

Nahdlatul Ulama: Indonesia's antidote to Islamism's feral fringe

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Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest independent Muslim organisation, is exporting Indonesia's traditionally tolerant Islamic values as the religion's authentic form, an antidote to nihilistic radicalism tearing apart the Middle East.

Claiming more than 40 million followers in the world's biggest Muslim nation, NU spiritual leaders are also trying to supplant the influence of Saudi-sponsored Wahhabism, which they believe is the ideological wellspring of Islamic State.

The message to vulnerable Muslim communities everywhere is "NU is here to help", Supreme Council secretary-general Yahya Cholil Staquf told *The Weekend Australian*.

"We know this threat, we have been fighting it for almost 90 years — it's our daily business to face them," said Haji Yahya.

"We know how they think, we know who they are, we know how they operate."

NU has this week launched *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* (The Divine Grace of East Indies Islam), a video explaining Indonesian Islam's origins and theology, fiercely rebutting Islamic State and Wahhabi fundamentalism.

NU formed in 1926 in part to resist the spread of Wahhabism to what was then the Dutch East Indies, following the Saudis' conquest of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

The new video denounces Saudi Islam as "grasping and materialistic, coarse and cruel" and links Wahhabist persecution of non-conforming Muslims and destruction of ancient shrines and sacred graves to Islamic State's depredations.

"Perhaps we have not witnessed with our own eyes our friends and neighbours being slaughtered," says NU chairman Said Aqil Siradj amid images of horrific executions and mosque destruction.

"We have not witnessed with our own eyes the graves of our saints and our religious scholars being desecrated and destroyed by these people. But it's obvious, obvious they are working non-stop to reach us."

NU, an organisation that has seen itself defending Indonesian religious values from aberrant foreign doctrines, is now joining the international ideological struggle.

Its message is directed both at the faithful abroad and non-Muslims horrified particularly by Islamic State.

“It is very important we export the ideas of Islam Nusantara to the world, in these times when many in the world hate Islam because of the acts of some Islamic people,” Dr Said said at the launch.

But as NU also struggles ideologically with extremists at home, some surreptitiously resourced from the Arabian Peninsula, others openly supporting Islamic State or al-Qa’ida, the video also reiterates Islam Nusantara’s traditions of pluralism and tolerance.

Indonesia’s senior security minister Luhut Panjaitan this week said the government was working with NU, Muhammadiyah, the other mass Sunni Muslim organisation, and other religious groups on a program of “soft approach to the problem of radicalisation”.

But NU leaders worry the government itself has been reluctant to confront radical groups, particularly those pushing as their main line imposition of sharia law across the nation, which NU opposes.

The thuggish Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), which enjoys close relations with some senior police, bullies non-Sunni communities — Shia and Ahmadiyya — and Christian churches, against NU’s precepts.

NU leaders believe the upsurge in attacks on Shias and Ahmaddis in the past five years is directly related to the spread of Wahhabi influence in Indonesia.

The former regional terrorist organisation Jemaah Islamiyah remains legal in Indonesia and is energetically recruiting among young middle-class people in the cause of sharia law.

The government itself has yet to give legal teeth to its 2014 “ban” on Islamic State, so that recruitment and travelling to Syria to fight for the caliphate still are not illegal.

Radical agendas prevailed at a Congress of Indonesian Muslims in February when NU, Muhammadiyah and the organiser Indonesian Ulama Council were pushed to the margins by the likes of FPI, Hizbut Tahrir and Indonesian Mujahadin Council.

Rahmat Islam Nusantara throughout emphasises and reinforces the tradition of Walisongo, the Nine Saints who began proselytising Islam in Java in the early 15th century.

That is a tradition of peaceful conversion, co-option of local cultures and the strong element of Sufi mysticism, all anathema to Saudi Islam and radical variants such as Islamic State.

“We are encouraging Muslim communities all over the world that they have the right to be Muslims, while at the same time maintaining their own local cultures and civilisation,” said Haji Yahya.

The video is being distributed internationally as *The Divine Grace of Islam Nusantara*, including an Arab-language subtitled version, over the internet and social media.