social activists. We shall call these men *kiai rakyat* (and, in the case of women, *nyai rakyat*), following the usage of some informants, who wished to distinguish them from the average *kiai* because of their siding with, rather than just teaching and leading, the people.²⁶

The *kiai* and *nyai rakyat* usually do not belong to the great and famous *ulama* families of the large *pesantren*; their influence does not spread far beyond their own districts. They are

²⁶ We are indebted to Bahruddin, a peasant organizer in Salatiga, for first drawing our attention to this type of *kiai* and introducing Farid Wajidi to some of them during preliminary fieldwork on NGO activities in traditionalist Muslim rural communities. We also owe the term '*kiai rakyat*' originally to Bahruddin, although it is more widely used now.

distinguished by their often very inventive efforts to mobilize people and stimulate active participation in self-help programs, using approaches of which they had become aware through earlier contacts with NGOs – for all of them have had at least some experience with the NGO activities of the past decades. They are perceived by their environment as somewhat eccentric (*nyeleneh* in Javanese) or even rebellious (*mbalelo*) with respect to the *pesantren* tradition, but it has always been the privilege of the *kiai* to deviate from social norms, and a certain measure of deviance may well contribute to his charisma. More important is the fact that, like other village *kiai*, the *kiai* and *nyai rakyat* not only are teachers of Islamic scripture but officiate in the village rituals of Javanese Islam, such as the *slametan*, *selapanan*, *tahlilan*, *khaul*, and *pengajian*. They have been able to make use of these rituals as occasions for effective social interaction.

Anthropologists have drawn attention to the fact that in other than Western societies, civil society and the public sphere may appear weakly developed because certain forms are not recognized as such although they may be more effective than imported forms. Certain traditional practices and institutions may fulfil similar functions.²⁷ The village rituals of Javanese Islam, especially the *slametan* (ritual communal meal), have been studied before but primarily as religious events (Geertz 1960, Beatty 1999), with an occasional observation on their solidarity-making function (Martin-Schiller 1989). In studies of traditionalist Islam and civil society (Baso 1999, Bush 2002, Ida 2004) they have been neglected so far, as the focus was on more formal types of civic association. Our observations on *kiai rakyat* suggests that these actors have been more effective than more formal NGOs precisely because they could use these traditional and more ‘authentic’ forms of rural civic life.

When someone dies, neighbours and friends, and in the village the entire village community visit the house of the deceased in the evenings of the first seven days, and again on the fortieth day, for *tahlil*, the recitation of the formula ‘there is no god but God’ (*la ilaha illa llah*), believed to be beneficial to the spirit of the recently deceased. There is usually no formal sermon, and anyone can lead the *tahlil*, but the presence of a *kiai* definitely lends splendour to the meeting and guarantees a large attendance. The same is true of other life cycle rituals, whether accompanied by a full-blown *selamatan* or not. Among the Javanese, the *selapanan*, celebrated after the thirty-fifth day in the life of a newborn child, is the first of the major public life-cycle rituals. The *khaul*

²⁷ The collection of articles edited by Chris Hann and Elizabeth Dunn (1996) makes this point quite forcefully and convincingly and provides a useful correction and complement to the dominant political science perspective in civil society studies.

is the commemoration of the death of a saintly person, which often is the occasion for thousands or tens of thousands of villagers to gather, visit the grave and ask for blessings, recite prayer formulas and listen to well-known preachers. The *pengajian* or religious sermon is a major form of entertainment in Muslim villages, taking place at set intervals (once a week, bi-weekly, or monthly). A good preacher (*muballigh*) combines the skills and styles of the stand-up comedian, the moral critic and the political agitator and teaches simple moral lessons in a highly entertaining form. Some preachers have become popular media stars, who can draw enormous crowds, but also preachers of more modest skills are assured of a captive audience because there are few other forms of entertainment, and it is widely believed that attending *pengajian* brings religious merit. As an alternative or in addition to *pengajian* there may be weekly collective recitations of some devotional text on the Prophet or a saint, which have a similar solidarity-making role and provide the occasion to meet and speak of matters of common interest. People of urban education tend to look down upon these practices as backward and on some of the rituals perhaps even as superstitious, and many of the greater *kiai* find it beneath their dignity to officiate in them, but the *kiai rakyat* derive their effectiveness as agents of change precisely from their role in these social events at the village level.

