

“Shaping US Policies toward the Malay Muslim World: Experiences in Brunei and Beyond”

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My goal in the next few minutes is to share with you experiences that, I believe, illustrate both the changing nature of political Islam in the Malay Muslim world and ways in which the United States has responded. When I speak of the Malay Muslim world, I refer specifically to Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, and Indonesia. My experiences with southern Thailand and the southern Philippines are less direct and will be included only by inference. And I must emphasize that these reflect **my** experiences. I do not pretend to speak for the totality of US policymaking efforts throughout this 30-year period.

In 1980, the State Department sent me to Cornell’s Southeast Studies Program for a year. I had served in Surabaya a few years before, where I first met Prof. Emmerson, and I was assigned to go to the embassy in Jakarta as a political officer. While at Cornell, I was under the mentorship of Prof. George Kahin. He offered to let me share an office at the Cornell Modern Indonesia Project building on the edge of the lower campus. My officemate was Sidney Jones, who currently leads the International Crisis Group in Indonesia. She is well-known for her recent work on Indonesian terrorist groups.

In the fall of 1980, Sidney had just arrived at Cornell after a year of field research in Indonesia. There, she concentrated on the country’s largest Muslim organization, the Nahdlatul Ulama or NU. As we talked about my upcoming assignment, Sidney described how the Indonesian political scene was evolving outside the political space allowed by Soeharto’s New Order regime. She encouraged me on return to Indonesia to get to know a Nahdlatul Ulama scholar who was quite different from the usual NU *kiyai*.*

Few Americans shared Sidney’s view that the politics of Islam outside the formal system was indeed “where the action was” or at least, where it was about to be. Fortunately, the head of the political section was ready to accommodate my interest. I made getting acquainted with this NU scholar as soon as possible my top priority. Our first meeting began what would become an ongoing relationship for a succession of US diplomats, ambassadors, and other officials. This then-rather obscure Muslim intellectual was Abdurrachman Wahid.

Now, jump ahead about 22 years to Brunei. Imagine a gathering of some 200 girls and young women. All are in their Girl Guide uniforms and nearly all have their heads covered with white *tudongs*. As our group enters the hall, the warmth of the response to the speaker is overwhelming. You’d think it was a rock star. Instead, it is an American woman astronaut, ‘Cady’ Coleman. My embassy has used its tiny allocation of public diplomacy funds to bring Cady from the US. In addition to her two flights aboard the Space Shuttle, Cady is an Air Force colonel. She has a Ph.D. in polymer physics. She is a wife and a mother. She is in Brunei to do two things: first, to present another face of the US and its people, and second, to provide a role model for young Bruneians. The students’ reaction is even better than anticipated. The local media gives Cady extraordinary coverage; even the Malay language daily, which rarely prints embassy materials, puts her visit on its front page.

* *Kiyai* is a term for a scholar of Islam or an imam commonly used in Indonesia, especially by Nahdlatul Ulama.

So, you may ask yourself, 'what do these two stories have to do with shaping US policies in the Malay Muslim world?' I believe they illustrate different American responses in two different eras.

The first was an era of dynamic change in the global politics of Islam. The effects of the Iranian revolution were evident not just in their early impact on the way many Muslims, including those in Southeast Asia, began to think about what they wore. More importantly, the idea had been planted that autocratic regimes were vulnerable to a religious-based political movement.

Also, changes in ideas among Muslims were influenced by more than what was happening in Iran. It may be hard to recall now, but the early 1980's were a period of intense competition between Libya's Muammer Qaddafi and Saudi Arabia for influence among Sunni Muslims. Libyan embassies in countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines were distributing copies of Qaddafi's "Green Book" as fast as they received them from Tripoli. And the Saudis were countering with the distribution of Korans and donations to independent Islamic schools.

