A Banser instructor announces an afternoon schedule during a rigorous three day induction course for Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, on July 23, 2017 in Kebumen, Indonesia. Claiming a membership of 50 million, the “militant moderates” from the Nahdlatul Ulama are dedicated to supporting Indonesia’s national unity and multi-religious character while combating conservative Islamic organizations, which have recently become a more vocal force in Indonesian politics and culture. Ed Wray—Getty Images

ISLAM

In Interview, Top Indonesian Muslim Scholar Says Stop Pretending That Orthodox Islam and Violence Aren’t Linked

Marco Stahlhut | Sep 07, 2017

Indonesia, the world’s biggest Muslim-majority country, has a constitution that recognizes other major religions, and practices a syncretic form of Islam that draws on not just the faith’s tenets but local spiritual and cultural traditions. As a result, the nation has long been a voice of, and for, moderation in the Islamic world.
Yet Indonesia is not without its radical elements. Though most are on the fringe, they can add up to a significant number given Indonesia’s 260-million population. In the early 2000s, the country was terrorized by Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a homegrown extremist organization allied with al-Qaeda. JI’s deadliest attack was the 2002 Bali bombing that killed 202 people. While JI has been neutralized, ISIS has claimed responsibility for recent, smaller terrorist incidents in the country and has inspired some Indonesians to fight in Syria — Indonesians who could pose a threat when they return home. The country has also seen the rise of hate groups that preach intolerance and violence against local religious and ethnic minorities, which include Shia and Ahmadiya Muslims.

Among Indonesia’s most influential Islamic leaders is Yahya Cholil Staquf, 51, who advocates a modern, moderate Islam. He is general secretary of the Nahdatul Ulama, which, with about 50 million members, is the country’s biggest Muslim organization. This interview, notable for Yahya’s candor, was first published on Aug. 19 in German in Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Here are excerpts translated from the original Bahasa Indonesia into English.

**Many Western politicians and intellectuals say that Islamist terrorism has nothing to do with Islam. What is your view?**

Western politicians should stop pretending that extremism and terrorism have nothing to do with Islam. There is a clear relationship between fundamentalism, terrorism, and the basic assumptions of Islamic orthodoxy. So long as we lack consensus regarding this matter, we cannot gain victory over fundamentalist violence within Islam.

Radical Islamic movements are nothing new. They’ve appeared again and again throughout our own history in Indonesia. The West must stop ascribing any and all discussion of these issues to “Islamophobia.” Or do people want to accuse me — an Islamic scholar — of being an Islamophobe too?

**What basic assumptions within traditional Islam are problematic?**

The relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, the relationship of Muslims with the state, and Muslims’ relationship to the prevailing legal system wherever they live ... Within the classical tradition, the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is assumed to be one of segregation and enmity.

Perhaps there were reasons for this during the Middle Ages, when the tenets of Islamic orthodoxy were established, but in today’s world such a doctrine is unreasonable. To the extent that Muslims adhere to this view of Islam, it renders them incapable of living harmoniously and peacefully within the multi-cultural, multi-religious societies of the 21st century.

**A Western politician would likely be accused of racism for saying what you just said.**

I’m not saying that Islam is the only factor causing Muslim minorities in the West to lead a segregated existence, often isolated from society as a whole. There may be other factors on the part of the host nations, such as racism, which exists everywhere in the world. But traditional Islam — which fosters an attitude of segregation and enmity toward non-Muslims — is an important factor.
**And Muslims and the state?**

Within the Islamic tradition, the state is a single, universal entity that unites all Muslims under the rule of one man who leads them in opposition to, and conflict with, the non-Muslim world.

**So the call by radicals to establish a caliphate, including by ISIS, is not un-Islamic?**

No, it is not. [ISIS's] goal of establishing a global caliphate stands squarely within the orthodox Islamic tradition. But we live in a world of nation-states. Any attempt to create a unified Islamic state in the 21st century can only lead to chaos and violence ... Many Muslims assume there is an established and immutable set of Islamic laws, which are often described as *shariah*. This assumption is in line with Islamic tradition, but it of course leads to serious conflict with the legal system that exists in secular nation-states.

Any [fundamentalist] view of Islam positing the traditional norms of Islamic jurisprudence as absolute [should] be rejected out of hand as false. State laws [should] have precedence.

**How can that be accomplished?**

Generations ago, we achieved a de facto consensus in Indonesia that Islamic teachings must be contextualized to reflect the ever-changing circumstances of time and place. The majority of Indonesian Muslims were — and I think still are — of the opinion that the various assumptions embedded within Islamic tradition must be viewed within the historical, political and social context of their emergence in the Middle Ages [in the Middle East] and not as absolute injunctions that must dictate Muslims' behavior in the present ... Which ideological opinions are “correct” is not determined solely by reflection and debate. These are struggles [about who and what is recognized as religiously authoritative]. Political elites in Indonesia routinely employ Islam as a weapon to achieve their worldly objectives.
Is it so elsewhere too?

Too many Muslims view civilization, and the peaceful co-existence of people of different faiths, as something they must combat. Many Europeans can sense this attitude among Muslims.

There’s a growing dissatisfaction in the West with respect to Muslim minorities, a growing fear of Islam. In this sense, some Western friends of mine are “Islamophobic.” They’re afraid of Islam. To be honest, I understand their fear … The West cannot force Muslims to adopt a moderate interpretation of Islam. But Western politicians should stop telling us that fundamentalism and violence have nothing to do with traditional Islam. That is simply wrong.

They don’t want to foster division in their societies between Muslims and non-Muslims, nor contribute to intolerance against Muslims.

I share this desire — that’s a primary reason I’m speaking so frankly. But the approach you describe won’t work. If you refuse to acknowledge the existence of a problem, you can’t begin to solve it. One must identify the problem and explicitly state who and what are responsible for it.

Who and what are responsible?

Over the past 50 years, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have spent massively to promote their ultra-conservative version of Islam worldwide. After allowing this to go unchallenged for so many decades, the West must finally exert decisive pressure upon the Saudis to cease this behavior … I admire Western, especially European, politicians. Their thoughts are so wonderfully humanitarian. But we live in a time when you have to think and act realistically.

The last time I was in Brussels I witnessed some Arab, perhaps North African, youth insult and harass a group of policemen. My Belgian friends remarked that such behavior has become an almost everyday occurrence in their country. Why do you allow such behavior? What kind if impression does that make? Europe, and Germany in particular, are accepting massive numbers of refugees. Don’t misunderstand me: of course you cannot close your eyes to those in need. But the fact remains that you’re taking in millions of refugees about whom you know virtually nothing, except that they come from extremely problematic regions of the world.

I would guess that you and I agree that there is a far right wing in Western societies that would reject even a moderate, contextualized Islam.

And there’s an extreme left wing whose adherents reflexively denounce any and all talk about the connections between traditional Islam, fundamentalism and violence as de facto proof of Islamophobia. This must end. A problem that is not acknowledged cannot be solved.

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