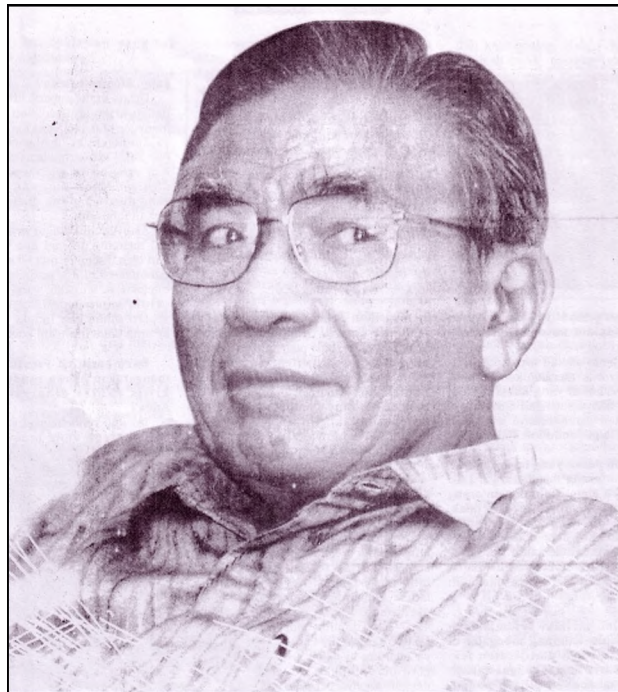

IN MEMORIAM: DELIAR NOER (1926–2008)



Prof. Dr. Deliar Noer
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Deliar Noer, the Islamic intellectual, educator, and author, and the first Indonesian to receive a PhD in Politics, died in Jakarta on June 18, 2008. Deliar's ties to Cornell University stretch back to the mid-1950s, when he was one of the first Indonesians to be sponsored by Cornell's Modern Indonesia Project. He became one of the outstanding scholars of Islamic political movements in Indonesia and a foremost critic of the failings of its post-independence governments. Blunt and outspoken, he was unwilling to compromise his principles, and this brought him into conflict with the policies of both the Sukarno and Suharto regimes, and led to his being fired twice from university positions and having to spend several years outside the country. His strong devotion to Islam was always accompanied by an unwavering belief in democracy and in the principle that people of all political persuasions should have the freedom to express and defend their own convictions.

Deliar Noer was born in Medan on February 9, 1926, the son of Minangkabau parents from Tilatang, Kamang, near Bukittinggi. His childhood was spent in North Sumatra, where his father worked in the government office for licensing pawnshops. Deliar attended Japanese technical schools through most of the war years, leaving Medan for Jakarta with a couple of friends in April 1945. After a few months in school there, he became a journalist and after the proclamation of Indonesia's independence was a radio announcer at the Radio of the Republic of Indonesia. It was while he was working there that he learned of his father's violent death. On December 13, 1945, Deliar's father, mother, and sister had been arrested by Japanese military units still active in North Sumatra. Though the latter two were released within a few days, his father disappeared, and only after several months of searching did the family find his body in a communal grave together with about a dozen others, none of whom could be identified except by their clothing.¹

Deliar was a strong supporter of the new Indonesian Republic but did not easily find a role for himself in the Revolution. He was rejected by the Republican Army's Military Academy and then made his way to Singapore, where he worked as secretary to the Trade Department of the Republic's Representative. At the same time, he took courses by mail, gaining fluency in English and passing the London University exams, which enabled him to matriculate in 1949.

At the end of 1949, after the Dutch transferred sovereignty to Indonesia, Deliar returned to Jakarta from Singapore, entering the PIA news agency. He headed the Jakarta branch of the Muslim Students' Association (HMI, *Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam*) from 1951 to 1953, and was then elected as president of the Central Committee of its national organization. While serving in this position, he became acquainted with the two leading Muslim political leaders of the time, Vice President Mohammad Hatta and Masjumi Party chairman, Mohammad Natsir. Both men came to view him as one of the most promising among young Muslim activists.

It was at the house of Mohammad Natsir, in 1955, that Deliar met with George Kahin, who was in the early stages of establishing Cornell University's Modern Indonesia Project under the auspices of the Ford Foundation. Kahin had asked both Hatta and Natsir for advice on the young Indonesian best suited to carry out research for the Indonesia Project on the "Development and Role of Modernist Islamic Thought in Indonesia." Both men promptly suggested the name of Deliar Noer. On their recommendation, Kahin met with Deliar, was impressed by his knowledge and demeanor, and appointed him field director for the research project. Deliar recruited two other students to assist him, a young anthropologist, Zahara Daulay, and a law student and reporter, Abdul Wahab Bakri. Over a period of more than two years, from mid-1955 to late 1957, Deliar and his assistants carried out intensive research on twentieth-century Islamic movements, devoting their major time and attention to in-depth interviews with many of the outstanding older Muslim leaders in Java and Sumatra. These included Muchtar Luthfie, Mohammad Noor Al-Anshari, Kiyai Dahlan (of Nahdlahtul Ulama), and Gunawan (first president of the Sarikat Islam for Jakarta, Sumatra, and Singapore), as well as K. H. Samanhoeddhi (founder of the Sarikat

¹ Shortly before he himself died, Deliar, accompanied by his son, tried to attend a memorial service at his father's grave, but after reaching Medan, he was too weak to make the difficult road journey from there to Tebingtinggi, where his father was buried.

