

UWTSD

Muslim Politics (HPRS7017)

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3. The significance of a Muslim movement in a Muslim majority context.

Introduction

Since the inception of Indonesia as an independent nation state in 1945, it has remained the largest Muslim nation in the world. Indonesia boasts a membership of about 229 million Muslims, comprising 13% of the 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide.¹ Today, Muslims constitute almost 88% of Indonesia's population.² Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is the largest grassroots Islamic organization in Indonesia, boasting a membership of 60 million.³ NU advocates a traditionalist form of Sunni Islam following the four Sunni schools of law (*madhhab*) and accepting Sufism as part of its Islamic heritage.⁴ NU was formally established in 1926 as a response and counteraction to the rise of modernist Islam⁵ around the globe which threatens the presence and influence of traditional Islam in Indonesia.

NU was established primarily as a social-religious organization with its membership concentrating in the rural population.⁶ NU's outreach to the masses especially in the rural areas was through the Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) it established throughout Java and later to the other parts of Indonesia. The enduring relationships formed between the religious teachers (*kiai*) and students in the *pesantren* were to become the most influential and strongest source of grassroots support for the NU

¹ Pew Research Center, *World's Muslim Population More Widespread Than You Might Think* (2017) <<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/31/worlds-muslim-population-more-widespread-than-you-might-think/>> [accessed 10 May 2022]; World Population Review, *Muslim Population By Countries 2021* (2021) <<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/muslim-population-by-country>> [accessed 10 May 2022].

² Pew Research Center, (2017); World Population Review, (2021).

³ Alexander Arifianto, 'Practicing What It Preaches? Understanding the Contradictions between Pluralist Theology and Religious Intolerance within Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama', *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, 55.2 (2017), 241-264 (p. 257).

⁴ John L. Esposito, 'Nahdlatul Ulama,' In *The Oxford Dictionary Of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 127; Faried F Saenong, 'Nahdlatul Ulama (NU): A Grassroots Movement Advocating Moderate Islam,' In *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2021), pp. 129-150 (p. 132).

⁵ Greg Fealy and Robin Bush, 'The Political Decline of Traditional Ulama In Indonesia: The State, Umma and Nahdlatul Ulama', *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 42.5 (2014), 536-560 (p. 541).

⁶ Saenong, p. 135.

throughout the decades.⁷ Today, NU boasts of a vast network of Muslim intellectuals, professionals, women, labourers and peasants in its organization, spanning the urban and rural parts of Indonesia.⁸ This paper seeks to show that NU is not just a socio-religious Islamic organization but it wields great political influence and is heavily involved in Indonesian politics from its inception while seeing itself as a guardian of traditional Indonesian Islam.⁹

Navigating Between Religion, Politics, and the State

From its inception, NU had to straddle between religion, politics, and its relationship with the state. While NU's founding ideals was to be a religious organization, most of NU's history is intertwined with politics.¹⁰ Under Dutch colonial rule, religion and politics were to be separated in Indonesia. Any form of Muslim unrest would be quickly suppressed as the Dutch feared Islam and its power to mobilise the masses against colonial rule.¹¹ This colonial legacy of a distinction between political and religious Islam remains in Indonesia state-Islam relations till today. Yet, Islam remains a central and important feature of Indonesia politics in its struggle against colonial rule. Majelis Islam A'laa Indonesia (MIAI, the Supreme Islamic Council of Indonesian) was established in 1937 by NU and Muhammadiyah (modernist Islam group) as a collaborative effort to unite all Islamic groups to unite and struggle against Dutch policies pertaining to Islam.¹²

During Japanese rule in 1942, Muslim leaders were incorporated into the administration, cementing Islam's place and participation in Indonesian politics.¹³ The Japanese disbanded MIAI and officially sponsored an official umbrella Islamic organization Madjlis Sjuro Muslimin Indonesia or Masyumi in short (Consultative Council of Indonesian Muslims) in 1943 consisting only of the two largest grassroots Islamic groups, Muhammadiyah (modernist) and NU (traditionalist), and two small traditionalist groups with NU's founding leader KH Hasyim Asy'ari becoming the

⁷ Fealy and Bush, p. 541.

⁸ Robin Bush, *Nadhlatul Ulama & The Struggle For Power Within Islam & Politics In Indonesia* (Singapore : Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), p. 2.

⁹ Marcus Mietzner and Burhanuddin Muhtadi, 'The Myth of Pluralism: Nahdlatul Ulama And The Politics Of Religious Tolerance In Indonesia', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 42.1 (2020), 58–84 (p. 62).

¹⁰ Bush, p. 37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹² Saenong, p. 140.

¹³ Bush, p. 41.

national chairman.¹⁴ Following the end of the Japanese occupation in Indonesia and the independence of Indonesia, Masyumi subsequently evolved into a political party whereby its members used as vehicle to participate in national politics. Saenong opined that NU's core role and involvement in Masyumi marked the formal beginning of NU becoming a political movement.¹⁵ Exiting from Masyumi due to differences and cries of being disadvantaged politically in 1952, NU went on to establish its own political party, participated and won in elections since 1955.¹⁶

Under President Sukarno in the 1950s, NU collaborated with the state to gain cabinet and legislative seats in the government and preserve its cultural-religious hegemony in Indonesia.¹⁷ In particular, the post of the Minister of Religion was critical to gain control of the Department of the Religion. This will essentially ensure continuous support and funding to its NU members and the operations of the *pesantren* and schools throughout Indonesia.¹⁸ Under President Suharto's rule which begins in 1966, relationship with the state were tense and strained for most part of the three decades of the New Order rule.¹⁹ NU mainly took on an oppositional role against the state in the mid-1960s to mid-1970s and faced repercussions and repression from the state. A case in point would be the removal of the Department of Religion from NU control in the 1970s which prevented access to state resources for NU. Facing political repression from the state and sustained deprivation of state resources, NU succumbed to the intimidation by the state by formally adopting political pluralism²⁰ and commitment to a multi-religious society in Indonesia and withdrawing from formal politics "in a move called *Kembali ke Khittah 1926*, or 'Return to the Guidelines of 1926'" in 1984.²¹ All these were done as strategic political moves to accommodate the state and to ensure the survival of NU in the volatile political landscape between 1984-1999. With the fall of Suharto in 1998, NU made a major political comeback with its Supreme Leader, Abdurrahman Wahid elected as the fourth President of Indonesia in 1999. Since 1999, NU has once again participated actively in politics with party

¹⁴ Bush, p. 42.

