

A Fatwa against Yoga: Mitigating Conflict in the Face of Increasing Fundamentalism in Indonesia

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Abstract

This article focuses on efforts at mitigating conflict that arose between the Indonesian Council of Muslim Scholar (MUI) and the Bali-India Foundation (BIF) in the wake of the former's issuance of a fatwa against yoga in January 2009. These efforts occurred in the framework of an international yoga festival that was held in Bali in March 2009, attended by large numbers of Muslim yoga practitioners and teachers. The article explores the historical background and local context of the fatwa in order to provide a sound basis for the examination of the strategies employed in the actual mitigation of the conflict.

Why is there a Fatwa against Yoga?

Why would Muslim, or for that matter Christian or Jewish, clerics want to turn against Yoga? From Sarah Strauss' treatise on the *Positioning of Yoga: Balancing across Cultures*, we learn how "yoga has transformed from a regional, male-oriented religious activity to a globalized and largely secular" practice embraced by modern middle-class women and men in pursuit of physical health, psychological balance, and spiritual freedom. She discerned the beginnings of this metamorphosis in the work of Swami Vivekananda who, in the late 19th Century, was the first to disentangle the practice of yoga from the rigors of an ascetic lifestyle embedded in various Hindu and Buddhist traditions and to relocate it within the secular life-worlds of householders. Vivekananda's repackaging of yoga as a scientific method to attain health and freedom strongly influenced the teachings of other modern Indian gurus who recognized it as a means to universalize their spiritual messages. One of them was Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh, the founder of the Divine Life Society, who turned yoga into a modern export product for both members of the Indian Diaspora and non-Indian audiences. Successfully implanted in the West from the 1950s onwards, yoga gradually attracted a wide array of followers looking for all kinds of things from alternative spirituality to fitness and stress-reduction. The concomitant proliferation of yoga styles range from decidedly spiritual forms of Raja Yoga or Kundalini Yoga to purely secular forms such as Beryl Birch's Power Yoga (Strauss 2005, xix, 2-3, 4, 5-6, 8, 36, 47-51, 96-100, 115-124, 126-130).

The recent blending of yoga into the global wellness trend has entailed the "re-import" of therapeutic forms of yoga to contemporary spas and fitness centers in Asia. The trend has even reached the Muslim world. In 2006, the Egyptian tourist agency T.E.N. Tours organized its first International Yoga Festival at El Gouna on the Red Sea. Officially opened by the Indian Ambassador to Egypt, the festival lasted one week and attracted more than 200 yoga

practitioners and teachers from all over the world, offering meditation at the beach, Hatha yoga, Tai Chi, and macrobiotics classes. The success of the festival was repeated in consecutive festivals organized along the same line, including chanting of “universal” Hindu mantras at the pyramids and performances by international spiritual musicians. The fourth festival in the series was held in 2009 in a Marriot Hotel at the Dead Sea in Jordan.

The origins of the festival go back to 1992, when Egypt and India started a bilateral cultural exchange program which led to the establishment of an Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) in the Indian Embassy in Cairo offering language courses, art programs and yoga classes to Egyptian citizens. Dr. Prabhakar Madhikar, a charismatic yoga teacher from Hyderabad, was brought over to teach the yoga classes, and his scientific approach attracted local doctors, journalists, academics, and other professionals. Eventually, he opened his own yoga rehabilitation practice in Cairo. Madhikar’s successful introduction of yoga to Egyptian urban middle-class society was underscored by the production of a TV series on yoga broadcasted on 9 international sports channels throughout the Arab World.

This development, however, roused the suspicion of Egyptian Muslim scholars, and in 2004, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Ali Gomaa, issued a fatwa against yoga for its Hindu provenience (Solomon 2006). The Grand Mufti’s fatwa was incidentally not the first Islamic legal opinion against yoga. Already back in 1984, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore had issued a fatwa, which was the first ever to forbid Muslims to practice forms of yoga that contain elements of Hindu ritual such as the chanting of mantras. Completely secularized forms of yoga, however, were permitted under the condition that they would only be practiced for health reasons. With the participation of Hindu practitioners and Buddhist lamas in the T.E.N. Tours’ Yoga Festivals, it is obvious that this conditionality was not met in Egypt. It is therefore not surprising that the festivals have taken place in the face of more or less overt anti-yoga sentiments on the part of Egyptian religious leaders.

