

new mandala

Daesh, Islam Nusantara and shades of grey

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It's an old enemy of Wahhabism. But is Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama and its project of tolerant, peaceful Islam an antidote to the extremism of Islamic State?

A statement late last year by Islamic State's spokesman and senior leader, Sheikh Abu Muhammad Al Adnani, drew attention mainly because of his orders to attack "unbelievers" in the West.

It was widely assumed that these unbelievers were non-Muslims, like those killed in the Paris attacks. But Adnani was also telling Muslims that they too may be judged unbelievers, and suffer the consequences.

He urged Muslims to attack unbelievers in any way they could.

If you refuse to do this, while our brothers are being bombarded and killed, and while their blood and their possessions are destroyed everywhere, then review your religion. Then you are in a dangerous situation.

Islamic State is playing on an old Islamic theme. If a caliphate exists, Muslims must defend it. If they fail to do so, they will be considered apostates.

There are no greys in the Islamic State religious scheme, notes Holland Taylor, head of non-profit LibForAll, which fights for tolerant Islam. Islamic State, like so many other religious groups over the centuries, believes it is the only way to God. Anyone who does not believe that may be killed or enslaved, sold as chattel.

As many have already noted, Daesh, as many Muslims prefer to call Islamic State, is a death cult attempting to put the world into reverse and turn it into a medieval construct ruled entirely by its leaders' strict interpretation of shariah law. The acronym Daesh happens to sound like Dahes, Arabic for sowing discord. Small wonder that Islamic State will cut your tongue out for using the term.

The emergence of Daesh is a problem for Muslims, for whom it is doctrinally impossible to deny sharia, or *fiqh*, the law. To deny Islamic State is, at least in the eyes of the radicals, to deny Islam. Many Muslims who know very little of their faith are easily cowed into submission by the threat of apostasy.

But while Daesh has wreaked havoc in the Middle East, many Indonesian Muslims are determined to oppose its demands.

Entering the lift at the central headquarters of traditionalist Sunni movement Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Jakarta, I and the other passengers are greeted by a recorded voice: "*Salam Alaikum*" (Welcome). When we stop at a floor, the recorded voice says "*Alhamdulillah*" (thanks to God). There are a few titters from the passengers, who perhaps like me are reminded of an evangelical prayer group in the West.

Indonesia, and even cosmopolitan Jakarta, adheres increasingly to the formalities of Muslim life.

Muslim modes of fashion and public behavior have become far more entrenched in daily life. NU, among all the changes of modern life, stoutly defends its traditional style of Islam. The world's largest single organisation of any kind with an estimated 50 million members, it represents a traditional, Indonesian-flavored Islamic community that says the barbarians of Daesh have got it all wrong.

The lift reaches the seventh floor, and we arrive at the Aula, the hall, where I grab a seat in the second row. The hall fills up quickly, the audience including a number of acquaintances, some foreign journalists, another Indonesia-watcher, a finance man. I ask the latter why he's come to the screening of the NU film. "I'm French. After Paris this is important to me," he states. It's important to all of us, I respond.

The speakers arrive. Kyai Haji Said Aqil Sirodj, the general secretary of the central board of Nahdlatul Ulama, tells us why we're here.

The aim of the film is to export to the whole world. Donald Trump wants to ban all Muslims from entering America because of the actions of a small group of people who are conducting terror in the name of Islam. Islam Nusantara is not anti-Arab but it is an Islam that developed in the eastern islands and it is very different to the Islam of the Middle East.

Siradj and his allies at NU are promoting their unique form of Islam as an antidote to Islamic State, a rejection of Wahhabism, an alternative model for Muslims everywhere as a comfortable fit of religion and culture, and as a message to the West that not all Muslims are crazed murderers.

Islam Nusantara, says Said Aqil, was introduced to the Indonesian islands in 1470, nearly 300 years before Ibn Abd al-Wahhab formed an alliance with a local ruler, Muhammad Ibn Saud, in what many believe has now become an unholy alliance of religious fanaticism and oil wealth.

We settle down to watch the documentary, *The Divine Grace of Islam Nusantara*. It's a one-and-a-half hour movie, slickly produced that carries the argument of the local brand of the religion as a remedy to Islamic State. The theme of the movie is a festival held in 2014 to honour the last resting places of the *Walisongo* (Nine Saints).

While there is debate among historians about how Islam arrived in the islands, NU credits Maulana Malik Ibrahim with the honour. Considered the first of the *Walisongo*, the others were his descendants. While some say they were of Arab descent, NU itself states that they were Chinese mystics. The second *Walisongo*, Sunan Ampel, is believed to have been born in Champa, modern-day Vietnam.