¹⁵ Saenong, p. 140.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁷ Bush, p. 56; Mietzner and Muhtadi, p. 63.

¹⁸ Mietzner and Muhtadi, p. 62.

¹⁹ Fealy and Bush, p. 546.

²⁰ Mietzner and Muhtadi, p. 63.

²¹ Bush, p. 2; Mietzner and Muhtadi, pp. 63-64.

members holding leadership positions in NU as well as in the government. In 2019, NU's Supreme Leader Ma'ruf Amin was elected as the Vice-President of Indonesia in a successful Presidential campaign with President Jokowi. Once again, this demonstrates the ongoing religious-political alliance between NU an Islamic organization and the state. From NU's history, it is difficult for NU to stick to "Khittah 1926" and distance itself from politics

Defending Traditional Islam Against the Pushback from Modernist Islam

A key fundamental reason for the formalisation of NU as a traditional Islam organization in 1926 was a response to a perceived threat to the existence of traditional Islam by modernist Islam. Modernist Islam represented by Muhammadiyah, the second largest Islamic socio-religious organization after NU in Indonesia is the main rival to NU political power and cultural-religious hegemony. Earlier in 1912, Muhammadiyah, a "puritan, reformist, and modernist socio-religious movement" influenced by the modernist reform movements in the Middle East was established by KH Ahmad Dahlan in Indonesia.²² Muhammadiyah's agenda was to "purify Islam from local syncretic practices commonly known as 'TBC' which stands for *takhayul* (myth, Arab. *takayyul*), *bid'a* (religious innovation), and *churafat* (superstition)." ²³ Thus, modernist Islam stands in direct opposition to the beliefs, practices and values of traditional Islam which has been in Indonesia since the coming of Islam in the thirteenth century. Furthermore, globally, Islam was also facing a shift towards a purist Wahhabist form of Islam with the rise of power of Ibn Saud in Saudi Arabia.²⁴ NU does not subscribe to the position that the Middle Eastern strand of Islam is the only lens to interpret Islamic scriptures. ²⁵ Thus, the local and global events heightened the fear of the traditionalists towards the threat of rising modernist Islam.

NU's concepts of Islam that it advocates can be said to be a populist as well as political strategy to keep its rival modernist Islam at bay. There are two key concepts that are core to NU. The first is "Indonesian Islam." Through the concept of "Indonesian Islam," NU seeks to accentuate the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Islam in Indonesia at

²² Saenong, p. 131.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

²⁵ Mietzner and Muhtadi, p.62.

the cultural level. Abdurrahman Wahid termed it as *Pribumisasi Islam* (indigenisation of Islam).²⁶ Indonesian Islam can accommodate existing local cultures in the context of being true to Islamic principles. NU argues that indigenization of Islam prevents polarization between culture and religion and promotes harmony in the Indonesian society.²⁷ The second key concept which is emphasized in recent times is “Islam Nusantara” (Archipelagic Islam) which NU officially adopted in its congress in 2015.²⁸ Essentially, “Islam Nusantara” is not a new concept but a re-affirmation of NU brand of Indonesian Islam which advocates religious tolerance and moderation since the 1980s and 1990s.²⁹ Just as its inception was a response to the threat posed by modernist Islam in the 1920s, “Islam Nusantara” can be said to be once again directed at NU’s new modernist rivals, in the form of the “Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, or FPI) and the Indonesian chapter of Hizbut Tahrir (HTI).”³⁰ With this concept of “Islam Nusantara,” NU positioned itself as a model of moderate Islam which “enables Muslims to accept, and indeed thrive within a secular-oriented polity, as embodied in the state ideology of Indonesia”³¹ and to counter the modernist Islam threat to its existence as the guardian to Indonesian Islam which is traditional Islam.

Conclusion

Throughout NU history in Indonesia, it has been a strong advocate and defender of traditional Islam which embraces local cultures, customs, and way of life as long as it conforms to Islamic principles.³² Traditional Islam has been largely entrenched in Indonesia especially among the Javanese since the coming of Islam to Indonesia.³³ NU’s astuteness in preserving its Islamic socio-religious hegemony and political legacy in Indonesia in the past ninety-six years is indeed no mean feat. As NU celebrates its centenary in 2026, it remains to be seen if NU can continue to successfully navigate amidst the increasingly overlapping terrains comprising religion and politics in Indonesia while promoting “Islam Nusantara” as a global concept.

²⁶ Saenong, p. 145.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145.

²⁸ Mietzner and Muhtadi, p.64.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.64.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.64.

³¹ Giora Eliraz, *Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama: A Tolerant, Inclusive Message To The Arab Middle East* (2016) <<https://www.mei.edu/publications/indonesias-nahdlatul-ulama-tolerant-inclusive-message-arab-middle-east>> [accessed 10 May 2022].

³² Bush, p. 29; Saenong, p. 143.

³³ Bush, p. 29.

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