

Hudson Institute

Among the Believers

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The 50-mile route from Sura-baya airport to this East Java city was lined with tens of thousands of banners wishing peace and success to Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world's largest Muslim organization, as participants gathered in August for its latest five-year congress.

There were banners bearing greetings from Indonesia's president and vice president, from the national political parties, the provincial governor, and governors throughout the country. Officials of the towns and villages through which those arriving for the congress passed also expressed warm wishes. Not to be outdone, banks and investment houses displayed greetings, as did Honda and Toyota and media, telephone, milk, cigarette, and sundry other companies. Since NU, founded in 1926, has some 50 million members, politicians and corporations wanted their goodwill and support to be well publicized. And there were reciprocal greetings from Muhammadiyah, the world's second-largest Muslim organization (with some 40 million members), which was holding its own congress in Mukassar at the same time.

NU's gathering was a great, sprawling, colorful, four-day business reminiscent of a state fair. There were thousands of delegates, and tens of thousands of visitors and observers, though only a handful from abroad. The official delegates often appeared drained and strained since there were major and acrimonious disputes over election procedures for the new leadership, and the last sessions of the day did not begin until 11 p.m. But ordinary NU members were happy and friendly. I was asked over 100 times to be part of group photos. There was plenty of music from a large soundstage and scattered local bands, as well as an exhibition of NU-related art, myriad food stalls, commercial booths, foot massage stations, and endless vendors offering T-shirts, Islamic fashion, hats, rocks, toys, jewelry, buttons, CDs, bedsheets, and more. My prize: a combination cigarette lighter and bottle opener embossed with the NU logo.

The stalls also included serious items. Some advertised NU's many magazines, its expansive and growing charitable and social work, its 22 universities, thousands of schools, and millions of students. There were wonderful book exhibits and sales, from children's books on Islam to dense theological and philosophical works, including the epistemology and axiology of Islamic jurisprudence. I was particularly struck by a reprint of the 1922 work *Menolak Wahhabi* (Wahhabism Rejected), by Muhammad Faqih Maskumambang, one of NU's founders. NU has been struggling against

Wahhabism, the repressive Islam of Saudi Arabia, for a century, trying to counteract its inroads into Indonesia, including by articulating and promoting an Islam at home in a plural society.

This fit the congress's theme of "Islam Nusantara," or "Islam of the Archipelago," the traditional Islam of the islands, since Indonesia—with over 15,000 islands, half of them inhabited (and one of which, Run, the British gave the Dutch in exchange for Manhattan)—is the world's largest archipelago. Islam Nusantara emphasizes that, unlike desert lands, Indonesia is a country and people of islands, coasts, travel, trade, and ports, whose towns have always incorporated people very different in language, race, and creed, and which has cultivated openness to others—and so has Islamic beliefs and cultures compatible with diversity.

But Islam Nusantara is not meant to be merely a specimen of interest to sociologists of religion, a serendipitous local phenomenon conditioned by the accidents of geography. I was invited to one of the preparatory meetings to talk with NU scholars about the theological roots of Islam Nusantara. One of the main themes was how Muslims had related to existing cultures and religions when Islam was introduced—and how they should relate to them.

NU scholars, and many others in Indonesia, are developing serious theological works seeking to understand, clarify, and expound this adaptable Islam for wider application in the Muslim world. One major goal is to counter extremism both abroad and in Indonesia—ISIS, of course, but also movements that have been active locally, such as the Islamic Defender's Front, Laskar Jihad, the Indonesian Mujahidin Council, and Hizb ut-Tahrir. NU's Islamic College in Jakarta runs a graduate program devoted to Islam Nusantara.

Its proponents sharply reject the charge of syncretism. Rather, they speak of enculturation—a critical appreciation of, and judicious incorporation of, existing practices—and the indigenization of Islam. NU chairman Said Aqil Siradj has called for Islam to be propagated by "respecting local cultures, not eradicating them." This manifests itself theoretically in Islamic works paralleling Christian discussions of common grace and natural law. It shows itself practically in the architecture of the older mosques in Indonesia, especially Java, home to over half the population of 250 million. Some mosques may be mistaken for Chinese temples, since several of the early apostles of Islam in Indonesia came from China, while most mirror traditional Javanese styles, with pyramidal roofs topped with ornate decoration but rarely with crescents. Minarets were traditionally rare: The call to prayer or fasting during Ramadan was announced with the beating of a huge drum, a bedug, which was used in traditional Javanese Gamelan music.

NU does not confine Islam Nusantara to debate and doctrine. In the weeks following the congress, in sweltering heat, thousands of uniformed men and women from NU's youth wing, Ansor, accompanied by bands, marched to the At-Taqwa Grand Mosque in Cirebon, West Java, a city with a history of militancy. Ansor's leader, Alfa Isnaeni, denounced the idea of an Indonesian caliphate and called on his members to promote Islam Nusantara throughout the country. Many more such rallies are planned.

In Indonesia, the congress was a major event. It opened with a speech by the country's president; each day it was the lead item on TV news and in national newspapers. But apart from the presence of diplomats at the opening and reporting by specialized academics, it mostly passed unnoticed in the West.

This is tragic, since a few days spent at the congress of the world's largest Muslim organization would reshape most Westerners' perception of Islam. While groups such as ISIS demand a many-sided, including military, response, long-term antidotes to growing Islamic extremism can only be found in organizations such as NU.

Historically, NU, like Indonesia, has rarely sought a bigger place on the Islamic or world stage. But now, with the nation's economy the largest in the Muslim world, and after eight successful democratic elections, both are reaching out, sponsoring reconciliation and educational programs in Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. There are even NU branches in the United States.

As we continue to struggle with bloody chaos in much of the Middle East, Indonesia, and especially Indonesian Islam, needs our careful attention.

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