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Towards “Humanitarian Islam”: New Nahdlatul Ulama Chairman and the Global Initiative to Promote Religious Moderation

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Humanitarian Islam at work: teaching the children. Photo by Andri Helmansyah on Unsplash.

SYNOPSIS

Nahdlatul Ulama — Indonesia’s largest Islamic organisation — recently elected Yahya Cholil Staquf as its new chairman. A close analysis of his background and past accomplishments reveals that Yahya has a potential agenda to transform the organisation into a global voice on religious moderation through his promotion of “humanitarian Islam”.

COMMENTARY

On 24 December 2021, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) — Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation — concluded its 34th national congress (*muktamar*) in Lampung. Congress delegates elected Yahya Cholil Staquf, formerly general secretary of the organisation, as its next chairperson.

Yahya's election means that NU, which claims nearly 100 million Indonesian Muslims as its followers, will once again be led by a cleric with a strong genealogical linkage to the family of its founding fathers, what NU activists internally refer to as “blue blood” (*darah biru*). The last NU chairman who came from a “blue blood” background was the late Abdurrahman Wahid, who later became Indonesia's first democratically elected president.

The change of leadership has taken place in a climate where many activists were concerned that NU had increasingly [become too involved in politics](#) — particularly during the chairmanship of Yahya's immediate predecessor, Said Aqil Siradj — with President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) co-opting the organisation as his leading Islamic ally during his 2019 re-election campaign. This turn towards politics saw several NU clerics and politicians being appointed to the president's second-term cabinet. These include Vice President [Ma'ruf Amin](#), a former NU supreme leader (*rais aam*), and [Yaqut Cholil Qoumas](#), the current minister of Religious Affairs and Yahya's younger brother.

“Blue Blood” Lineage

The two chairmen who preceded Yahya — Hasyim Muzadi and Said Aqil — did not come from “blue blood” backgrounds but instead were ordinary clerics (*ulama*) who rose through the NU's leadership ranks. NU insiders stated that the organisation's activists had decided to pick a cleric from a “blue blood” background to lead the organisation for the next five years in order to reorient NU's mission towards becoming [a civil society organisation](#), just like when it was under Wahid's leadership from 1984 to 1999.

Yahya's father, [Cholil Bisri](#), was a politician who was a member of parliament from the United Development Party (PPP) during the Suharto era and later co-founded the National Awakening Party (PKB) during the *Reformasi* period following the fall of Suharto. Yahya's uncle, [Mustofa Bisri](#), is a prominent NU cleric and poet who was Wahid's close confidant. Mustofa briefly served as NU's supreme leader from 2014 to 2015.

Immediately after his election as NU's chairperson, Yahya reorganised the organisation's leadership board by appointing many senior clerics of “blue blood” background. They include [Hasib Chasbullah](#), son of NU co-founder Wahab Chasbullah, and [Alissa Wahid](#), daughter of Wahid, who himself was a grandson of NU co-founder Hasjim Asj'ari. Alissa and East Java governor Khofifah Indar Parawansa became the first two women appointed to the NU leadership board. This reorganisation signifies that future leaders of the organisation would continue to come from “blue blood” background, but possibly through the female line as well.

A “Great Communicator”

Despite his campaign pledge to move NU away from politics, Yahya himself has a track record of serving in the inner circle of several presidential administrations. He was a presidential spokesperson during the Wahid presidency (1999–2001), while under Jokowi he served as a member of the Presidential Advisory Council from 2018 to 2019.

Combined with the fact that his brother is the current religious affairs minister, this past political affiliation indicates that under Yahya’s chairmanship NU will retain its role as one of Jokowi’s key allies, albeit in a less prominent capacity than under his predecessor Said Aqil.