The tombs of the *Walisongo*, scattered around the north coast of Java, are pilgrim sites to this day. At just one, the custodian says that on an average day around 15,000 people visit. In Saudi Arabia, sites such as this have been erased from the earth by the purist Wahhabi in a sterilised form of state Islam that Said Aqil states is also intrinsically capitalist.

Mysticism

The presence of the *Walisongo* in Java did not result in conflict with established religions. The courts followed Hinduism and Buddhism but most people, according to historian and religious school operator KH Agus Sanyoto, followed a belief system called Kapitayan. Instead of rejecting this creed, the *Walisongo* adopted it into what became Islam Nusantara – Islam with the flavor of the East Indies archipelago.

“The Kapitayan worshiped the highest God, who they called Sang Hyang Taya, the Great Void or Absolute,” Sanyoto recounts in the film. “Taya means emptiness, yet although the word literally means ‘that which is not’ it does not imply non-existence.

“This cannot be explained in purely rational terms, which is why Sang Hyang Taya came to be described with the phrase Tan Keno Kinoyo Ngopo, ‘that to which nothing can be done’. The mind cannot grasp ‘That’ which lies beyond human concepts, nor can ‘That’ be approached using any of the five senses.”

Followers of Sang Hyang Taya venerate rocks and boulders, which they see as containing the essence of the absolute. Priests meditated to caves, which represented emptiness. The Dutch described the belief system as animist, and Daesh and the Wahhabi consider it – and Islam Nusantara with it – as apostasy.

Old enemies

For NU, the propagation of Islam Nusantara as a counter to Daesh is not merely a question of theology. The organisation was formed specifically to counter pressure from Wahhabi infiltration. “We know who these people are, we have been fighting them for 90 years,” says KH Yahya Cholil Staquf, one of the leaders of the Islam Nusantara project.

KH Mustofa Bisri, until recently the spiritual head or Rois Aam of NU, describes the proselytising of the Wahhabi as an offence to the Prophet Muhammad. “The Prophet advised those who proselytise (*da’wa*) to make things easy for people, not cause them to live in terror. And yet lately it is precisely *da’wa* that makes people feel horrified and appalled by Islam.

“Genuine Islam, Islam Nusantara, Indonesian Islam, the Islam taught by the Messenger of God, has been supplanted by Saudi Islam, a grasping and materialistic Islam, coarse, cruel and savage. The Wahhabi view is just a ghoulish nightmare that keeps the world awake at night, trembling in horror.”

The enmity between Indonesian Islam and Wahhabism has deep roots.

Pilgrims from West Sumatra who returned from the haj in the early 1800s determined that their indigenous Islam, coloured with local traditions and culture, was inferior to the austere Wahhabi form they had seen in Mecca and the other centers of Islamic life.

They strove to apply its strictures in their own country, where Sufi traditions had blended with local cultural legacies. Those who refused to acknowledge the new ‘pure’ version of Islam were murdered, including close family members. Others were enslaved, just as Daesh enslaves ‘unbelievers’ today. The conflict became known as the Padri wars.

Historical accounts of the Padri wars say they stretched from 1821 to 1837. The Wahhabi faction might have prevailed, but their philosophy denied the legitimacy of local rulers, who were naturally reluctant to give up their power and fought back. The Dutch colonists, initially tied down in a war in Java, finally were able to assist the rulers and defeat the Wahhabi adherents. Ironically, the attempt to impose an austere form of Islam on the people of West Sumatra ended as a springboard for Dutch expansion into other areas of Sumatra.

For NU, the war against the Wahhabi has been a long one, and it is still not finished. Said Aqil Sirodj warned in October 2015 that Daesh wants to expand its network across Asia by 2017. And, while he did not provide any sources to back up his statement, he added that it is aiming for a global caliphate by 2022. That would absorb Indonesia, Malaysia and Muslim areas of the southern Philippines, answering the prayers of hard-liners in the three Southeast Asian states.



NU General Chairman KH Said Aqil Sirodj. Photo: Harian Terbit

The right to innovate

In opposing the Wahhabi theology, the proponents of Islam Nusantara realise what they are taking on. They are actively pressing for revisions of Islamic law to outlaw practices such as killing of so-called apostates and slavery.

Yahya Staquf admits that, as the law – *fiqh* – currently stands, Muslims have a problem. “The introduction of slavery by Islamic State is based on Islamic law,” he says. “What can we do about this? Logically, we must revise Islamic law.”