One of the earliest persons to gain a reputation as *kiai rakyat* is Kiai Mahfuzh Ridwan, who leads the small *pesantren* Edi Mancoro in Gedangan near Salatiga (Central Java). His claims to religious authority are based on his study in the Middle East – he returned from Baghdad in 1977 – but he soon shocked his colleagues by proposing a radically different implementation of the *zakat*, the Islamic ‘alms tax’. In Salatiga, as in most other places in Java, it had been common for people to pay their *zakat* to the *kiai*, who would then redistribute it according at their own discretion.²⁸ Kiai Mahfuzh proposed that the contribution of *zakat* to alleviating the plight of the poor should be made more transparent, and he established a small independent committee for collecting *zakat* and redistributing it in kind, in the form of community development projects, to the poor of the district. This caused angry responses from other *kiai*, for it constituted a departure from established practice and from the respected textbooks on Islamic obligations on at least two counts. The books spoke of *zakat* as a contribution in grain or in money, and the poor should therefore receive food or money. A project that might in the long run benefit them more was

²⁸ According to the traditional interpretation of the Qur’an, the *zakat* has to be divided among eight categories of lawful recipients but not necessarily equally. The poor and needy constitute two of these categories, but another interpretation is possible according to which the *kiai* and their *pesantren* belong to one of these categories. Many *kiai* have used the entire *zakat* for the upkeep of their *pesantren*.

unheard of and, according to many *kiai*, a heretical innovation. More importantly perhaps, though this was never said explicitly, this new way of administering *zakat* broke the monopoly of the *kiai* and deprived them of a major source of income.

The early 1980s saw Kiai Mahfuzh working together with another young man from Salatiga, M.M. Billah, who was one of the early NGO activists involved in *pesantren*-based community development efforts. They were involved in efforts to organize small farmers and improve their conditions through self-help projects. A number of *paguyuban tani* (farmers' associations) presently active in the region go back to the Yayasan Desaku Maju (Foundation 'My Village Makes Progress') that Billah and Mahfuzh had set up more than two decades ago. Billah moved on to other activities, but Kiai Mahfuzh stayed in the region and remained deeply involved in the life of small farmers. When many villagers were forced to leave their land because of the giant Kedung Ombo dam, he was one of few religious leaders to get actively involved, and it is due to him that displaced villagers come for advice and help in claiming the compensation they feel entitled to.

At the time of the economic crisis of the late 1990s, which hit the villagers very hard, Kiai Mahfuzh organized an inter-religious group comprising representatives of the various religious communities, the Forum Gedangan (after the name of the village where his *pesantren* is located). Forum Gedangan attempted to relieve the most urgent misery of marginalized groups and to prevent inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflict. The *kiai*'s discourse and methods of social activism are clearly informed by the NGO experiences of previous decades, but the *kiai* is more deeply rooted in the community; through his ritual services among them he is more aware of their needs and better capable of helping them to defend their interests.

Nyai rakyat: the case of Nyai Ruqayyah

A most remarkable case of such embedded activism on behalf of the oppressed is that of Nyai Ruqayyah Ma'shum, a respected but eccentric (*nyeleneh*) popular preacher in the districts of Bondowoso and Situbondo in East Java who has become deeply involved in the struggle for women's rights in this conservative environment. Her life story, with which she has gone public, is one of brutal oppression and resistance, which no doubt has made her a role model for many women in similar circumstances.