Four years after the ban of yoga for Muslims in Egypt, the 83rd National Fatwa Council of Malaysia, held in Kota Baru from 22-24 October 2008, also formally declared the practice of yoga as *haram* and hence forbidden for Muslims. While yoga classes throughout Malaysia are generally filled with citizens of Indian and Chinese descent, it has become increasingly common for Muslim women to join in too. Even Malaysian Muslim men have started to explore yoga. According to a BBC report, some Muslims have appreciated the calming effects of yoga to the extent that they have even combined it with their daily prayers (Brant 2008). It is understandable that such a development would rouse the concern of the Malaysian Fatwa Council.

At an official press conference on 22 November 2008, broadcasted by Malaysia’s *The Star Online TV*, Malaysian Fatwa Council Chairman Datuk Dr. Abdul Shukor Husin stressed that yoga consists of three elements: physical movements, worshipping, and chanting. While the mere physical movements of yoga might not be wrong, worshipping in form of meditation geared to unifying oneself with God and the chanting of mantras would definitely “destroy” (Malay *merusak*) the *aqidah* or foundation of the Islamic creed and are hence in opposition to the Shari’a. Since one thing would usually lead to another, the practice of yoga is not likely to stop at mere physical movements. Muslims should therefore not engage in it at all.

The fatwa raised strong criticism even from among Malaysian Muslims. For instance, the internationally renowned Malaysian Muslim scholar and long-time yoga practitioner Farish Ahmad-Noor rejected the fatwa on three grounds (Noor 2008):

- (1) Millions of Europeans have practiced yoga without converting to Hinduism;
- (2) Yoga practices including indigenous forms of massage have been part of Southeast Asian cultures for four thousand years. Both Malaysian and Indonesian Muslims still regularly practice pre-Islamic pressure-point massage, so why make a fuss about yoga;
- (3) The fatwa closes down yet another neutral civic space where Malaysians could meet and interact beyond denominational, ethnic, and political ties.

The Malaysian fatwa was indeed passed at a time when the substantial number of non-Muslim Malaysians, e.g. Hindus, Buddhists and Christians of Indian and Chinese descent, were protesting against increasing government-sponsored Islamization (Patung 2007).

The Indonesian fatwa against yoga that soon followed the Malaysian one was issued in a very similar socio-political climate. Three days after the Malaysian Fatwa Council's official press conference on 25 November 2008, the Indonesian Council of Muslim Scholars (MUI) convened a closed meeting on the matter of yoga. Ma'ruf Amin, Head of MUI's Fatwa Department, stated to the press that in the following two weeks, the Council would inspect several yoga centers in Jakarta, Bandung, and Bali, such as the Sai Baba centers, the Hare Krishna centers, and the Bali-India Foundation (BIF), in order to form a legal opinion on whether the courses offered there would contain elements of Hindu ritual. Amin exhorted those among the Indonesian Muslim community who were practicing yoga to stop while the investigation was underway. During the annual convention of Muslim Scholars in Padang Panjang, West Sumatra, from 24-26 January 2009, MUI finally issued a fatwa against yoga together with other *fatawa*

Naturally, the fatwa against yoga was a major topic at the first International Yoga Festival organized by the BIF, which had been one of the yoga centers investigated by MUI. Taking place in Denpasar from 3-10 March 2009, the festival attracted some 1,200 participants. The overwhelming majority were Indonesian, i.e. Hindu Balinese, Buddhist Indonesian-Chinese, Muslim Javanese and Muslim Sundanese, yoga practitioners, and teachers representing altogether 5,000 yoga students in Java and Bali. Dr. Acharya Laxmi Narayan, Director of the Yoga Research Institute in Rishikesh and Head of the Department of Yogic Science at SJRS College in Rishikesh, India, together with his assistant Apitha, Master of Yogic Science, and Dr. Yadav Somvir, the naturalized Indian founder and director of BIF, were advocating a universalized and science-oriented form of yoga, while a number of Balinese Hindu leaders as well as Balinese students of the Indian-derived Ananda Marga sect represented localized versions of Hatha yoga. An American yoga teacher, an American ethno-musicological researcher, a Dutch Muslim, and a Dutch film team documenting the festival were the only international audience. Like the international yoga festivals in Egypt, the BIF festival had scheduled a number of different activities, such as a yoga competition, an exhibition of spiritual paintings by Balinese, Javanese and Western artists, yoga-dance performances, yoga and ayurvedic classes as well as a yoga teachers' training course. The success of the festival was

marked by the foundation of the first national yoga network, the Indonesian Yoga Association representing 30 yoga centers in Bali, Java, and Lombok.

