In the Black Hole

Pakistani nuclear scientist and human rights activist, Pervez Hoodbhoy, hosts in-depth public discussion of Nahdlatul Ulama's agenda

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The following text and transcript appear courtesy of Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy and Dr. James M. Dorsey:

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan / 21 April 2023 — Pakistan ranks high on the list of Muslim-majority countries in which significant segments of the population are, in religious terms, militantly ultra-conservative. It's a country where the impact of decades of Saudi funding of ultra-conservative religious thinking has left deep inroads.

It's also a country in which numerous people over the years have been killed or lynched by outraged individuals or mobs over allegations of blasphemy, or for expressing opposition to harsh laws that mandate the death sentence for blasphemy. Since 1990, more than 80 people have been killed in such violence. This month, a Chinese national was remanded in custody after protesters accused him of blasphemy.

This makes a discussion with a Pakistani audience about the battle for the soul of Islam, the rivalry in the Muslim world over what constitutes 'moderate' Islam — the need for reform of religious jurisprudence, and the competition for religious soft power in the Muslim world — particularly interesting.

Pervez Hoodbhoy, a prominent nuclear scientist and human rights activist, hosts regular in-person and online discussions at The Black Hole, a community center in Islamabad that seeks to foster critical debate. This week, Pervez kindly hosted James Dorsey for a discussion about what he describes as "The Battle for the Soul of Islam." This is a transcript of their discussion, lightly edited for clarity. The discussion is also available in audio and video.

Pervez Hoodbhoy (00:08):
Good afternoon everyone, and welcome to The Black Hole.

We are talking today about important changes happening in the Muslim world from where we are here in Islamabad. This is a city of madrassahs, of mosques, and we can hear what sort of kutbas (sermons) are given over there, but living here in Pakistan, we don't know very much about what is happening in the rest of the world. Important changes have happened and are happening there to tell us exactly what's going on.

We've invited Dr. James M. Dorsey, who is a journalist, a very fine journalist, has won many awards. He's based in Singapore, is the author of many books and his area of expertise is the Middle East and Indonesia, Malaysia. He has been looking at these areas of the world with the particular eye of what is happening at the level of society, at the level of government, and how religious leaders over there are changing Islam.

(01:50)
Now, I know that this very title, the Battle for the Soul of Islam and the subtitle that Islam is changing. Well, some people may not like that very much. They think that Islam is something that is fixed for all times to come. Well, maybe it is and maybe it isn't, but think about Christianity. Is the Christianity today the Christianity of Jesus Christ? Is it the Christianity of the Middle Ages and the Popes, or is it the Christianity of the reformation that followed? Or is it the Christianity that is now in Europe where it is rapidly losing ground or is it the Christianity of the United States where it is gaining ground or at least has gained a huge amount of ground. So, all these are issues that one must keep in mind when last, what is a religion? Is the religion what is in the holy text or is it the practise of that religion? Well, now I'll go to Dr. James M. Dorsey. James, welcome and it's so good to have you here. Thank you for speaking to us....

James M. Dorsey (18:14):
It's a debate that is now being fueled by what is the Muslim world's most powerful and largest civil society movement. And that's a movement in Indonesia. In February, so two months ago, the movement held an international conference of Ulema, which was attended by very senior Saudi clerics, including Mohamed Al-Issa from the world Muslim League, as well as Sheikh Shawki Alam, Egypt's Grand Mufti, and various Al-Azhar luminaries. And in that conference, Nahdlatul Ulama, the Indonesian group, called for the abolition of the concept of the caliphate. And the argument behind that was twofold. One is that the notion of a nation-state is not anchored in Islamic law, yet we live in a world that is organised around nation-states and we live in a world in which the notion of a caliphate, a unified state for all Muslims, no longer is fit for purpose. And so that revives the whole debate about what is the state in Islamic law and what should that state be.

Pervez Hoodbhoy (20:12):
So glad you raised this issue of the caliphate or the khilafa as we call it. You're absolutely right. It's not mandated in Islam, certainly not in the Qur'an or the Hadith. And we know that Prophet Mohammed did not nominate a successor. Had he done that, maybe we would've been spared the Shia Sunni divide. We would not have had the bloody wars of succession that came later. But the fact is that the caliphate has been around for a very long time until it was abolished in 1924 in Turkey. And for a long time, it remained dormant and then came along Daesh (the Islamic State) and Daesh. It revived the caliphate with Al-Baghdadi as its caliph. So, it's good that Nahdlaltul Ulama has come out with such a strong statement that the caliphate does not belong to Islam. What exactly did they say? Can you tell us?

