

Clerics defend Obama amid smear campaign: Condemn "bitter, destructive politics"

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A host of religious leaders have condemned "the bitter, destructive politics" that they say produced a political smear campaign against Senator Barack Obama (D., Ill.), who is preparing a run for the presidency.

Several Web sites and a Fox News program reported that Obama was hiding the fact that he was educated in a madrassa—a fundamentalist Islamic school—during his childhood in Indonesia.

Obama, who denied the allegations, acknowledged attending a school that enrolled mostly Muslims for two years, as well as a Catholic school for another two while living in Indonesia.

A number of clerics signed an open letter that sharply criticized the tactics.

"We have had enough of the slash- and-burn politics calculated to divide us as children of God," the letter read. "Certain moral standards should infuse our national dialogue, and the recent attacks on Senator Obama violate values at the heart of this dialogue."

Bob Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches and a former Democratic member of Congress, signed the letter and lambasted the allegations against Obama.

"It appears Fox News is using a political candidate to further foment a fear of fundamentalism in hopes of dividing Americans and pitting people of faith against one another," Edgar said.

Religious officials signing the letter include Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner of the Union for Reform Judaism; Imam Mahdi Bray, the executive director of the Muslim American

Society; and Stephen J. Thurston, president of the National Baptist Convention of America.

CNN sent senior correspondent John Vause to Jakarta, Indonesia, to investigate the questions about Obama's educational background. Vause, who has visited madrassas in Pakistan that have been accused of training terrorists, reported that he found no signs of radicalism at the Basuki school, which Obama attended from 1969 to 1971.

Additionally, the headmaster of the school told Vause that Basuki is "a public school" that doesn't "focus on religion," adding that although respect for religion is advocated, the school does not give preferential treatment to any one faith. - *Religion News Service*