While the US was not directly embroiled in this intra-Islamic battle of ideas, we obviously had a stake in understanding how it was playing out in the Malay Muslim societies of Southeast Asia. Its impact could potentially affect our diplomatic, economic, and military relations with those nations. American diplomats needed to get to know people like Abdurrachman Wahid, Adi Sasono, Lukman Harun, Slamet Bratanata, and Deliar Noer, if we were to appreciate the underlying political trends in Indonesia.

By the time Cady Coleman came to Brunei in 2005, circumstances were obviously changed. The US had been attacked on September 11, 2001. We were engaged in the Global War on Terrorism. Brunei's government felt itself vulnerable to terrorism and shared our larger goals. However, American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were not popular among Brunei citizens.

Getting our official messages into the small, tightly-controlled local media was difficult. And Bruneians had access to many sources of information, including BBC and CNN. Plus, they were exposed to a daily dose of al-Jazeera translated simultaneously into Malay. In this era, it was not a question of understanding the local political dynamic so much as affecting that dynamic by offering other narratives about the US. We in the U.S. embassy wanted to tap into what we believed was a significant residue of admiration and respect for our country and some openness to our ideas.

While very different in time and circumstance, these two stories have a link. From my earliest experiences as a foreign service officer, I have been convinced that exchange programs are among the most effective diplomatic tools we have as a nation. Obviously, Cady Coleman's visit to Brunei was a tangible example of putting that belief into action. With Abdurrachman Wahid, we at the embassy in Jakarta soon found a way to bring him to the US. As I recall, his first visit was in response to an invitation to participate in an annual White House prayer breakfast. Wahid welcomed the opportunity. Not only did it expose him to a diverse group of American religious leaders. It also provided an opportunity for them to meet a moderate, thoughtful Muslim figure who could help them better appreciate what was happening in Indonesia. Understanding grew in both directions.

Wahid was not the only NU member or Indonesian Muslim leader to make an exchange visit. And it was not always easy to convince them, once invited, that going to the US was a good thing. I recall the case of a progressive NU *kiyai* from Central Java, Kiyai Hamam Dja'far. He

was leader of Pondok Pesantren Pabelan,* which won recognition from the Aga Khan Foundation in 1980 for its innovative work in the local community. When first invited, the *kiyai* seemed a bit reluctant, but he agreed. When the time came to travel to Jakarta to collect his tickets and visa, however, he was a ‘no show.’ Later, we contacted him through a close friend in Jakarta and learned that he had decided not to travel at the last minute out of fear that our goal was to convert him to Christianity. After helpful interventions by several of his friends and a call on him by the new American consul in Surabaya, Barbara Harvey, *Kiyai* Hamam agreed to another exchange visit. That one went well. No one tried to convert him. And he returned not only with a deeper appreciation of the US and our people, but also with the highest admiration for the Mormons he met when he visited Salt Lake City. In addition to *Kiyai* Hamam, a generation of his students benefited from that exchange.

Our efforts to reach out and build understanding did not always rely on exchange programs or significant US resources. Sometimes, it was a matter of encouraging something that was happening anyway. In Kuala Lumpur in the early 1990’s, I became acquainted with an American Muslim woman who was in Malaysia with her teacher husband. This woman had her own Ph.D. in Islamic studies. She regularly met with a group of Malaysian Muslim women who sought a more balanced appreciation of their religion, which they felt they did not always receive from male *ulama*. This group had a life of its own, and we in the embassy limited ourselves to staying in touch and offering moral support for their efforts. One of the leading Malaysian voices in this group was Zainah Anwar, and the group, of course, became “Sisters in Islam,” which continues its active civil society role in Malaysia today. I know from talking to Zainah in Malaysia in 2002 that she deeply appreciated the embassy’s interest and encouragement a decade before.

For those of you more comfortable with a chronological approach, I will shift back to Brunei and wrap up with a couple of stories. I do so not because I believe Brunei is an axis around which the Malay Muslim world revolves. But I do so for two very good reasons. First, because I was American ambassador there, and ambassadors have a rare opportunity to put their personal mark on policy. And second, because these illustrations say something about ‘shaping,’ not just in the sense of shaping US policies as the title of this presentation suggests but also in shaping the environment in which US policies are received internationally. I know my counterparts in the region – indeed, in all Muslim majority countries – were engaged in similar efforts.