James M. Dorsey (21:48):
Let me be clear. I think I would differ with you on one point. The caliphate *is* grounded in Islamic law and that is the problem. What is *not* grounded in Islamic law is the notion of a nation-state. So, in terms of the notion of what statehood constitutes in Islamic law, it is in a state structure that encompasses the whole Muslim world, and yet we live in nation-states. Nahdlatul Ulama's argument is that this needs to be addressed for Islamic law to be able to function correctly in the modern world. There's also a second reason why, and that is what you correctly noted: the Islamic State, or Daesh, grounds its ideology, its religious beliefs, in the

notion of the caliphate and in various other concepts within Islamic law. And so, if you really want to be struggling against extremism and against jihadism, you're going to have to deprive extremists and jihadists of the opportunity to justify their actions and their beliefs with Islamic law.

(23:39)
And that is the whole thinking behind this. Now, let me just briefly explain what Nahdaltul Ulama constitutes. Indonesia is a country of 270 million people, 90 million Indonesians follow Nahdlatul Ulama. That is to say one third of the population. This is an organisation that is a hundred years old. It was founded a century ago for two reasons, one to counter Wahhabi incursions [following the Saudi conquest of Mecca and Medina], and two, because as you referred to earlier, the abolition by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924, which Nahdlatul Ulama at the time believed created a void that needed to be filled.

(25:11)
But what I think is important here is the way Nahdlatul Ulama is positioning a lot of this stuff. It is not just simply Islam is in need of reform and that's what they are going to do. This is an organisation with a religious structure and authority of its own. So, when it started with reforms, it was a convention of 20,000 religious scholars in 2019, that abolished the concept of the *kafir* (infidel) and replaced it in a *fatwa* with the concept of a citizen. What NU is trying to do is not just reform Islam, but also constitute a model for the same kind of reform that is needed in other major religions, be that Judaism, be that Christianity, be that Hinduism, and it is actually engaging with groups in the Hindu world, in the Christian world, in the Jewish world, to try and further that notion.

Pervez Hoodbhoy (26:34):
If we look at reforms in various religions, Christianity began with Luther and the Reformation. That then affected the Jews in Europe as well. If we look at Islam and Hinduism in the 1[9]th century or so, you had people like Muhammad Abdu and Rashid Rida (two late 19th, early 20th century Muslim scholars) in Egypt who were inspired by some of the enlightenment ideals, and they sought to bring conformity between Islam and the modern world in the subcontinent. You had a few people, not very many, but there was Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and there was Ameer Ali. Yes, they were under the influence of the British colonial masters, and they wanted India and Indian Muslims to go along that path. The Hindus were also affected by the British in that way. And so you had reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and they wanted to end the caste system, et cetera. What is driving Nahdlatul Ulama? It's clearly something that's pretty big that you've got a hundred million followers or 90 as you said, but where does their impetus come from? Is it by looking at the modern world? Are they striving for enlightenment ideals, the European Enlightenment? What do they want?

James M. Dorsey (28:37):
Before I answer the question, let me draw one or two distinctions. I mentioned earlier that in Christianity you had a centralised institution, which I think makes a major difference. And Martin Luther was in essence a split-off from that centralised institution. The bargain that ultimately was concluded in Christianity was that the institution, the Catholic church, retreated to the realm of spirituality. It surrendered its worldly, temporal powers to the secular state and retreated to the Vatican, a small "island" [of political autonomy] in Rome, Italy. That model is obviously not applicable to Islam, or for that matter to Judaism. I think the second distinction one has to draw is, and in a sense you drew that implicitly in your remarks just now, is that past proponents of reform in Islam were individual thinkers, maybe small groups of thinkers. They

were not organisations with the kind of power that Nahdlatul Ulama represents. And to give you two more indications of its power, NU has a five million-strong militia, a paramilitary militia. Its political party has four cabinet ministers.

