

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2181  
December 31, 2008

## Indonesian President's Praise of Natsir Raises Questions

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These are perilous times for those in the idea business. Whether you're a think tanker or a politician, it is easier than ever to be misunderstood. Words reach the four corners of the world at the speed of light; it is impossible to segregate audiences.

Indonesian President Bambang Susilo Yudhoyono seemed to be aiming at a very specific audience a couple weeks ago when he capped a long-standing push to designate M. Natsir a national hero with a speech in the Indonesian province of West Sumatra. His host, West Sumatra's Governor Gamawan Fauzi, used the occasion to note that history will forever remember President Yudhoyono's leadership in making the determination. Indeed. But what did the president intend by conferring essentially favored son status on this very learned—and by all accounts polite and unassuming—Islamist?

**A Suitable Role Model?** The president sought to explain. He lauded Natsir for his anti-colonialism and his fundamental contribution to Indonesia's unity. Natsir's anti-colonialism credentials are best judged by Indonesians; but they seem to be beyond question. With regard to his impact on Indonesian unity, the debate will continue. Some will surely fault the president's logic in praising someone so closely identified with rebellion.

But the seriously perplexing part of the speech came when the president praised Natsir as a model for addressing misunderstandings about Islam and serving as a bridge between cultures and religions.

Natsir is associated with a political ideology that informed people do not generally associate with

Indonesia. His founding of Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (DDII) alone would make him an inappropriate role model for the nation. Theodore Friend, a highly regarded historian, describes DDII as "extreme," "intolerant," and yes, "Islamist." Among its targets, he counts "Muslim liberalism," "the economic dominance of the Chinese," and a "conspiracy to Christianize Indonesia." The DDII's problem with Christians in particular makes it strikingly odd to commend its founder for an ability to bridge understanding between religions.

Natsir's precise views on and personal history with Pancasila (Indonesia's founding non-sectarian state philosophy) were no doubt complex. But when all is said and done, history remembers him as Indonesia's foremost advocate for the direct role of Islam in government and the ideal of the Islamic state.

**Perplexing Politics.** So what's a friend of Indonesia to do? He could tell himself that it's pure politics. The presence of the Islamist PKS minister of agriculture in the entourage to West Sumatra is good evidence of that. But to the president's Islamist political allies, this is about much more than politics. And so, given the stakes, that is not a satisfactory answer. One could say that it's an anomaly, but there are too many similar developments in Indone-

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm2181.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm2181.cfm)

Produced by the Asian Studies Center

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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sia to consider it an anomaly. This year there was the violent Islamist attacks at Indonesia's national monument, the fatwa on Ahmadiyya, and the media circus over the execution of the Bali bombers. Last year's enormous Hizbut Tahrir rally in Jakarta and near victory of an Islamist candidate for governor of Jakarta also jolted observers of Indonesian politics.

A friend of Indonesia would definitely tell his colleagues that all of this must be kept in perspective. Despite a 2004 electoral surge for Islamist standard-bearer PKS, considerable success at the local and provincial levels since, and high hopes for 2009, the fundamentalists are further from taking control than they were in the 1950s. He would cite the centuries-old ebb and flow of fundamentalism that has always left the Islamists on the losing end of Indonesian history. He would also note Indonesia's extraordinary well-springs of cultural and religious tolerance.

But the Islamists are savvy. They understand better than anyone that ideas can transform a political environment without ever owning it. From Natsir until today, they have sought to prepare the grassroots for Islamization of the state. So even while national politics may register only an occasional flare of radicalism, underneath, the coals glow

bright. This friend of Indonesia worries that Indonesia's mainstream political leaders will wake up too late to find that Indonesia's house is on fire and that not only did they not prevent it, but they unwittingly fanned it.

**Only Time Will Tell.** For a politician, sometimes the only way to deal with different audiences is to just say what he has to and accept that he may be misunderstood by those on the outside. To make that call, however, the political need should far outweigh the risk of alienating his other audiences.

In the case of President Yudhoyono's praise of Natsir, one can only conclude that either the need to accommodate Islamist sentiment is much greater than Indonesia's friends abroad appreciate or that he is miscalculating the strength of the Islamists and unnecessarily appropriating beliefs he doesn't himself hold.

Neither is a particularly comforting conclusion, but at least one friend of Indonesia hopes it is the latter.

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