However, the fatwa against yoga did constitute a major concern especially for the attending Muslim yoga practitioners and teachers. Given the recurrent Islamist violence in Indonesia, the fatwa threatened not only them but also BIF as an institution supposedly garnering Muslims to the practice of yoga. To preempt such accusations, Somvir had invited Dr. H. Salman Harun, Professor of Tarbiyah (i.e. Education and Upbringing) and Director of Multi-Faith Education at the National Islamic University in Jakarta, to give the keynote address and a seminar on the relationship between Islam and yoga scheduled for the third day of the festival. Somvir had also invited Dr. H. Utang Ranuwijaya, Head of MUI's Research Department who had led the investigation of the yoga centers, to a roundtable on the seventh day of the festival to alleviate the existing tensions between BIF and MUI. As I was allotted the task of moderating both Harun's seminar and the roundtable discussion with Ranuwijaya, I was in a privileged position to closely follow the different lines of reasoning and the final settlement of the dispute at the end of the roundtable. In the following I would like to provide some background information about the two disputants and then proceed with a more detailed account on the various efforts of mitigating conflict during the festival.

MUI as Motor of the Islamization of Indonesian Society

MUI was founded in 1975 as a governance tool of ex-President Suharto's New Order regime. It was tasked with providing Islamic support and legitimacy for Suharto's development policies, involving the issuance of *fatawa* as binding legal opinions for the heterogeneous Indonesian Muslim community. Additionally, MUI was to keep a check on the formation of political Islam throughout the country. With branches and committees at all levels of administration, MUI's arm reached down to every locale with a Muslim constituency even in areas with a predominantly Christian or Hindu population, like North Sulawesi or Bali. Being a state-controlled institution, MUI's members were appointed by the government and consisted of representatives of ten independent Muslim organizations and of the Islamic Spiritual Civil Service as well as the spiritual offices of the Indonesian military and police. It is noteworthy that MUI's *fatawa* often clashed with the views of the majority of Indonesian Muslims (Ramage 1998, 29; Hosen 2004; Hooker 2008, 30).

When ex-President Suharto accorded Islam more normative and institutional recognition in 1989 in connection with a major shift of his inner-Indonesian political alliances, a thorough Islamization process of Indonesia's state law and multi-faith society set in that has gained further momentum after the economic, political and legitimacy break down of Suharto's New Order regime in 1998 (Hosen 2007; Hooker 2008; Salim 2008; and Ramstedt forthcoming). At the same time, Indonesian Islam, which had hitherto been renowned for its moderate and occasionally syncretistic nature as well as its tolerance towards other faiths, has become much more radical, orthodox, and discriminatory. MUI has been one of the main motors of this process in an effort to detach itself from the tainted image of having been a puppet of the Suharto regime. This is borne out by a whole series of recent *fatawa* (Menchik

2007, 1-2). Suffice it to mention here the fatwa against pluralism, liberalism and secularization of religion, the fatwa against interfaith prayer, and the fatwa against religiously mixed marriages. Together with the fatwa against yoga, these *fatawa* have helped to cement the boundaries between the different faith communities in Indonesia, which has resulted in a socio-political climate that seems to be less and less conducive to interfaith dialogue.

Since the fall of Suharto, MUI has indeed gained greater independence from the government and a stronger public profile, not the least because of two prestigious projects: (1) a Halal Certification and Assurance System; and (2) a strong involvement in the overseeing of Islamic banking.

BIF and the Practice of Yoga in Indonesia

Somvir, the founder of BIF, first came to Indonesia at the beginning of the 1990s, drawn to the country for its ancient Indian heritage and studying the Old Javanese rendition of the ancient Indian epic Ramayana. After having obtained his Ph.D. from the University of Delhi, he was requested as lecturer of Sanskrit, Hindi, and Hindu studies at Udayana University in Denpasar. A born communicator, he was able to forge relations across the factions of contemporary Indonesian Hinduism and closely cooperated with Indonesian Muslim scholars as well as Buddhist and Christian intellectuals. His being so well-connected eventually earned him the position of Director of the first Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) in Bali, opened in 2004. Like all the other Indian Cultural Centers representing the Indian Council for Cultural Relations throughout the world, it has offered courses in traditional Indian music and dance, yoga, as well as classes and exhibitions on Indian art and culture.

