

**Sadanand Dhume. *My Friend the Fanatic: Travels with a Radical Islamist*.
New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2009. 271 pp.**

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The author of *My Friend the Fanatic* is an Indian Hindu, educated at premier universities in England and the United States, who had a career as a journalist, working at top-rated English-language magazines dealing with Asia. He portrays this book as a foray into a new career as a writer—presumably of nonfiction—focusing on topical subjects related to current events. Sadanand Dhume was living in Indonesia at the time he did research for this book and, while he knew Bahasa Indonesian well enough for general conversations, he relied on a local writer who had access to the militant Muslim community to assist him with interviews. The “fanatic” of the title is that Indonesian writer, who helped the author explore the militant Muslim perspective, while both of them gained considerable insights by the experience. They never came to an agreement on the worth of militant Islam, and their interrelationship was marked by suspicion and estrangement at times, but somehow each gained by the cultural interchange.

The strength of the book lies in its journalistic descriptions of the Indonesian scene. There are two strong side stories, one concerning an extravaganza occurring in the Jakarta artistic community, with its Bohemian airs and general disregard for conventional morality. The author identified strongly with some of its members. The second is a moving portrait of the young women who sign up to work in the factories of Riau, opposite Singapore, and who endure spartan living conditions to earn money for their future marriages. As well, there is an insightful description of the use of the Kijang auto-vans that move workers and guests to wherever they need to go—such vans are a mainstay of many associations in Indonesia. The auto-vans became an important meeting place for the author and various Muslim cadres. The compounds, mosques, and meeting places of the Muslim militants all receive ample attention thanks to the author’s concern for providing good color for the story of the Muslim activists he is addressing.

Equally good are the vignettes of historical Indonesian leaders and their role in creating the conditions that prevail in Indonesian national life. Sadanand Dhume’s thumbnail sketches of presidents Sukarno, Suharto, Habibie, and Abdurrahman Wahid, as well as of several Muslim leaders, provide important historical and contemporary political context. One is equally impressed by the range of Muslim leaders that Sadanand Dhume was able to meet, which included the widely known Din Syamsuddin of the Muhammadiyah, the arrested Abu Bakar Bashir of the Jemaah Islamiyah, and the district commissioner of Bulukumba, who instituted Islamic law in his district of Sulawesi, as well as many others. The general politics of the activist Muslim community is well explained with the inclusion of names of leaders, the role and activities of organizations, and descriptions of general incidents, especially terror strikes, that are featured in headlines regarding the Muslim environment of Indonesia. All this is done with a sharp and interesting style that holds the attention of the reader.

The professional journalistic skills of the writer are abundantly clear in these presentations.

The book is not as strong when it comes to the substance of the Muslim movement. The author indicates at the beginning that he wants to tell the story of Islamic militancy in Indonesia and make some judgments about it. To achieve this end, he succeeds only in part. He finds in his talks with Muslims several persistent themes: the aim to alter Indonesian basic education so that it centers on Arabic language and Islamic subject matter, the replacement of the national law of Indonesia with Islamic law (*syariah*), the subjugation of women, and the promotion of terrorists and militants as martyrs and heroes. Sadanand Dhume is duly concerned about these tendencies and condemns militant Muslims as being strongly in error and as likely to lead all Indonesian Muslims into political, cultural, and religious dead ends. Unfortunately, the themes and the judgments are too often based on generalities and a lack of real depth in the interviews he undertook. In truth, he had limited access to the leaders he set out to interview, having been granted only very short periods of time with them. Rather, he spent most of his time with members of the various leaders' entourages, whose members often had only generalities to impart to him. Neither did he delve deeply into any of the subjects when he had the opportunity, such as the role of women in Islamic society, which Muslim women usually strongly defend and honor, or the role of technology and science in education, which a great number of Muslim university graduates advocate and give Islamic context. As well, Sadanand Dhume gives only limited attention to currents in law-making, where efforts have been made to institute Islamic norms as part of national law, as in marriage, divorce, and reconciliation. As the author himself states, he was uncomfortable with Muslim leaders, feared rejection because of his Hindu faith, and held back from accepting closeness with the Muslims because of cultural differences. He was generally the outsider, and that he was perceived as such is apparent in his descriptions of his meetings. But in his defense, it is often the case in Asia and elsewhere that first visits to people yield some results, but after a person becomes known, he then receives a better reception and consequently gains greater insight. The American scholar Bill Liddle and the Dutch scholar Martin van Bruinessen, who visit individuals and groups over and over again in order to understand them (and to get their attention), bear testament to the validity of the statement that first-time visitors are kept at an emotional and intellectual distance. The text indicates that Sadanand Dhume was cordially received everywhere and, undoubtedly, if he wishes to write further on this subject, he will receive a better audience next time through.

On balance, *My Friend the Fanatic* is worth reading for the general view of Indonesian society it provides and for one view of the dangers that militant Islam poses for Indonesia and other Southeast Asian societies. It is well written, with a highly readable style. Those who want to review the militant case in greater depth can turn to Gordon P. Means, *Islam in Southeast Asia*,¹ but it is suggested that they read Sadanand Dhume's study first because of its descriptions, which set the scene well.

¹Gordon P. Means, *Islam in Southeast Asia* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2009).