

## Moderate Muslims get vocal in Indonesia

**Fahira Idris recalls the day she visited the headquarters of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), a group known for its violent acts and vocal support for Sharia law.**

"Of course I was terrified, but I was there on behalf of hundreds of people," says Fahira, with a warm smile.

Since its birth in 1998 the FPI has made its name raiding bars, nightclubs and restaurants open during the fasting month of Ramadan.

But the most infamous incident took place in 2008, when the group attacked a rally staged in support of religious tolerance.

The incident led to the arrest of FPI leader Habib Rizieq Shihab, a Saudi-educated scholar who has become the face of radical Islam in Indonesia.

When Fahira visited their headquarters last year she took hundreds of petitions and emails, demanding the group to drop their violent dogma.

In the end both parties agreed to disagree, but the meeting itself was a milestone. It was the first time a member of public, not someone holding office, had come forward to talk with the FPI leader and express their concern.

"It was three days before the start of holy Ramadan month and I said, okay, if no one's going to say this to their face, then I will," says Fahira, a practising Muslim.

Despite there being no conclusion to the meeting, last year's Ramadan went by without any violent attacks from FPI members.



Fahira is also working on the 'Love Peace Movement' using social media

Many public figures - including Islamic figureheads - have openly called for the dissolution of FPI, but the authorities have repeatedly insisted they can't find any criminal evidence to ban the group, once described by the International Crisis Group as an "urban thug organisation".

"We have been staying on the sidelines and discussing this for far too long," says Fahira.

She says Islam in Indonesia should not be represented by the face of the FPI, and she's convinced that many Muslims in the country share her belief.

"It's just that they choose to be quiet."

### **Vocal opposition**

Being vocal is not the norm among Muslim moderates in Indonesia, where almost 185 of its 230 million people follow Islam, making it the world's biggest Muslim nation by population.

"The militants will always be noisier although the moderates outnumber them by millions," says Ulil Abshar Abdalla, a Muslim activist who campaigns relentlessly for pluralism in Indonesia.

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Ulil Abshar Abdalla  
Muslim activist

But his vocal opposition to Sharia law in Indonesia comes at a price. Ulil received his first murder threat after he founded the Liberal Islam Network in 2001.

Earlier this year Ulil was the target of a bomb hidden inside a book titled, 'They must be killed because of their sin against Islam'. He was unharmed, but the police officer who opened the package lost his right arm.

A group of young men who the police describe as 'a new breed of terror' were later declared as suspects. Police also foiled an attempted attack on a church outside Jakarta, allegedly by the same men.

"I was worried, of course. But we can't stop because of things like that," says the Harvard graduate.

### **Misused momentum**

Indonesia has recently been hit by a series of small outbursts of religious violence after a long period of peace.

On the outskirts of the capital a Christian man was stabbed following a local dispute over building a church inside a Muslim neighbourhood.



Hardliners demonstrate against the Ahmadiyah sect because of its beliefs

In February 2011 three people were killed when an angry mob attacked supporters of the Ahmadiyah Muslim sect in Umbulan village, Pandeglang, Banten.

The Ahmadi movement follows the teachings of the Koran, but is regarded by orthodox Muslims as heretical because it does not believe that Mohammed was the final prophet sent to guide mankind.

According to Ulil Abshar, Islam has enjoyed a political revival in Indonesia since former president Suharto stepped down 13 years ago, but this momentum has been misused by some for political gain. "For some, it manifested into intolerance and violence in the name of Islam," says Ulil.

Islam was suppressed as a political power under President Suharto, who held office for 32 years until his resignation in 1998.

This largely stemmed from Suharto's fear of creating an alternative focus of power. Authorities also discouraged strong public displays of Islamic values, fearing a rise in fundamentalism.

Analysts say the absence of autocratic ruling has created room for radicalism.

The problem has also been made worse because some hardliners are known to receive backing by former generals, who seek political gain from them.

"Either for political or personal reasons, authorities are sometimes reluctant to take firm action against them. Hence that makes them feel privileged," says Ulil.

### **Radicalisation of youth**

Despite recent crackdowns, the FPI says it now has more members than ever before.

A recent survey found that almost half of high school pupils around Jakarta approved of the use of violence in the name of religion and morality.

"This is indeed an astonishing result," says Bambang Pranowo, a professor at the Jakarta Islamic State University, which ran the survey.

Pranowo believes this is the result of a vacuum created by moderate Muslims who have not been pro-active enough to discourage radicalism.

"As a result the youth absorbed ideas from anywhere else, in this case also from the radicals," says Pranowo.



**Suharto ruled Indonesia for over three decades, but was ousted in 1998**

He also blames the media for creating 'hype' over the hardliners activities. "The media went wild with the news of Imam Samudra being executed," he says, referring to the Bali bomber.

He insists that some of the media coverage tended to "glorify" the convicted bombers. "When the public are fed up with news on corruption and injustice, apparently some find solace in people who show they can fight for justice their own way," says Pranowo.

In the months since the results of Pranowo's survey two of Indonesia's biggest moderate Islam organisations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama, have been under review.

While some high ranking government officials have denounced the survey in public, both Islamic organisations admit the survey was a wake-up call.

"I've been invited to countless occasions by both organisations, also their top notch ulemas, who are really worried about this," says Pranowo.

Fahira Idries says she's working on a campaign using social media.

"We initiated this Love Peace Movement around Indonesia via twitter and now we have about 10,000 members already," she says.

"Teachings can only be challenged by teachings, belief by belief. Don't count on others to do it for you".