After a couple of years, Somvir retired from the ICC in order to realize his long-standing aspiration to build a full-fledged yoga ashram where Indonesians could study yoga, ayurvedic medicine, and the benefits of simple living. Coming from a farmer's family in rural Hariyana, Somvir had entered one of the Arya Samaj boarding schools (*gurukul*) as a young boy, where he had obtained a good grounding in a yoga-based life-style. He had passed through his school years with excellence and then entered the well-known Gurukul Kangri University founded, in 1902, by Swami Shraddhananda, a member of the Arya Samaj, in the pilgrimage town of Hardwar. After his master's degree, he moved on to the University of Delhi where he began a more academic and less religion-oriented life-style. He nevertheless retained a close relationship to Swami Agnivesh who is arguably the most distinguished leader of the Arya Samaj today. Agnivesh has gained an international reputation for his campaigns against bonded labor, child labor, female feticide, and alcoholism, which have earned him an appointment as chairperson of the UN Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery. When I visited Agnivesh together with Somvir in 2000, he was also engaged in international interfaith relations initiated by Hans Küng.

Inspired by Agnivesh's engagement for social justice, Somvir has felt particular concern for the Balinese and Indian youth negatively affected by the so-called blessings of modernity. He set up BIF to remind people of their spiritual heritage and to provide them with low-tech but effective means to lead a healthy life. As can be gleaned from BIF's website, alongside yoga, BIF

also promotes the indigenous art and culture of Bali and India as a way to cultivate harmonious exchange and peace among people across the boundaries of class, caste, nationality, and religion.

Like other yoga teachers who have modeled their spiritual enterprises after that of the international Divine Life Society, the headquarters of which is based in Rishikesh, a town some 24 kilometers away from Haridwar, Somvir has presented yoga very much along the lines of Swami Vivekananda's exposition. He thus uses somewhat dereligionized, if still spiritual rhetoric interspersed with scientific metaphors in order to promote yoga as a universal and rational practice to achieve health, balance and contentment in life (cf. Strauss 2005, 2, 3, 6, 12-14, 20, 33-51; also McKean 1996, 13, 51, 52, 174-180, 182-184).

Again like other successful promoters of yoga as body-mind therapy, Somvir has skillfully used the forums provided by local mass media. For some years already, he has been running his own one hour-long yoga program on Bali television broadcasted every Sunday morning. Moreover, he publishes a glossy bi-monthly magazine, which is available in major bookshops throughout Indonesia. He has furthermore cooperated closely with well-known Indonesian dancers and actors. Due to his popularity, he has frequently been invited to teach yoga in different places throughout the country, including the Muhammadiyah University in Makassar, South Sulawesi.

Apart from the yoga courses offered by more or less spiritual or even outright religious institutions such as BIF or the Gandhi Ashram dependencies in Bali and Java, more and more Indonesian tourist resorts and fitness centers also offer yoga classes to their cosmopolitan clients. The yoga styles presented in these classes do vary according to the respective teacher employed, who might be a Westerner or a local with excellent English language skills. However, the classes are thoroughly secular in the sense that no religious trappings are introduced to clients. Most teachers even refrain from introducing breathing exercises and meditation to their classes.

A different matter is the annual BaliSpirit Festival combining yoga, dance and music workshops. It has been organized by arty Western expats in Ubud, Bali, since 2008. Predominantly catering to an international clientele interested in yoga and alternative healing, the BaliSpirit Festival is explicitly dedicated to "creative and spiritual diversity".

Mitigating Conflict

The fatwa against yoga seemed to have united the different Hindu factions within Bali, as both traditionalists, represented for instance by the yoga group of the Balinese Brahmin priest Ida Padanda Made Gunung from Kemenuh, and modernists, represented amongst others by the low-caste¹ Ubud-based Balinese yoga teacher Ketut Suambara, were attending the festival in relatively large numbers. Harun's keynote address was enthusiastically received. Taking a stance

¹ While the four castes, into which the different Balinese descent groups have traditionally been classified, are not officially recognized any more, they still play an unofficial role in contemporary daily life.

similar to that of his Malaysian colleague Farish Ahmad-Noor, he underscored the trans-cultural and trans-religious benefits of yoga. In his seminar a few days later, Harun further refuted any contradictions between Islam and yoga, starting off with a comparison between the physical movements of the Sun Salutation, a major yoga exercise, and those of the salat, the daily Islamic prayer. He even referred to the postures of the salat as simple yoga. Dhyana, or meditation, he compared to the practices of Tafakur (contemplation) or Zikr (remembrance of God) in Sufism.