Ruqayyah was born in a respected religious family; her father was a minor *kiai* who led a modest *pesantren* in the Prajekan Mas subdistrict of Bondowoso. The *kiai* consider themselves as a hereditary nobility, in this part of Java even more so than elsewhere, and Ruqayyah's father, wishing to make sure she would marry into a good family, arranged her betrothal to the son of another *kiai* while she was still a child. She was 14 years old and studying in a *pesantren* in Probolinggo when her father died. Her family forced her to come back and marry her fiancé – much against her will, but she had been taught that obedience is a religious obligation so she did not resist. Fortunately her father-in-law, in whose *pesantren* the couple went to live, showed her much affection and became her private teacher, to whom she owes the Arabic and the religious knowledge that is presently one of her major assets. He also taught her how to speak in public, how to structure a sermon and to address a large audience. In most other respects, the marriage was a disaster and extremely stressful to her; she often had seizures and fainted, which her environment attributed to black magic but she herself now tends to explain as due to severe strain. After her father-in-law died, the relations with her husband further deteriorated; he divorced her for reasons that were never clear to her and sent her home.

Undaunted by the low status of a divorcee but with the backing of her family's reputation, Ruqayyah started putting her father-in-law's lessons into practice and became a *muballighah*, a female preacher, delivering sermons almost every day. She also joined the local chapter of the NU's young women's association Fatayat, of which she soon became the chairperson. Through her involvement in Fatayat, Ruqayyah came in contact with various activists, and she took part in a number of workshops on gender issues (*fiqh al-nisa*) organized by P3M in a *pesantren* in nearby Jember in 1996 and following years. She had meanwhile remarried, this time with a man of her own choice – and much against her family's wishes for he was not of a *kiai* family – a former student activist and IAIN graduate, who worked as a civil servant in the town of Bondowoso.²⁹ This second marriage proved not a happy one either; her husband soon began treating her badly, abusing her physically and hurting her through affairs with other women. The *fiqh al-nisa* discussions convinced her that Islam does not justify such male behaviour, but out of shame and hoping she might reform her husband she suffered it silently.

²⁹ An IAIN (Institut Agama Islam Negeri, State Institute of Islamic Studies) offers a form of higher education that is accessible to *pesantren* graduates. The vast majority of NU youth who go to higher education study at IAIN. IAIN graduates typically work as religion teachers in secondary or tertiary education or as civil servants in the vast bureaucracy of the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

In the opening of political space after the fall of Suharto, her husband reactivated his old student contacts and became active in the NU-based political party, PKB. In the 1999 elections, Ruqayyah loyally campaigned for him and helped to get him elected to the DPR (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, People's Representative Assembly). The couple moved to Jakarta, where her husband's treatment of her further deteriorated; he beat her frequently, married a second wife, and even attempted to rape her sister. Ruqayyah then decided to demand a divorce and take her husband to court for domestic violence. She contacted members of various women's NGOs whom she had first come to know through the *fiqh al-nisa* workshops, and these promised her help. Many others, however, attempted to dissuade her from pursuing this course because of the embarrassment it would cause the PKB and the shame it would bring to the *pesantren* world as a whole. Another nyai warned her that she would herself be the chief victim of her actions because her own social environment would blame her, not only for her own predicament but even more for opening up secrets of family life and the *pesantren* world. Moreover, it is almost impossible to take a member of parliament to court; as this necessitates a special permission from the President. Nonetheless Ruqayyah fought for her divorce, and when she found the court let her husband too easily off the hook, she circulated a press release revealing the backgrounds of her divorce case. By then, she felt she was not simply fighting her own struggle but one on behalf of all women facing domestic violence.³⁰

After the divorce she returned to Bondowoso to resume her career as a preacher, but this time determined to fight against traditions that keep women subservient and oppressed. The weekly religious gatherings, *majelis ta'lim*, in her parental house, which had been popular before she left for Jakarta, drew such large numbers of women that a new mosque had to be built in front of the house to accommodate them all. Ruqayyah changed the format of the *majelis ta'lim*. Whereas formerly this had been an ordinary *pengajian*, where the *muballighah* spoke and the audience listened, she turned it into a more interactive meeting such as she had experienced in the *fiqh al-nisa* workshops. She urged the participants to reflect on their own experiences in the light of her more woman-friendly exposé of Islamic values and prescriptions, and asked them to speak of problems they were facing. Perhaps because Ruqayyah had kept no secret of her own problems, it often happened that other women were willing to speak up and have their personal difficulties discussed in the meeting. Posters on the walls – an unusual decoration of a mosque – also

³⁰ This is an abbreviated version of the life story as Ruqayyah herself told it, in an interview with the journal of the Muslim feminist NGO, *Rahima* (2001).

indicated that this was no average *majelis ta'lim*: the posters, produced by various women's NGOs, carried clearly activist messages: 'Every minute a woman dies in childbirth', 'Women's rights are human rights', 'Stop domestic violence!', 'Please report when you see or hear domestic violence!'