Yahya was well known in the international arena for his advocacy of the kind of moderate Islam that was envisioned by NU. Aided by the communication skills he gained from the time he served as President Wahid’s spokesperson and his excellent command of English, Yahya served as NU’s unofficial “foreign minister” during Said Aqil’s chairmanship and travelled overseas extensively to promote the concept of [Islam Nusantara](#) (“Archipelagic Islam”).

Projecting NU as a Global “Humanitarian Islam” Organisation

Islam Nusantara is an accumulation of teachings by Wahid and other previous generations of NU ulama. It promotes Islamic moderation and toleration towards non-Islamic cultures and religious traditions. Promoted [as an antidote](#) against Islamist radicalism and extremism, Islam Nusantara was proclaimed as NU’s semi-official ideology during the organisation’s 2015 national congress.

Yahya’s mission in his previous NU position was to promote Islam Nusantara and its derivation, “humanitarian Islam”, to the international community as NU’s interpretation of moderate Islam that is applicable not only to Indonesian Muslims but to all Muslims worldwide.

In this endeavour, he partnered with Holland Taylor, a former telecommunication specialist and executive who earlier co-founded [the LibForAll Foundation](#) with Wahid and Yahya’s uncle Mustofa Bisri. Together, Yahya and Taylor founded the [Bayt ar-Rahmah \(“House of Mercy”\) Foundation](#) — a charity which seeks to promote “humanitarian Islam” as a global strategy [“to recontextualize the teachings](#) of orthodox, authoritative Islam ... with the reality of contemporary civilization, whose context and conditions differ significantly from those in which classical Islamic law emerged.”

Yahya believes that “orthodox Islam” [has been misused](#) by some Islamist-leaning actors to promote “a hidden or explicit agenda of dominating the existing political order”. This, in his view, ultimately leads to the Islamists’ desire to replace the Indonesian state based on the nationalist state philosophy of *Pancasila* with one based on an orthodox interpretation of Islamic law (*shari’a*).

To counter this misinterpretation, Yahya proposes that Islamic teachings be rejuvenated by “humanitarian Islam”, which has long been practised by NU.

Humanitarian Islam, according to the Bayt ar-Rahmah Foundation, aims to “[recontextualize the teaching](#) of orthodox, authoritative Islam” and challenge the “problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy” that leads to [radicalism and terrorism](#). Its eventual aim is “[to bring about a world](#) in which Islam — and Muslims — are truly beneficent and contribute to the well-being of all humanity” and where there can be “respect for equal rights and dignity of every human being”.

Yahya has spoken about NU’s experience in practising and promoting humanitarian Islam in numerous North American and European nations. In 2018 he held a meeting with then Israeli Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), where the two men discussed the possibility of developing closer ties between Israel and Muslim nations.

This meeting was widely interpreted as an exploration for Indonesia and Israel to eventually open diplomatic ties. Given that the governments of the two countries may [have since begun informal negotiations](#) for establishing ties, Yahya could have played a significant role as chairperson of Indonesia’s largest Islamic organisation by [removing objections](#) raised by the previous NU leadership to such a move.

Yahya has also met with [Pope Francis](#). Meeting at the Vatican in January 2020, the two men discussed the possibility of the Roman Catholic leader visiting the world’s largest Muslim nation sometime in the near future.

Concluding Observations

Yahya’s appointment as new NU chairman opens a new chapter in the organisation’s nearly century-old history of promoting an Islamic interpretation that is grounded in Indonesia’s Islamic religious customs and traditions.

Yahya’s election could potentially increase his organisation’s international profile — a goal that the NU leadership has long sought as part of its efforts to [boost the organisation’s “soft power”](#) in interfaith diplomacy. The idea is to promote NU’s vision of “humanitarian Islam” and religious moderation worldwide with a view to projecting the organisation as a leading voice of moderate Islam on a global scale.

However, while the new chairman has pledged to restore NU as a politically neutral civil society organisation, he is expected to retain its close ties with the Jokowi regime and to work together with the regime to promote Indonesia’s brand of “moderate Islam”, both within Indonesia and internationally.

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