Harun's seminar was attended by about 30 yoga teachers, most of whom had an Islamic background. They mainly requested further details on the parallels between Sufism and yoga. One participant added that the Hadith would even mention the medicinal qualities of herbs and honey. Islam would hence have something comparable to ayurvedic medicine. The seminar ended with Harun emphasizing that the contemplation of the commonalities between traditions rather than their differences would be more appropriate for Indonesians because of the multi-cultural and multi-religious constitution of their society.

The roundtable discussion with Ranuwijaya was tactfully scheduled several days after Harun's seminar in order to preclude any embarrassment that might have resulted from a direct encounter between two speakers with such different takes on the relationship between Islam and yoga. A bodyguard in civilian clothes accompanied the MUI representative, who visibly relaxed in the course of the discussion attended by some fifty participants, who in turn kept a respectful and non-aggressive demeanor throughout the whole event. Ranuwijaya related how the MUI research commission had classified the yoga courses under investigation into three categories: (1) courses that would be completely enmeshed in Hindu ritual; (2) courses that would involve meditation, the chanting of mantras, and the affirmation of universal spiritual values; and (3) courses that would present yoga as a kind of gymnastics purely intended for health benefits.

While the first two categories would be forbidden for Muslims, the last one would be allowed in principle, provided that women and men would be in separate classes, and that the women would be decently dressed. Should the organization of separate classes not be feasible, then the minimal solution would be that the men practice in the front rows and the women in the rear. The professed goal of many yoga practitioners to attain union with God in meditation was anathema to Ranuwijaya. Should meditation be part of an otherwise purely secular yoga class, then Muslim practitioners are to practice Zikr instead. He further denounced the practice of Sun Salutations and the Lotus posture as unfitting for Muslims, because they would be religious in nature. He concluded by exhorting the Muslim participants, some of whom had appeared in veil and sports clothes, to choose only yoga classes of the third category.

Given the fact that the yoga classes at BIF usually included short meditations ending with the chanting of mantras, it was clear that MUI deemed them unfitting for Muslims. Somvir, however, tried to settle the dispute with MUI by openly accepting Ranuwijaya's conditions pertaining to a form of yoga permitted for Muslims, asserting that henceforth there would be no chanting of mantras, and that Muslim participants would be advised by all teachers of the newly founded Indonesian Yoga Association to practice Zikr during meditation periods. He further suggested that BIF and MUI should maintain communication on this issue. Ranuwijaya

departed with a final approval of Somvir's acknowledgment of MUI's conditions, and communication has henceforth been maintained between the two institutions.

Conclusion

MUI's categorization of the different yoga formats echoes the distinctions drawn by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore and the Malaysian Fatwa Council. In the face of the known attempts of some Indian yoga teachers at winning adherents of other faiths over to the universalized spiritual values of Neo-Hinduism (McKean 1996), MUI's position seems justified. At the same time, the fatwa against yoga testifies to MUI's propensity for a complete segregation of the different faith communities in Indonesia, which ultimately undermines pluralist civil society. This is all the more alarming as it mirrors similar attempts elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

In the different attitudes of Harun and Somvir towards the fatwa, we encounter two different strategies of extenuating the potential for interfaith conflict that springs from fundamentalist attitudes emphasizing the exclusivity of traditions. While Harun tried to build theological bridges between different traditions by pointing to structural and typological similarities between them, Somvir accepted absolute difference and then negotiated an agreement on the basis of what seemed possible under the circumstances.

In BIF's official dealings with MUI, Somvir's strategy was probably the more successful one. Harun's position, however, demonstrated to the participants of the yoga festival that contemporary Islam is not monolithic. It obviously prevented some participants from denouncing Islam as a whole. Both strategies therefore worked in favor of a peaceful settlement of the dispute between BIF and MUI.

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