Just before I arrived in Brunei as ambassador, the Sultan visited the US for his first-ever meeting in the White House with a US president. In addition to Washington, DC, the Sultan also visited the US Military Academy at West Point. There, he learned about the international student cadets who attend West Point every year, including from Brunei’s neighbors in Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Pakistan, and South Korea. As we drove back to New York City, two of the Sultan’s advisors asked me if there was any bar to a cadet from Brunei. The answer was ‘no.’

Within a few months, I heard from the head of the Armed Forces that Brunei would like to put forward a cadet candidate. We all understood this would be a challenge. Brunei’s education system produces good students, but its focus is on preparing them for university in the British system. Finding just the right person would not be easy.

We were not successful the first year. However, the Bruneians identified a young man early in the cycle for 2005. Working with his mentors, our cultural affairs assistant, Merlin Kong, and our defense attaché in Singapore guided him through the process. I was extremely proud the day the Armed Forces chief came to my office at the embassy to join me in publicly announcing the appointment of the first Brunei cadet to West Point. Recognizing how many

* In Indonesia, a *pondok pesantren* is a Muslim boarding school, often in a rural location.

foreign West Point graduates have risen to the top of their own military services, we all appreciated the potential significance of this event.

And a final story to close: Brunei is a small, wealthy, and mostly homogeneous country. The Sultan has used an abundance of oil and gas wealth to provide generous benefits and infrastructure to his citizens. Freedom House rates Brunei as 'not free,' and US country human reports for Brunei have, on balance, been critical. Unlike in some countries where I have served, such as Indonesia and Turkey, the government of Brunei has not engaged in dialogue with us about the human rights report.

Beginning in 2003, several Brunei officials expressed concern to me that Brunei was too little known in the US and its own officials knew too few American counterparts. In 2004, I became aware of a program that was the result of an earmark in the State Department funding authorization. This was the "Rule of Law Forum," organized by the Dedman School of Law at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

Unlike so many programs of its kind, the "Rule of Law Forum" did not exclude a well-off country like Brunei. Indeed, in establishing the funding stream, Texas Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison was specifically concerned by an absence of dialogue between the US and Muslim majority countries. Brunei seemed like a good fit, and the dean of the law school agreed to set up a forum event.

In 2005, I accompanied the delegation of Bruneians selected to participate in the forum. After visits to New York and Washington, we flew to Dallas. There, the dean and several distinguished Texans talked about the rule of law in the US. And the Bruneians described the rule of law and process of political evolution in their own country. This was, to the best of my knowledge, the first-ever dialogue between Bruneians and Americans on human rights and the rule of law. Its success was attributable to the fact that it was 'unofficial' and off-the-record. There was another important outcome. It gave the Bruneians access to a new group of senior American political and legal figures, including Senator Hutchison and Supreme Court Justices O'Connor and Breyer.

Success might also be measured by what happened to some of the participants on the Brunei side. A delegation that left Brunei headed by a minister and including three permanent secretaries* returned to Brunei immediately after the Sultan announced a cabinet shuffle. The minister had been moved to another important ministry. Two of the permanent secretaries were elevated to become ministers, as was the head of the Brunei Economic Development Board, who was with us, and another permanent secretary became deputy minister of defense. From one minister to four ministers and a deputy. It was remarkable. And my personal stock among Brunei officials, to say nothing of my diplomatic counterparts, rose to an incredible level. How did I know who to choose, they all asked.

I think this last story says something important about shaping. It is a two-way street. Yes, we can try to shape or influence how governments and their peoples think about the US and its policies. But, we must also be aware that we are being shaped in return – that through their interactions with us, the Malay Muslim communities of Southeast Asia may shape our own ideas and policies.

Thank you.

* Equivalent to an under secretary in the US system.