Besides her own *majelis ta'lim*, Ruqayyah also regularly delivers *pengajian* at various women's associations in the region (including the association of civil servants' wives, Dharma Wanita, a venue most NGO activists would avoid but where she believes her message should be heard) and on a local radio station. On another radio station she has a weekly interactive talk show discussing gender issues. Her prestige and skills as an orator are such that she is regularly invited to take part in large open-air *pengajian*, along with two or three other, usually male, preachers. Such large *pengajian* are often the occasion for a competition in oratory fireworks, where the most popular preachers establish their ranking. As the sole woman, Ruqayyah is usually the last to speak, which gives her the opportunity to criticize the earlier speakers. She has repeatedly challenged her male colleagues over the issues of polygamy and confinement of women to the domestic sphere.

Ruqayyah not only addresses adults but young girls as well. She has been teaching a special religion class for young girls living in the neighbourhood every day between the dusk and evening prayers, and on Sundays a forum where the girls can '*curhat*' (chat about personal problems) with her. She admonishes them on the importance of education and, citing her own experience, warns them and their parents against child marriage, still a widespread practice in the region. She not only gives advice but actively intervenes where she thinks that is needed, as in the case of an 11-year old girl who was pregnant after being raped by her own grandfather. She helped the girl to get an abortion, overruling religious arguments of her environment, and forced the local community to impose sanctions on the perpetrator, who was a functionary in a mosque where she regularly gives *pengajian*.

It has been Ruqayyah's accomplishment to redraw the boundaries separating the private from the public sphere and to break the silence over oppressive practices, bringing them out into the open and fighting for the empowerment of victims and the shaming or punishment of perpetrators. There can hardly be a more telling example to illustrate the feminist dictum that the personal is political than Ruqayyah's very public private life and her present life as a preacher-teacher-activist. Understandably, she has become the favourite local counterpart and resource person of

Jakarta-based women's NGOs. She learnt much through her contacts with the NGO world, but it was in creatively acting out her traditional role that she became a more effective agent of change than any formal NGO.

Conclusion

According to a recent survey (reported in Mujani and Liddle 2004), slightly over 40% of Indonesians identify more or less with the NU and 17% do so strongly. Much of this constituency is rural and economically backward, characterized by social and economic inequality and pervasive patronage relations. The various efforts at community building and development from below by NGOs trying to reach these communities through the *pesantren* may not have been as successful as their initiators may have hoped, and in many cases the *kiai* may even have reinforced their control over the communities through these projects, but that is only part of the story. Whereas the first generation of NGO activists active in these circles were culturally speaking outsiders, from the mid-1980s on increasing numbers of *pesantren*-educated young people (mostly students or graduates of IAIN) became active in a wide range of NGOs, and much larger numbers followed training programs on various subjects given by these NGOs. The visible impact of these activities on the emancipation and economic development of backward communities may have been marginal, but they have had the effect of creating a counter-elite within the NU constituency. Many young, socially engaged men and women have learned useful practical skills (from organizing a meeting and moderating discussions to legal drafting and publishing and marketing books) and broadened their horizons through their involvement in these NGOs. The very ideas of critical engagement with the tradition, and of a plurality of valid interpretations have found wide acceptance among the better-educated *pesantren* graduates, and established forms of class and gender inequality are openly challenged. The traditionalist Islam of the *pesantren* environment, which used to be socially and culturally conservative, has paradoxically spawned a progressive movement for social and religious reform that is closer to the grassroots than most others. The most remarkable aspect of this progressive movement is the role of the *kiai rakyat*, whose ideas and ideals and whose social interventions reflect their experiences with the NGO world but who depend on their traditional (in most cases inherited) legitimacy to be effective.