(30:30)
None of the past reformers could even come near to projecting that kind of power and that kind of influence. What drives them is that they're a movement that comes out of Java. They're not a liberal movement, they're a conservative movement, a socially conservative movement, perhaps even a politically conservative movement, but they're grounded in Sufism, they're grounded in Javanese culture. The socialisation of Islam in Indonesia was not one that was carried out by the sword, it was through assimilation, an accommodation, and I think that's what makes Nahdlatul Ulama in a lot of ways different from the kind of Islam that you see in the Middle East, or for that matter in Pakistan.

Pervez Hoodbhoy (31:39):
Yes, it's fascinating. Islam came here through the sword, but in Indonesia it came via trade and that made all the difference. We can't even imagine that a person like (prominent Pakistani Islamic scholar) Javed Ahmed Ghamidi would ever be leading any kind of a big movement. He does have an organisation called Al-Mawrid. But it's handful of people, nothing much more than that. And there you say it's 90 million and they've got ministers and everything. They also have had one president. But explain one thing. You said that they're politically conservative and socially conservative. What does that mean?

James M. Dorsey (32:36):
In terms of social conservatism, what it means is that — in contrast to the developments that you're seeing in the West — Nahdlatul Ulama views the family as the core nuclear unit of society. They're also politically conservative. Nahdlatul Ulama's relationships are on the centre right, and in some cases, even on the far right. Now, I would argue that its relationships with the centre are where Nahdlatul Ulama is politically, whereas it's relationships with certain far right groups, for example, the (Hindu nationalist) RSS in India, is really designed to achieve a strategic goal rather than based necessarily on a common ideology. But they are, having said that, they are conservative.

(33:51)
Democracy is a core principle to them. Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim-majority state and the world's largest Muslim democracy, and that's not something they want to change. On the contrary, that is something they want to uphold. They're strong believers in pluralism, and as I mentioned before in the example of abolishing the category of *kafir* (infidel) and replacing it with the notion of a citizen, it's equality and equity for all irrespective of race, ethnicity, religion. To give you one example, last year the Minister of Religious Affairs in Indonesia, who is a member of Nahdlatul Ulama — he's the former head of their militia — was criticised for congratulating the Baha'is on one of their holidays. In response to the criticism, he said, "They are Indonesian citizens, even if it's not one of the six religions that Indonesia officially recognises, Baha'is are Indonesian citizens and that's as such I greet them."

Pervez Hoodbhoy (35:29):
So, would they subscribe to the UN Declaration on human rights? Would they have reservations about it or would they endorse it wholeheartedly?

James M. Dorsey (35:42):
One of the major distinctions I think between Nahdlatul Ulama and many other Muslim states, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, which only conditionally endorse the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and are particularly concerned about the articles 18 and 19 that relate to religious freedom, Nahdlatul Ulama endorses the declaration, unambiguously no conditions, no restrictions.

Pervez Hoodbhoy (36:31):
Okay, I'll ask just one question and then open it up to the audience. The Pakistani notion or the sub-continental notion of Islam is that it's a complete code of life, and that everything you want to know about the world is there in the Qur'an or can be interpreted from it. Is there a break with that notion in Indonesia?

James M. Dorsey (37:08):
Look, I think that Nahdlatul Ulama, like any other Muslim organisation, views the Qur'an as the word of God. I don't think that they view... the various schools of Islamic jurisprudence as the word of God, and therefore unalterable. In fact, what they're doing and what they're arguing for is change and reform of some of the concepts within... Islamic jurisprudence, particularly those that propagate supremacy, that propagate differences based on religion or ethnicity or race. So, I think that's the distinction one has to make....

Pervez Hoodbhoy (01:27:59):
There's a simple phrase in Pakistan, "military-mullah alliance," and that has survived the last 40 years. It's been a symbiotic relationship between the military and the mullahs. They've been joined together because of *jihad*, because of wanting to conquer Kashmir and make it Pakistan. And they have, so far, been good to each other. But now I think there are serious problems arising, because the state came under attack earlier and now it is coming under attack again with the rise of the TTP (the Pakistani Taliban). So with that, I think we should end. Thank you very much, James. It's been a great session with you. You took out the time and everyone here much enjoyed it and learned from you. Thank you.

James M. Dorsey (01:28:55):
Well, I learned from you and I enjoyed the questions. It was a pleasure. Thank you for having me.