On the question of slavery, he states that:

This is a question of jurisprudence and perhaps it needs to be re-interpreted. Other factors need to be considered such as the relationship between people of different religions. What we believed hundreds of years ago isn’t necessarily relevant or appropriate today.

This represents *bi’dah* – innovation, which in the Muslim sense is usually a negative connotation. One hadith is reputed to state: “Every *bid’ah* is a going astray and every going astray is in hellfire” (although the point is made that in Arabic ‘every’ means ‘nearly every’.)

The website Masjid al-Muslimiin states the following:

God ordered Muslims not to divide themselves into sects. Innovations and divisions in matters of religion and worship within Islam are considered to be contamination, error, and deviation.

And this:

The changing of God’s laws is forbidden in Islam. God condemns religious leaders who alter divine principles. One who attempts to make changes places him or herself on the same level with God, committing polytheism. An example of this would be to make the

killing of innocents lawful. The laws of God are perfect and do not need to be 'modernised' by anyone.

The question of *bid'ah* goes to the heart of the scriptural argument between Islamic State and other Muslims, including Islam Nusantara. Holland Taylor, a former US telecom tycoon who has been working for years with NU, notes that for most Muslims there are acceptable and unacceptable *bid'ah*.

The latter would include attempts to change the basic rules of Islam. "If someone says it is not necessary to pray five times a day (that) is unacceptable *bid'ah*. But to 'innovate' by adjusting the practice of Islam to current circumstances is acceptable to many," he states.

To Daesh, any *bid'ah* is unacceptable. They insist on the application of *fiqh* as formulated in the centuries immediately after the Prophet Muhammad. These were times of violence and bloodshed, and required a violent stance but the Wahhabi argue that Muslims must live under the laws that applied at that bloodthirsty time.

For NU, that is erroneous. Its teachers point out that the *fiqh* that Daesh insists still applies to society was not formed by the Prophet himself but by the Umayyad and later caliphates that came a century later.

As such, this interpretation of *fiqh* cannot be seen as the word of God. Instead, NU believes that Islam should reflect changing times. "They are not bound by the letter of the law but by the spirit of the law," says Taylor.

This presents a diametrically opposed view of Islam. Islam Nusantara is setting itself up as the champion of tolerant, moderate Islam, rejecting all forms of violence. Yet it too has engaged in violence.

In the wake of an aborted pro-communist coup in Indonesia in September 1965, Muslim mobs, with major involvement of Ansor, the NU youth group, embarked on a slaughter of communists and sympathisers. Accounts vary of the death toll, but at least 500,000 people died, clogging rivers in Java and Bali with dead bodies.

This bloody history leads many to reject a role of Islam Nusantara and NU from attempting to oppose Islamic State. Those with blood on their own hands cannot now claim to be the champions of peace and tolerance, they argue.

I put this to Said Aqil. "We have to see this in the context of history and not just the outcomes," he replied. "There were many actions of the PKI (the Indonesian Communist Party) that opposed the beliefs of the Indonesian people and many conflicts occurred."

The PKI became increasingly confrontative in the wake of a rebellion in the East Java town of Madiun in 1948, as nationalists were still fighting the Dutch for control of the country. Put down harshly by the Indonesian Army, the communists regrouped quickly and aimed their venom at traditional societies.

"Between 1948 and 1965 there was no time when there was not conflict between the PKI and the followers of Islam, especially NU," says Said Aqil. "If we look at this from the perspective of the day, not today's perspective, it compares to periods of conflict elsewhere in the world. The past is the past.

“There is no need for an apology (for the killings, as many demand). Leaders in the regions have approached the descendants of those that were killed and come to good terms. We don’t need to apologise.”

Said Aqil is keen to stress that NU and Islam Nusantara is about peace, not conflict. Yet it is not difficult to see NU and Ansor taking out the knives once again, this time not against communists, but against hard-line Wahhabi groups if they continue to contest the right of Indonesian Muslims to believe in the religion that has been theirs for centuries.

So far it has not come to that. But in distributing the film *The Divine Grace of Islam Nusantara* widely, NU is mounting a direct challenge to Islamic State and the Wahhabis. Yahya Staquf states that the film is an invitation to Muslims everywhere to reject radicalism and theological straight-jackets and stand up for their own cultural adaptation of Islam.

“They have the right to be Muslims and still retain their own civilization and culture. What the world needs now is to learn about the true nature of the threat.

“Islamic State is a part of Islam and the threat is real. We need to build a coalition and the will to combat this. The threat is what it is and we need to build a consensus on how to address the threat... We consider this a threat to all humanity.”

Keith Loveard has been reporting on Indonesia since 1990.

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