References

Abdurrahman, Moeslim

- 1988 'Wong cilik dan kebutuhan teologi transformatif', in: Masyhur Amin (ed.), *Teologi pembangunan; paradigma baru pemikiran Islam*, pp. 153-61. Yogyakarta: LKPSM NU DIY.
- 1995 *Islam transformatif*. Jakarta: Pustaka Firdaus.
- 2003 *Islam sebagai kritik sosial*. Jakarta: Penerbit Erlangga.

Anam, Choirul

- 1985 *Pertumbuhan dan perkembangan Nahdlatul Ulama*. Sala: Jatayu.

Aspinall, Edward

- 1999 'The Indonesian student uprising of 1998', in: Arief Budiman, Barbara Hatley and Damien Kingsbury (eds), *Reformasi; crisis and change in Indonesia*, pp. 212-37. Clayton: Monash Asia Institute.

Baso, Ahmad

- 1999 *Civil society versus Masyarakat Madani; Arkeologi pemikiran 'civil society' dalam Islam Indonesia*. Bandung: Pustaka Hidayah.

Beatty, Andrew

- 1999 *Varieties of Javanese religion; An anthropological account*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Benda, Harry J.

- 1958 *The Crescent and the Rising Sun; Indonesian Islam under the Japanese Occupation 1942-1945*. The Hague: W. van Hoeve.

Bruinessen, Martin van

- 1994 *NU; Tradisi, relasi-relasi kuasa, pencarian wacana baru*. Yogyakarta: LKiS.
- 1995 'Muslims of the Dutch East Indies and the caliphate question', *Studia Islamika* 2 no.3:115-40.
- 2002 'Back to Situbondo? Nahdlatul Ulama attitudes towards Abdurrahman Wahid's presidency and his fall', in: Henk Schulte Nordholt and Irwan Abdullah (eds), *Indonesia; In search of transition*, pp. 15-46. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.

Bush, Robin

- 2002 'Islam and civil society; the case of Nahdlatul Ulama'. Ph.D. thesis, University of Washington, Seattle.

Castles, Lance

- 1966 'Notes on the Islamic school at Gontor', *Indonesia* 1:30-45.

Effendi, Djohan

- 2000 'Progressive traditionalists; the emergence of a new discourse in Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama during the Abdurrahman Wahid era'. Ph.D. thesis, Deakin University, Melbourne.

- Eldridge, Philip J.
- 1995 *Non-government organizations and democratic participation in Indonesia*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Fakih, Mansour
- 1987 'Dakwah; siapa yang diuntungkan ?' *Pesantren* No.4, Vol. IV:9-14.
- 1989 'Mencari teologi untuk kaum tertindas (khidmat dan kritik untuk guruku Prof. Harun Nasution)', in: H. Aqib Suminto (ed.), *Refleksi pembaharuan pemikiran Islam; 70 tahun Harun Nasution*, pp. 165-77. Jakarta: LSAF.
- Feillard, Andr e
- 1997 'Indonesia's emerging Muslim feminism; women leaders on equality, inheritance and other gender issues', *Studia Islamika* 4 no. 1:83-111.
- Fox, James and Pradjarto Dirjosanjoto
- 1989 'The memories of village santri from Jombang in East Java', in: R. J. May and William J. O'Malley (ed.), *Observing change in Asia. Essays in honour of J.A.C. Mackie*, pp. 94-110. Bathurst: Crawford House Press.
- Geertz, Clifford
- 1959 'The Javanese kijaji; The changing role of a cultural broker', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2:228-249.
- 1960 *The religion of Java*. New York: The Free Press.
- Hadiwinata, Bob. S.
- 2003 *The politics of NGOs in Indonesia: developing democracy and managing a movement*. New York: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Hann, Chris and Elizabeth Dunn (eds)
- 1996 *Civil society; Challenging western models*. London: Routledge.
- Hefner, Robert W.
- 1998 'A Muslim civil society? Indonesian reflections on the conditions of its possibility', in: Robert W. Hefner (ed.), *Democratic civility*, pp. 285-321. London: Transaction Publishers.
- 2000 *Civil Islam; Muslims and democratization in Indonesia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hidayat, Komaruddin
- 1985 'Pesantren dan elit desa', in: M. Dawam Rahardjo (ed.), *Pergulatan dunia pesantren; Membangun dari bawah*, pp. 73-97. Jakarta: P3M.
- Ida, Laode
- 2004 *NU muda; kaum progresif dan sekularisme baru*. Jakarta: Erlangga.
- Kuntowijoyo
- 1988 'Menuju kemandirian; pesantren dan pembangunan desa', *Prisma* XVII No. 1:102-115.

