

## Indonesian online warriors pulling the beard of radical Islam

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Malcolm Turnbull says Indonesia and its reformist President Joko Widodo are a global role model for “tolerant and inclusive Islam”.

**When the head of Indonesia’s largest and most moderate Muslim organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama, joked that men with beards tend to be stupid — and the longer the beard the more stupid the man — there was apparently method in his madness.**

Just as there was in an unflattering observation about those Indonesians wearing trousers above their ankles in the Arab style of conservative Muslims.

“It was just a joke but actually it works in a very effective way because the fact is those people already infected by extremist ideology usually wear beards,” NU Supreme Council general secretary Yahya Cholil Staquf said of chairman Kyai Said Aqil Siradj’s inflammatory comments.

“Not everyone who wears short trousers is radical but most radicals wear short trousers. Some people didn’t like it but it helps ordinary people in villages easily identify who is to be avoided.”

The message was clear; imported, conservative versions of Islam are not welcome in Indonesia's tolerant and pluralist Islam Nusantara (archipelago Islam).

Yahya says NU wants "to give our people confidence that we're also legitimate. We don't have to follow whatever Arabs say about Islam".

It is this Indonesia that Malcolm Turnbull referenced last week when he cited Australia's northern neighbour and its reformist President Joko Widodo as a global role model for "tolerant and inclusive Islam".

"Australia has a vital interest in seeing President Widodo's commitment to tolerance succeed," he said, though NU leaders worry Jokowi's government shows too great a tolerance for fundamentalists opposed to Indonesia's pluralist model. However, the Indonesia that US President Barack Obama spoke to *The Atlantic Monthly* about was one that was increasingly receptive to Wahabist Islam propaganda and the sacks of Saudi money that inevitably fund the madrasahs, imams and teachers to support it.

Obama, as an example, pointed to far greater numbers of Indonesian women wearing the hijab than when he lived in the country as a child. Indeed, as Haji Yahya spoke last week of Indonesia's tolerant, pluralist Islam, the country's highest clerical body, the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), flagged its intention to ban Muslims from wearing clothing linked to other religions.

Meanwhile the flow of Indonesians joining Islamic State and the like fuels fears sophisticated terror networks could be revived in the world's most populous Muslim country.

So which Indonesia is it?

"Actually your Prime Minister is right and Obama is also right," says Yahya. "From the 1980s money started to pour into Indonesia from the Middle East to propagate this Wahabist ideology and it's getting stronger and stronger. They are succeeding in infiltrating many different elements of society."

Military officers were joining groups ideologically opposed to Pancasila — the principles of monotheism, humanism, democracy, unity of nation and social justice that underpin the Indonesian state — and most Hizb ut Tahrir followers were civil servants.

"But we still have the potential to protect our Islam Nusantara. It's a global war we're waging and we can't just rely on the natural instincts of the people. We need to consolidate, we need resources."

Indeed, the government at the weekend banned the Islamic sect Gafatar as a deviant religion. The move was the latest setback to the country's commitment to protect minorities and tolerate diversity, following the targeting of the LGBT community.

The 90-year-old NU, which has 40 million followers in Indonesia alone, has an army of several thousand religious scholars that work "offline" in communities, as well as in its 14,000 schools, to counter the spread of extremism.

More recently it has been using partners around the globe to spread its moderate Archipelago Islam model to counter the nihilistic, sectarian messages of Islamic State and other extremist groups dominating the media landscape.

But at a launch in Jakarta last week of the Vienna Observatory for Applied Research on Terrorism and Extremism — a joint venture with Vienna University and the LibForAll Foundation, Yahya admitted the NU was losing the online fight: its up to 400 online activists were volunteers, self-funded and not rich.

“Since 2010 we’ve been raising donations every month to give money to them just to buy internet credit. Sometimes they have to surrender what they’re doing when the website they’re working on shuts down because they can’t pay. This happens a lot.”

They are no match for what Ali Fisher, a research fellow with the University of Southern California’s Centre on Public Diplomacy, calls the “swarm cast” of the media mujaheddin which constantly re-establishes accounts as quickly as Twitter can block them.

In the four months from last October, Dr Fisher tracked 3.4 million tweets referencing Islamic extremism, 3.3 million accounts and 1.8 million websites.

NU follower Zainal Maarif, a part-time Islamic schoolteacher, goes into battle online to counter extremist narrative using the Koranic references of his ideological nemeses to disprove their arguments. He acknowledges it is a David and Goliath battle against such a well-resourced opponent.

“I am on standby all the time via my smartphone. I respond to any invitation for online debates,” he says. “But I struggle with financial issues. I’ve been hacked many times and lost many websites because I can’t afford to pay the domain fees.

“We need more people to do this. We need more support to get articles and thoughts translated and read across the world.”

Dr Fisher said the mismatch between the lakes of money available in the West for counter-terrorism and the dilemma for Indonesia’s grassroots online activists is nonsensical.

“The problem with Western organisations is they want to fund their own organisations. We have a situation here where young activists are struggling to pay for internet to try to fight it out online and meanwhile millions is being spent by governments and organisations saying we need to build something. It just doesn’t make any sense,” he said.

“After the (January) attack on Jakarta we talked about the victims and attackers. The policemen who stood their ground, outgunned and outmanned, barely got a mention outside Indonesia and yet they were ... standing in the way of people trying to take extremist action. They weren’t prepared to back down.”

Holland Taylor from LibForAll says “Indonesia has very strong antibodies” against extremism.

“One of the key elements in addressing (Islamic State) is to assert that it’s OK to have your own cultural expression of Islam. That’s the purpose of this Islam Nusantara campaign; to show that we still have that here.”

At a time when the world is desperate to engage with moderate Islam, NU could be “a serious threat to ISIS”, he insists.

If only it had the framework.