

“Do Not Take Unbelievers as Your Leaders: The Politics of Translation in Indonesia”

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Mizan Texts and Translations 01

After achieving independence in 1945, Indonesian leaders began tackling the basic questions that faced all postcolonial state-builders: What principles would guide the state and nation? Communism or capitalism? Secularism or Islam? How could they craft a common national identity from a diverse population?

In the Indonesian case, this challenge entailed uniting a population of hundreds of ethnic groups, equally as many languages, a wide array of religious traditions, and territory spanning a vast archipelago the equivalent of the distance from Britain to Baghdad. As a result, these questions were not speculative: they were of pressing importance to the founders of the state, as well as the nation at large.

It is against this backdrop that in the April 1954 issue of the popular Indonesian Muslim periodical *Al-Muslimun*, the editors published an unusual translation of a well-known verse from *Sūrat al-Nisā'* of the Qur'an from Arabic into Indonesian.¹

Arabic	Arabic-English	Indonesian	Indonesian-English
يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَتَّخِذُوا الْكَافِرِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَتُرِيدُونَ أَنْ تَجْعَلُوا لِلَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ سُلْطَانًا مُبِينًا	O you who believe! Do not take unbelievers as friends rather than believers; do you wish to provide God clear proof against you?	Hai orang2 jang beriman! Djanganlah kamu mendjadikan orang2 kafir itu sebagai ketua2 (kamu) padahal mereka dari kaum Mu'minin.	Oh you who believe! Do not take people who are unbelievers as your leaders since actually they are not of the family of Believers.

Notice a difference between the Arabic-English and the Indonesian-English translations of Q.4:144. In the former, the Muslim reader is urged not to become friends with unbelievers rather than Muslims, so as to

¹ “Memilih Pemimpin Jang Bukan Islam,” *Al-Muslimun*, April 1954, 3.

avoid offering God evidence of a lack of loyalty to the Muslim community.² In the latter, it is not friendship but *leadership* at stake; the reader is urged not to select non-Muslims as leaders.³ The implication is that support for non-Muslim leaders is inconsistent with a Muslim's obligations to God, and that anyone supporting non-Muslim leaders would be punished in the hereafter.

Further along in the article, the editors offer another curious translation of a qur'anic verse (5:55).⁴

Arabic	Arabic-English	Indonesian	Indonesian-English
إِنَّمَا وَلِيُّكُمُ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَهُمْ رَاكِعُونَ	Your friends are God, His Messenger, and those who believe, who regularly pray, and bring zakat, and they bow humbly...	Pemimpin (ketua) kamu itu tidak lain melainkan Allah, Rasul-Nja dan orang2 jang beriman jang mendirikan sembahjang dan mengeluarkan zakat, padahal mereka merendah diri.	Your real leader (chief) is none other than Allah, his Apostle, and those who believe, those who regularly pray, and bring zakat, and they bow humbly.

As before, the author has substituted "leader" for Arabic "friends" (*wali/awliya*) in the Indonesian translation. And just in case the injunction was unclear, the editor inserted a synonym for leader, "chair" or "chief," in order to compel the reader to follow a Muslim rather than a non-Muslim leader. In other words, the author left no doubt as to whom the Qur'an commands should lead Muslims in Indonesia.

What explains this unusual translation? In this essay, I will explore and assess three different strategies for resolving this question: the ambiguities of translation, the ideology of the author, and the politics of translation.

One strategy for answering this question is to focus on varying interpretations of the key term *wali/awliya*, rendered in the Arabic-English translation above as "friends." In other translations of the Qur'an, the term

² The phrase "clear proof" renders the Arabic *sulṭān mubīn*, following the classic medieval commentary *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, which explains *sulṭān mubīn* as *burhān bayyin*. The word *sulṭān* usually means "power" or "authority" but the concluding phrase here clearly means "do not give God an unambiguous case against you" or "pretext for judging you."

³ Author's translation from the Indonesian.

⁴ "Memilih Pemimpin Jang Bukan Islam," *Al-Muslimun*, April 1954, 3. Author's translation.

may be rendered differently: “allies,” “patrons,” “protectors,” “helpers,” “sponsors,” “guardians,” or “supporters.” Yet the most common term in translations of the Qur’an is “friends.” This translation reflects the principle, well established by scholars of Islam, that the Qur’an envisions a variety of relationships defined by the idea of protective friendship.⁵ Ultimately only God alone can be trusted to be one’s protector, although the believing community may also play this role. Believers should thus be protective friends to each other and should not choose unbelievers for protection, since non-believers may be deceptive.

Yet, while these ambiguities are important, the disjunction between “friends” and the Indonesian translation into “leaders,” “chief,” and “chair” is too vast to be explained simply by the vicissitudes of translation. Clearly, something more is going on.