- Madrid, Robin
- 1999 'Islamic students in the Indonesian student movement, 1998-1999', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 31:17-32.
- Marcoes-Natsir, Lies M. and Syafiq Hasyim
- 1997 *P3M dan program fiqh an-nisa untuk penguatan hak-hak reproduksi perempuan*, Jakarta: P3M.
- Martin-Schiller, Barbara
- 1989 'Social networks in an upland Javanese village; family and community', *Prisma - The Indonesian Indicator* no. 46:32-44.
- Mihardja, Achdiat K. (ed.)
- 1977 *Polemik kebudayaan, 3rd ed.* Jakarta:Pustaka Jaya.
- Mujani, Saiful and R. William Liddle
- 2004 "Indonesia's approaching elections; politics, Islam, and public opinion", *Journal of Democracy* 15:109-123.
- Prasodjo, Sudjoko et al.
- 1974 *Profil pesantren. Laporan hasil penelitian pesantren Al-Falak dan delapan pesantren lain di Bogor.* Jakarta: LP3ES.
- Rahardjo, M. Dawam
- 1973 'Kyai, pesantren dan desa; suatu gambaran awal', *Prisma II*, no. 4:80-95.
- Rahardjo, M. Dawam (ed.)
- 1974 *Pesantren dan pembaharuan.* Jakarta:LP3ES.
- 1985 *Pergulatan dunia pesantren; membangun dari bawah.* Jakarta:P3M.
- Rahima
- 2001 'Potret - Nyai Ruqayyah Ma'shum; "Kekerasan tak boleh didiamkan lagi"', *Swara Rahima I*, no. 2:27-31. Online at: <http://www.rahima.or.id/SR/02-01/Potret.htm>
- Saifuddin, Fahmi D.
- 1988 'Peranan pondok pesantren untuk mewujudkan ketahanan masyarakat desa'. Tugas karya perorangan, Lembaga Pertahanan Nasional, Mabes ABRI, Jakarta.
- Salim HS, Hairus and Muhammad Ridwan (eds)
- 1999 *Kultur hibrida; anak muda NU di jalur kultural.* Yogyakarta:LKiS.
- Sidel, John T.
- 2001 "'It takes a madrasah'?; Habermas meets Bourdieu in Indonesia' [review article on Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and democratization in Indonesia*], *South East Asia Research* 9, 1:109-122.
- Soebagijo I. N.
- 1972 *K.H. Mas Mansur: Pembaharu Islam di Indonesia*, Jakarta: Gunung Agung.

Soetomo

1977 'Nationaal-onderwijs-congres', in: Achdiat K. Mihardja (ed.), *Polemik kebudayaan, 3rd ed.*, pp. 43-51. Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya.

Uhlin, Anders

1997 *Indonesia and the "Third Wave of Democratization"; the Indonesian pro-democracy movement in a changing world.* Richmond: Curzon.

Walkin, Jacob

1969 'The Moslem-communist confrontation in East Java, 1964-1965', *Orbis* 13/3:822-847.

Widjojo, Muridan S. and Moch. Nurhasim

1999 'Organisasi gerakan mahasiswa 98; upaya rekonstruksi', in: Muridan S. Widjojo, Irine H. Gayatri and Moch. Nurhasim (ed.), *Penakluk rejim Orde Baru; gerakan mahasiswa '98*, pp. 290-376. Jakarta: Sinar Harapan.