

# INDONESIA: A JOURNALIST VISITED THE PRISON WHERE THE LEADER OF THE GAFATARS IS INCARCERATED

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HRWF (08.08.2017) – In March last, Jon Emont, a journalist covering a number of issues in and from South-East Asia and the Middle East, visited the leader of a new religious movement in Islam who is currently in prison in Indonesia. See here below excerpts from his long article entitled “Why are there no new major religions?” published in The Atlantic on 6 August. The full text is available at

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/08/new-religions/533745/>

## ***The Atlantic***

Cipinang prison stands like a huge fortress in East Jakarta, its massive walls and guard towers separating the city’s bustling traffic from the criminals held within its gates. I visited in March, sitting at a noisy mess hall filled with hardened, tattooed Indonesian prisoners who greeted their wives and children with hugs and pats on the head. The prison is known for housing many of the country’s most notorious drug criminals and convicted terrorists. But across from me sat a trio of prisoners in bright orange fatigues charged with a different crime entirely: daring to start a new religious movement.

The leader of the group, Ahmad Mushaddeq, a broad-shouldered man with bright gray eyes and a winning smile, is a former national badminton coach turned preacher. In the late 1990s, he said, it was revealed to him that he was the son of God. His followers proclaimed him to be the prophet to succeed Muhammad, sparking a new religious movement based on his teachings, which was eventually called Millah Abraham. The new faith was adopted mainly by disenchanting Muslims. It spread quickly across Indonesia and Malaysia to more than 50,000 followers, according to the group. Mushaddeq's followers also established a parallel back-to-the-land social movement, called Gafatar, which promoted organic farming and agricultural self-sufficiency, considered by Millah Abraham to be two of the real-life applications of their vaguely New-Age faith.

As strange as Millah Abraham's beliefs may seem, scholars of religion say the group is simply in the early stages of a process nearly as old as humanity: starting a new religion.

"Often cults are seen as aberrations, or a psychological phenomenon. Psychologists would see cult leaders as having delusions of grandeur. But I see them as something different—as baby religions," said Susan Palmer, a sociologist and scholar of new religions at Concordia University in Montreal. "I think people are unaware how many of them there are, how constant they are."

Al Makin, an Indonesian scholar of new religions, estimates that Indonesia alone has seen over 600 new religious movements in its modern history. In this regard the archipelago is hardly unique: New religions spring up regularly in the United States, Canada, Russia—everywhere government authorities are flexible enough to allow them.

And like many other new religious movements, Millah Abraham is dreaming big, with hopes to supersede Christianity and Islam as the dominant Abrahamic faith. Millah Abraham's followers

believe that every Abrahamic faith, from Judaism onward, is fated to lose its way, becoming corrupt and power-hungry, until eventually it is succeeded by a new prophet who will restore the original Abrahamic relationship to God. Followers of Millah Abraham believe that the near-constant wars in the Middle East are just one indication that Islam has fallen and it is Mushaddeq's turn to continue the eternal cycle and establish the next iteration of Abrahamic faith. In the same way that Judaism was succeeded by Christianity, and Christianity by Islam, Islam is to be succeeded by Millah Abraham.

Though its prophet is in prison, it's still possible Millah Abraham will succeed in becoming a globally influential faith. There have, after all, been unexpected successes before. "If we had been observers of the religious scene in the year 50 AD, I wonder if we would have bet on that small religious group in the corner of the Roman empire," said Jean-François Mayer, a Swiss scholar of new religious movements, referring to ancient Christianity. Still, he acknowledges that the odds appear to be very much against Millah Abraham, even without persecution from the Indonesian government. (...)

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Dwi Adiyanto, an Indonesian marketing professional in his mid-30s living in central Java, told me that when he first encountered Millah Abraham's teachings in a local study group, it gave him a sense of purpose and clarity about his life's mission that Islam had never provided. The group's religious teachings, which posited a continuous pattern of faiths rising and falling as they strayed from Abrahamic teachings, resonated with Dwi, as did the sense of social purpose he gained from joining a farming community. "It offered a source of faith that could really be trusted," he told me, "a path that was clearly correct." Dwi sold all his belongings in late 2015, and moved to rural Borneo, along with around 7,000 members of Millah Abraham.

Though Indonesia's constitution promises citizens religious freedom, starting a new religion here is illegal, and a crackdown quickly followed. Indonesia has just six legal religions—Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—and sects that split off from Muslim orthodoxy are punished with blasphemy charges. After Gafatar branches throughout the Indonesian archipelago began running into trouble with local authorities, the organization's authorities encouraged adherents like Dwi to sell all their possessions and use the money to buy land in remote Indonesian Borneo, where they hoped state authority would be lax enough to allow them to farm in peace. The goal was to establish a Zion, similar in concept to the one Mormons founded one and a half centuries ago in Utah—a faraway community where followers could live according to their faith without being challenged by outsiders. The young faith was rapidly evolving, and as followers moved out to Borneo it took on an increasingly ecological bent, with Millah Abraham leaders arguing that cities were corrupting and alienating, and the best way to worship the Lord was to till land in harmony with nature.

But the utopian effort would not last long. Just a week after the national government formally banned Gafatar in January 2016, local mobs stormed the group's compound in West Borneo and burned their farms to the ground. "There were around a thousand men who brought clubs and daggers. They burned our homes in front of our eyes," Dwi recounted to me. "There was no respect for human rights, although police were right there." Indonesian police officers then forcibly returned around 7,000 Gafatar members to their home provinces—on waiting planes and boats. After being returned home, Gafatar members were given classes on Indonesian nationalist doctrine by soldiers; evaluated by psychologists, and encouraged to return to their old faith, which was generally Islam.

"They have their own system, they have their own country—in my

opinion it is dangerous for Indonesia," Koentjoro Soeparo, a professor of social psychology who evaluated Gafatar members after they were returned home from Borneo, told me in an interview. He said that de-radicalization was necessary. "Gafatar has a lot of similarities with what happened in the United States with Jim Jones," he added, referring to the American cult leader who persuaded hundreds of followers to follow him to the remote jungles of Guyana to participate in a giant agricultural project, before conducting a mass suicide that killed around 900.

But followers I spoke with said there had been no coercion, and Gafatar members had moved to West Borneo to live communally and worship freely, not to challenge the Indonesian state or conduct mass suicide. They "never had that desire, to create a new country," Yudhistra Arif Rahman, a lawyer who represented Mushaddeq, told me. In total, more than 25 members of Gafatar were convicted of blasphemy around the archipelago, with around a dozen spending time in prison. Human Rights Watch called the Indonesian government's treatment of Gafatar one of the worst examples of religious persecution since Indonesia began transitioning to democracy in 1998.

Members of the faith insist they will soldier on; their persecution, after all, is in keeping with prophesy. "We were prepared for this mentally," Farah Meifira, a Millah Abraham adherent, told me. But it's far from clear whether the faith will be able to carry on effectively, given the Indonesian state's apparent determination to stamp it out.

State persecution, aided by religious authorities, is in fact a major reason why new faiths fail in parts of the world where government polices religious doctrine. "New religions have always existed; they are an organic phenomenon like weeds in a garden. In some societies they are considered weeds and will be uprooted; in other societies they will be allowed to grow and take root and become plants," said Palmer, the scholar of new religion. To the Indonesian government, Millah Abraham is

a weed. (...)

See HRWF Database of religious prisoners in Indonesia at <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Indonesia-FBL-2017.pdf>