Dagang Islam), with whom he corresponded. He also interviewed contemporary leaders such as Hamka, Sjafruddin Prawiranegara, Mohamad Roem, and Tamar Djaja, in addition to Hatta and Natsir.² Information gained from his interviews with the older generation of Muslim politicians and thinkers, several of whom died over the next few years, has been indispensable to our knowledge of Islamic movements in early twentieth-century Indonesia and formed the basis not only for Deliar's dissertation and first major publication, but also for many later studies by both Indonesian and Western scholars. At the same time, Deliar was studying Social and Political Sciences at the National University in Jakarta, and he received his bachelor's degree there in 1958.

Because of the high quality of his research, Deliar was accepted as a PhD candidate in the Department of Government and was invited to come to Cornell on a fellowship initially funded by the Indonesia Project. His strong academic record then led the Rockefeller Foundation to support his remaining studies, and he received his MA and PhD from Cornell in 1960 and 1963.

His research assistant, Zahara Daulay, had also continued her studies, receiving government support to go first to American University in Washington, DC, and then continuing on to Cornell, where she received her MA in Cultural Anthropology in January 1960. After returning to Indonesia, Zahara taught in the Education Faculty at the University of North Sumatra, in Medan. She married Deliar by proxy the following year and returned to Ithaca in August 1961, to work as a "native speaker" in Indonesian while Deliar completed his doctorate.

Zahara and Deliar arrived back in Indonesia at the end of 1962, and after a short period in Jakarta they moved to Medan, where Deliar joined the Law Faculty of the University of North Sumatra (USU), while Zahara taught in the Anthropology Department. This was the height of the era of Sukarno's Guided Democracy, and Deliar soon found himself clashing with the authorities at the USU (in 1964, the leftist Governor of North Sumatra, Col. Ulung Sitepu, was appointed to head the university presidium). Unwilling to adapt his teaching to the atmosphere of the time, Deliar insisted on criticizing Marxism and Guided Democracy, along with other forms of authoritarianism, leading even members of the HMI to be suspicious of him. Accusations circulated that he was anti-Nasakom, anti-revolutionary, and anti-Marxism, and there were calls for him to be "retooled." Finally the university faculty requested that he cease coming to the university and forbade him from teaching. For a while he tried to earn a living by giving lectures in other institutions in North Sumatra, but his situation became untenable, and finally in August 1965 he returned to Jakarta with Zahara and their baby son, Dian.

Although he was also unable to teach in Jakarta, Deliar did obtain a position in the Department of National Research (Durenas, Departemen Urusan Research Nasional) while Zahara taught in the Psychology Faculty of the University of Indonesia (UI).

The advent of the Suharto regime gave Deliar, like so many others, great hope that Indonesia would now become a truly democratic state, and initially he saw evidence that his hopes would be realized. Three days after the coup of October 1, 1965, Miriam Budiarjo, who headed the Politics Department at the University of Indonesia, invited

² Letter from Deliar Noer to Mr. George McTurnan Kahin, September 6, 1955.

Deliar to lecture there, acknowledging, according to Deliar's recollection, that she and her colleagues had long wanted to have him teach there, but that "the situation had not permitted it."³ For the next six years (1965–71), he lectured regularly at UI. In addition, several of the reformist military leaders (including General Suwanto and General Sudirman) invited him to participate in seminars at the Army Staff and Command School (Seskoad), where the future form of government for Indonesia was discussed, and he was also named to the political advisory group that counselled Suharto's private assistants (Assisten Pribadi, Aspri). In February 1967, he was appointed rector of the IKIP (Institut Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan, Institute of Teacher Training and Pedagogy) in Jakarta.

But the period of promise was short lived. It soon became clear that the president's civilian advisors were losing any influence they may have exerted in the first few months of the new regime,⁴ and that Suharto and his military colleagues intended to keep tight control over the political process in Indonesia. The regime even prohibited Mohammad Hatta from forming a new political party, the Partai Demokrat Islam Indonesia (PDII), which Deliar had been helping him establish.

Frustrated with the civilian advisors' lack of influence over the presidential assistants, Deliar withdrew from the group in 1968 and concentrated on his teaching and on administering IKIP, while he continued to give lectures at UI and occasionally participated in seminars at Seskoad. At the same time, he completed work on his first major book, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia 1900–1942*,⁵ a revised version of his Cornell dissertation.

