

Safety signal: As sporadic rioting targets ethnic-Chinese merchants, a Java trader marks 'Muslim' on his storefront in hopes of avoiding damage.

INDONESIA

'Us' and 'Them'

Muslim activists say it's time to seize economic power

By Margot Cohen in Jakarta

Fadli Zon has a vision. The former student activist imagines his countrymen cycling slowly down Jakarta's Jalan Thamrin, a central boulevard normally choked with cars. Instead of Western clothes, everyone will be wearing sarongs made of rough cloth. "If necessary, we'll go backwards 10 or 15 years," he says fervently. "The Muslim majority is ready to face any challenge, as long as there is economic justice. We can start to develop our country without them."

To Fadli, a rising young thinker and editor, "them" refers to Indonesia's tiny ethnic-Chinese minority, which he holds responsible for the country's deepening economic crisis. If "they" don't return their wealth parked overseas, he warns, it's payback time. Time for the 87% Muslim largely Catholic- and Buddhist-Chinese entrepreneurs would delay economic recovery and dent the already battered rupiah further. In addition, religion-based policies appear to clash with the deregulated, free-trade environment sought by the International Monetary Fund.

Will Muslim economic nationalism triumph? Will long-simmering anti-Chinese sentiment explode beyond the current level of scattered riots? There are no simple answers. For the moment, the Muslims have no coherent political strategy—not surprising, given President Suharto's systematic attempts to depoliticize Islam since launching his New Order in the 1960s.

In fact, the grassroots distress triggered by the current economic crunch has deepened the rifts within the Muslim community, spawning new groups with shifting memberships and nebulous loyalties. religious and ethnic lines to achieve this goal. Take Amien Rais, chairman of Muhammadiyah, a Muslim group that boasts 25 million largely urban members from the middle and lower-middle classes. Rais has agreed to work with Megawati Sukarnoputri, ousted chairman of the opposition Indonesian Democratic Party. Megawati may be short on answers for the nation's future, but she brings a religious rainbow of supporters to the table.

Other Muslim groups, however, prefer to side with the status quo. The gentler, wealthier 1990s have been benign for Indonesia's Muslims. They have gained greater freedom to preach and practise, as well as a new Islamic bank and the Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals, whose aim is to foster Muslim social and economic interests. Known by its acronym ICMI, the organization draws its members from Indonesia's social elite, and is chaired by Research and Technology Minister B.J. Habibie, viewed as Suharto's choice for vice-president.

To be sure, ICMI has disappointed Muslims by its failure to empower Muslim entrepreneurs. But now that they have come in from the cold, certain Muslim leaders don't want to rush back outside. "There's no guarantee that under new leadership we can enjoy all of these benefits," says H. Ahmad Sumargono, vice-chairman of the Indonesia Committee for World Muslim Solidarity, known by its acronym KISDI.

Fear of reprisal is also a factor. It was probably behind the decision of the Muslim-oriented United Development Party, better-known as the PPP, to support another presidential term for Suharto. A. Hafidz Ma'soem, chief of the PPP's chapter in Jombang, east Java, believes backing another candidate could have led to ostracization of party members. A Muslim youth leader in Jakarta echoes those qualms. "How can we summon the courage to struggle? If there's a discussion at noon, the authorities find out by evening. The security forces are very repressive," says Syaiful Bahri Anshori, who chairs a youth group under Nahdlatul Ulama,

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