



# Countering Extremism In Indonesia And Beyond

Paul Marshall • June 22, 2018

Between May 8 and May 14, 2018 Indonesia was hit by a [wave of ISIS terrorist attacks](#), including bombings carried out by families--fathers, mothers, and children together. The principal targets were churches and police stations, including the headquarters of the paramilitary Police Mobile Brigade (which is also where Ahok, the former [Governor of Jakarta](#) and a Christian, is serving a sentence for blasphemy). In the wave of attacks, [thirteen terrorists and fourteen others](#) were killed, and more than 40 were injured.

The Indonesian government's security forces responded strongly. There were some early arrests and then, on May 31, in a series of raids, anti-terrorist squads arrested 41 terror suspects and killed 4 others. These raids came less than a week after the May 25 passage of a new anti-terrorism law that criminalized overseas terror attacks and allowed for longer detention of suspects. The bill had been languishing in parliament for two years amid controversies over how strict it should be and how to define terrorism, but this the wave of deadly suicide attacks persuaded lawmakers the bill should be passed.

But a much more low-key event may signal broader changes in how Indonesia is approaching its effort to combat extremism.

On May 31, Indonesian President Joko Widodo appointed Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf (Pak Yahya) as a [member of the Presidential Advisory Council](#). Pak Yahya is from one of Indonesia's most distinguished Muslim families, is the Secretary-General of the Supreme Council of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world's largest Muslim organization, and is the head of Gerakan Pemuda Ansor (ANSOR), NU's young-adult wing, which has some 5 million members. He is also among the Muslim world's most incisive and outspoken reformers.



Indonesian President Joko Widodo with members of his cabinet and other Palace officials, inaugurating Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf—former spokesman of Indonesia’s fourth President H.E. KH. Abdurrahman Wahid—to the Presidential Advisory Council (Wantimpres). Photo: Screen capture via YouTube/Bayt ar-Rahmah

NU has long been engaged in ideological combat with Islamist extremism. In May 2017, Ansor called together more than 300 international religious scholars to consider the “obsolete tenets of classical Islamic law” that call for “perpetual conflict with those who do not embrace or submit to Islam.” This gathering issued the Ansor “[Declaration on Humanitarian Islam](#),” that built on the May 16, 2016, NU-hosted International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL).

The “[Declaration on Humanitarian Islam](#),” is far more self-critical than declarations that have come from the Middle East. It argues that there are elements within classical Islam that are problematic and need to be changed. At the press conference announcing the Declaration, [Ansor Chairman Yaquq Qoumas](#) stated “It is false and counterproductive to claim that the actions of al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram and other such groups have nothing to do with Islam, or merely represent a perversion of Islamic teachings. They are, in fact, outgrowths of Wahhabism and other fundamentalist streams of Sunni Islam.”

Pak Yahya reemphasized these themes and expressed them in an even more radical fashion in a July 18, 2017, [address to the Council of the European Union Terrorism Working Party](#), many of whose members would have accused the speaker of Islamophobia if he had been anyone else. He stressed:

*“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.”*

*“Within the classical tradition, the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is assumed to be one of segregation and enmity.”*

*“Why, no matter how many [terrorists] we kill or put in jail, new recruits are always coming to join them? Here is the fact: the problem lies within Islam itself. Jihadist doctrine, goals and strategy can be readily traced to specific elements of orthodox, authoritative Islam and its historic practice, including those portions of fiqh—classical Islamic law or shari‘ah—that enjoin Islamic supremacy.”*

While NU as a whole has not endorsed the “Declaration on Humanitarian Islam,” Pak Yahya told me they are discussing it and he has suffered little criticism for his statements. The arguments that he and Ansor are making are radical, and crucial in the battle with extremism. And they are gaining increasing attention in Indonesia and around the world.

On May 17, 2018, Pak Yahya met with Vice President Pence for the second time. And the fact that Indonesian President Jokowi has now appointed him to his Advisory Council sends a strong signal about Jokowi’s own attitudes.

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