It was inevitable, however, that his outspoken criticisms would bring him into conflict with the Suharto regime as it increasingly attempted to control the activities of both Muslim groups and university students. Deliar made no effort to conceal his outrage at the government's heavy-handed treatment of *haj* pilgrims and its efforts to manipulate the leadership of the PPP (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, the Unity Development Party), the one Muslim political party it permitted to exist), as well as its bribing of *pesantren* leaders so that they would support the government party, Golkar, in the 1972 elections. In the universities, too, where the Suharto regime was attempting to increase its control of student activities, Deliar took a stand, with other university rectors, in opposing the 1968 regulations introducing compulsory military training on campuses—an effort to quell student activism and organize the students into a sort of army reserve.

Deliar's disillusionment with the regime came to a head in early 1974, at the time of Malari (Malapetaka Januari), when students spearheaded protests against the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka to Jakarta. In a series of articles (only two of which were published), Deliar analyzed the protests and supported the students' actions. When Education Minister Sjarief Thayeb met with university rectors on January 26, Deliar expressed the IKIP senate's sympathy with the students, and at the Training College's Dies Natalis celebration, on May 19, 1974, he made a speech criticizing the

³ Deliar Noer, *Aku Bagian Ummat Aku Bagian Bangsa* (Jakarta: Penerbit Mizan, 1996), p. 587.

⁴ Interview with Deliar Noer, Jakarta, June 8, 1967.

⁵ Deliar Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia 1900–1942* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1973).

government's actions in suppressing the protests. The following day the minister summoned him to a meeting to inform him that "as a government official" he could not speak publicly in opposition to the government. A month later, Deliar sent Thayeb a photocopy of the speech he intended to give at his inauguration ceremony for full professor (*guru besar*), entitled "Partisipasi dalam Pembangunan" (Participation in Development), in which he argued that the government should allow greater political freedom so that both Muslims and students could play a larger role in the country's development. Again he was summoned by the minister, told to postpone the speech and to resign as a government official if he did not agree with government policy.⁶ The minister also forbade him from going abroad. Protests from IKIP's Student Council that this decision undermined academic freedom led the minister to summon Deliar again to accuse him of inciting the protests. In September, Deliar received a letter of dismissal, and when the IKIP faculty protested the government's actions, they were informed that he was a dangerous person (*orang yang berbahaya*), whom they should avoid. Members of the security services visited Deliar's friends to find out the content of their conversations with him, and to ask if they would be willing to appear as witnesses if he were brought to trial.⁷ Deliar soon received a further letter forbidding him from teaching in any public or private tertiary institution in Indonesia and again banning him from going abroad.

Five months later, at the end of February 1975, Deliar flew to Australia, traveling via Bali as he feared he would be stopped if he tried to leave from Jakarta. He found support and refuge initially at Australian National University, and in 1976 Griffith University offered him a position, where he stayed until 1987, initially as a visiting fellow and later as a senior lecturer. By then the situation in Jakarta had calmed down considerably, as the government had begun to relax some of its most glaring restrictions and was softening its attitude toward Islam. In 1980, Mohammad Natsir and other friends in Jakarta had begun efforts to establish a research institute, the Lembaga Islam untuk Penelitian dan Pengembangan Masyarakat (LIPPM, Islamic Institute for the Investigation and Development of Society), and wanted Deliar to head it.⁸ When Griffith agreed that he could spend half the year in Jakarta with the institute, Deliar joined his wife and son in Jakarta for part of the year, dividing his time between there and Griffith. Both during his years in Australia and after he returned to Indonesia, he continued his research on politics and religion, and wrote a number of important books on these subjects,⁹ as well as a comprehensive political biography of the former vice president, *Mohammad Hatta: Biografi Politik*, and his own detailed

⁶ Anwar Ibrahim, as head of ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia) asked for the text of this censored speech and published it in Kuala Lumpur in 1978 under its original title. Five years later, it appeared in Jakarta under the title *Ideologi, Politik dan Pembangunan* (Jakarta: Yayasan Perkhidmatan, 1983).

⁷ Noer, *Aku*, p. 671.

⁸ LIPPM was affiliated with the Dewan Dakwa'ah Islam Indonesia (DDII), the Muslim social and proselytizing organization Natsir had established when the Suharto regime prevented him from returning to political activity.

⁹ These included *Partai Islam di Pentas Nasional* (1987), *Ideologi, Politik dan Pembangunan* (a revised version of his aborted IKIP speech), *Islam, Pancasila, dan Asas Tunggal* (1983), *Pemikiran Politik di Negeri Barat* (1982, 1996), and *Bunga Rampai dari Negeri Kanguru* (1981), as well as *Administration of Islam in Indonesia*, which was published by Cornell's Modern Indonesia Project in 1978.

autobiography, *Aku Bagian Ummat Aku Bagian Bangsa*, published by Mizan, Bandung in 1996.