Another way of explaining the discrepancy is to look at the ideology of the author. *Al-Muslimun* was a monthly magazine published by the Islamic association Persatuan Islam (Persis) in Bangil, Indonesia from 1954-1960. Persis is one of Indonesia’s oldest Islamic organizations, founded in 1923. Ideologically, it is sometimes compared to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood or Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistan and categorized as radical fundamentalist, extreme modernist, or Islamist. Indeed, elsewhere in the pages of *Al-Muslimun* we see references to the famous Islamists who helped shape Persis’s views: Abū’l-ʿAlā al-Mawdūdī of Pakistan and his model of an Islamic state as a “theo-democracy” with limited popular sovereignty; Said Ramadan, the son-in-law of Muslim Brotherhood founder Ḥasan al-Bannā and progenitor of the World Islamic League; and Muhammad Asad of Pakistan, who developed influential ideas about Islamic constitutionalism. Perhaps, then, the translation reflects the editors’ ideological intolerance to non-Muslim leaders in democratic Indonesia?

The problem with this explanation is that the pages of *Al-Muslimun* also feature the promotion of tolerance of Indonesian Christians and promises to protect the religious freedom of Christian churches in the country. In the same edition of the magazine, in response to the question of whether a Muslim can work in a church, the editor wrote that it would be permitted as long as it was not necessary to kneel in front of a statue of Jesus or Mary. Working for an unbeliever in other ways would also be permissible as well. In other words, an ideological explanation for the translation seems problematic and none of these theorists provide precedent for Persis’s unusual translation. Again, something else must be going on.

To understand the disjuncture, we need to look at the political context of the translation and not just the key terms or the ideology of the organization. In April 1954, Persis was preparing for Indonesia’s first national democratic elections. Their main opponents were not Christians but rather nationalists (mostly secular Muslims) and communists. As the election grew closer, Persis’ hostility toward communists and nationalists grew alongside expressions of tolerance to Christians. In a fatwa titled, “Joining Parties Whose Principles are Opposed to Islam and Those Whose Character is Opposed to Islam,” Persis declared that it was prohibited (*ḥaram*) for Muslims to become members of parties that have principles that were opposed to Islamic law, or who opposed the state implementation of Islamic law. Given that both the Indonesian

⁵ Daniel A. Madigan, “Themes and Topics,” in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), [The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’an](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 79-95, 84.

nationalists and communists were opposed to state implementation of Islamic law, Persis deemed it prohibited to join them.⁶

To explain the translation it is necessary to look at the political alignments of the 1950s. The communists were growing in power, and often aligning with the nationalists. In response, Persis looked increasingly to the Christians as potential allies in parliament and in public debates concerning the role of religion in the new state. They signaled to the Muslim public that only voting for a Muslim party was permitted, while supporting nationalists or communists was forbidden. This applied even to parties predominantly comprised of Muslims, like the nationalists. Any politician or party that was opposed to the state implementation of Islamic law was deemed a “non-Muslim.” And by including nationalists and communists as non-Muslims, Persis was forced to stretch the definition of unbeliever, too.

The next issue of *Al-Muslimun*, in May 1954, continued the polemic by providing specific definitions of four types of unbelievers and correlating them to Indonesian political parties. The first is *kafir inkar*, the one who denies, refuses, or rejects Allah like Pharaoh, Karl Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and other communists. The second is *kafir nifaq*, the one who accepts Islam but seeks to mix it with other ideologies, like the Indonesian Communists. The third is *kafir 'inaad*, the one who knows the truth of Islam, but does not want it to be the foundation of the state, like the Indonesian nationalists. The fourth type is *kafir djumud*, who is static, frozen, and contradictory, knowing Allah but not wanting to listen to his commands.⁷ Not surprisingly, in a subsequent issue, marriage to communists is prohibited since they are considered unbelievers.

In sum, by shifting the focus of the qur'anic verse from “friends” to “leaders,” *Al-Muslimun* tried to convince their readers to support Islamic political parties instead of nationalists and communists. In other words, a political calculus in the midst of a heated election season explains this unusual translation of the Qur'an.

I want to use this example about the politics of translation to illustrate some larger points about interpreting sacred texts. I have recently published a book on Islam and tolerance in Indonesia, [*Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism*](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2016). After learning about my book, and my research on Muslims and tolerance, it is common for people to ask, “What does the Qur'an say about tolerance?”

That question requires at least three answers. One is that the Qur'an, or any other scripture, has no single meaning. Within any scripture, including the Qur'an, there are passages that support interreligious conflict (e.g., Q.2:120, 3:28, 4:58; 42:1) and passages that support interreligious cooperation (Q.2:62, 2:213, 4:163, 5:43, 5:47). Sacred texts are always multivocal. A second answer is that within Sunnī, Shī'ī, modernist, traditionalist, or Islamist interpretations of the Qur'an, there are influential arguments for

⁶ “Fatwa Madjlis Ulama Persatuan Islam Tentang Memasuki Partai-Partai Jang Berpendirian Menentang Islam Dan Jang Bersifat Menentang Islam,” *Aliran Islam*, September 1954, 55.

⁷ “Kafir,” *Al-Muslimun*, May 1954, 8.

embracing non-Muslims as equals and influential arguments for embracing only fellow Muslims. Those positions are varied, but all positions are authentic interpretations of the Qur'an.

My third and most important answer is that on any question, there are a vast variety of ways in which the Qur'an can be understood. The task of the scholar is to show how the Qur'an speaks to particular people in particular contexts, rather than as a timeless or universal set of directions. The task of the scholar is, therefore, to investigate how specific communities of Muslims, in specific times and in specific places, understand the lessons of the Qur'an.

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