Soon after his return to Jakarta, Deliar began attending meetings of the opposition group *Petisi 50*, and, in 1991, with Dharsono and Abdul Madjid, he became joint head of the FPKR (Forum Perumnian Kedaulatan Rakyat, Forum for the Purification of People's Sovereignty), which branched out from that group. He never joined the association of Islamic intellectuals (ICMI, Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia), formed in 1990, though he gave a number of lectures to them. Later explaining, "I did not oppose it, but I could not join it,"¹⁰ he tied his reluctance specifically to the fact that ICMI was headed by Vice-President Habibie. In his view, Habibie lacked the religious qualifications to head an Islamic organization. Deliar was also critical of the vice-president's role in the island of Batam's development and rejected the possibility that Indonesia might be developed on such a pattern.¹¹

Actively supporting the students in 1998, Deliar believed that the overthrow of Suharto in May of that year should lead to a complete reformation and cleansing of the Indonesian political system. He thus strongly opposed Habibie succeeding Suharto as president and felt compelled to step personally into the political arena within a month after Suharto's resignation when, on June 28, 1998, he formed the first Islamic political party in the post-Suharto period, the Partai Ummat Islam (PUI, Party of the Muslim Community). Deliar initially hoped that this party would draw together Muslims of all political persuasions, and insisted that it be based on Islam, rejecting arguments by leaders such as Amien Rais that political parties should embrace Indonesians of all religious beliefs.¹² As head of the PUI, Deliar campaigned vigorously but unsuccessfully for his new party in the 1999 elections. When the PUI failed to attract substantial support, he led efforts to join it with other smaller Islamic parties into an Alliance of Islamic Parties. Four years later, he again attempted to run in the 2004 elections, but this time the party (now named the PUII, Partai Ummat Islam Indonesia) failed even to qualify as a contender.

In the final years of his life, Deliar became increasingly disappointed at the lack of any real reform in the political system and the role and actions of Muslim politicians. He felt that after the divisive policies of Indonesia's post-independence regimes there needed to be some reconciliation among political groups, and he strongly supported formation of the Komisi Kebenaran dan Rekonsiliasi (Truth and Reconciliation Commission), to which he was elected. He hoped that the commission might be able to contribute to an improvement in Indonesia's current political situation, particularly with respect to Aceh and Papua, and was bitterly disappointed when President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) dissolved it. From then on, Deliar's non-academic activities were mostly involved with the Majelis Mujahidin, which he had joined in

¹⁰ Interview with Deliar Noer, Jakarta, January 10, 2004.

¹¹ Noer, *Aku*, p. 904. In my conversation with him in January 2004, Deliar specifically criticized Habibie for protecting his brother, who headed the development of Batam and was allegedly involved in corruption there.

¹² He noted that in a multi-party system, such as existed in Indonesia in the immediate post-independence period of parliamentary government, there had been no objection to parties, such as Masjumi, being based on religion, and it was only under Suharto's authoritarian regime that all organizations and political parties had to accept the Pancasila as their basis.

2003. Although he generally supported its position on introducing Islamic law (*syariah*) into Indonesia, he felt emphasis should first be on education and social welfare, stating that “once you have these two things, then you can talk about *syariah*.”¹³ His academic activities were largely confined to giving weekly lectures at the University of Indonesia and at Krisnadwipayana University in Jakarta. According to his son, Dian, Deliar seemed to gain energy from teaching there but was exhausted once his lectures were over. As his strength declined, he spent more and more time with his grandchildren in the peaceful compound he and Zahara had built in east Jakarta, but he was still giving lectures to his students until the week before his death.¹⁴

Both admired and criticized for his bluntness, Deliar found it impossible to dissemble or hide his opinions and refused to compromise his beliefs. As a friend later wrote, “for him the line between black and white was always clear and distinct,”¹⁵ and he was never reluctant to point out the difference. As a result, he was ill-suited to be successful in practical politics or in the increasingly politicized academic world in post-independence Indonesia. But his integrity was never tarnished, and he remained the model of a committed scholar and observant Muslim for a new generation of Indonesian students with few such examples to follow.

¹³ Interview with Deliar Noer, Jakarta, January 10, 2004.

¹⁴ Shortly after his death, I received a postcard from him, dated June 9, 2008 (nine days before he died), in which he told me he was still lecturing at the university, “But certainly I am now not as strong anymore.”

¹⁵ “Baginya batas hitam dengan putih itu jelas dan tegas,” Mahrus Irsyam, “Profil Intelektual yang Utuh,” *Begawan Politik, Deliar Noer 75 Tahun* (Jakarta, 2001), p. 151.