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THIS WEEK IN ASIA / Politics

Indonesian Muslim group calls for calm amid Islamic world's fury at France's Macron

- Head of Nahdlatul Ulama said 'responding to the insult ... by killing the perpetrator is a savage act that has the potential to trigger widespread instability'
- In Malaysia, the foreign minister said the country strongly condemned the 'defamation of Islam' as he expressed concern over growing hostilities towards Muslims

Amy Chew | 28 October 2020



A Palestinian in East Jerusalem erects a mural with the slogan "Anyone but the Prophet" and the portrait of French President Emmanuel Macron with boot prints and placed on the body of a dog. Photo: AFP

Indonesian group Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world's largest Muslim organisation, on Wednesday called for calm while criticising France's "extreme secularism", even as Muslims across the world reacted furiously to French President [Emmanuel Macron's](#) defence of free speech and description of Islam as "a religion in crisis".

"Humiliating the honour of the Prophet Mohammed is considered an insult to Islam," said Yahya Staquf, secretary general of NU, which has an estimated 90 million members.

"However, responding to the insult to the Prophet by killing the perpetrator is a savage act that has the potential to trigger widespread instability without control," he warned.

More than 90 per cent of [Indonesia's](#) population of 270 million identify as Muslim, making it the world's most populous Muslim nation.



Muslims protest against French leader's defence of Prophet Mohammed cartoons, call for boycott

Staquf was reacting to Macron's statements in the wake of the beheading of French high schoolteacher [Samuel Paty](#) by a Chechen extremist on October 16 after Paty showed his students some of the Prophet Mohammed cartoons published in 2015 by *Charlie Hebdo*, a French satirical newspaper.

The publication of the cartoons led to the massacre of 12 people at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* the same year.

In Syria, people burned pictures of Macron in reaction to his comments, while tricolour flags were torched in the Libyan capital, Tripoli, and French goods have been [pulled from supermarket shelves](#) in Qatar, Kuwait and other Gulf states.

Macron earlier this month unveiled proposals to fight extremism stressing the secular values of the French Republic. He described Islam as being a religion “in crisis, including in countries where it is a majority religion”, while emphasising the need not to stigmatise Muslims.

Days later, the 47-year-old Paty was beheaded.

Staquf urged Muslims to address the issue calmly “and not indulge in emotions”. He said what Muslims “really face is not only those who insult Islam, but the needs of all human beings from diverse backgrounds and beliefs to find a foundation for harmonious global integration”.



A shelf that used to display French products sits empty in Kuwait City. Photo: AFP

Staquf, who is a prominent advocate of interfaith coexistence, said this could only be achieved through “quiet dialogue”.

“Muslims should not follow those who use Islam and the cartoon issue of the Prophet as a political weapon to gain exclusive and one-sided political advantage or deliberately ignite conflict to destroy political opponents,” Staquf said.

Staquf said Macron was not completely wrong in stating the Islamic world is in crisis, because in Staquf’s view the crisis is that the Islamic world has not yet arrived at a religious and sociopolitical construction needed to integrate harmoniously with the whole world.

The issue, Staquf said, was that Macron addressed the current problem from the perspective of France’s “extreme ideology of secularism”, which tends to view religion only as a source of problems and an ideological challenge that must be defeated.

“This unilateral view is regretted not only by Muslims but also by Christians and Jews,” said Statqf, who added that the entire world community could be viewed as being in crisis amid conflicting ideologies and world views. “The world needs a platform for dialogue based on honesty to build consensus on shared civilisational values.”

In Jakarta, the Alumni 212 movement, a Muslim group behind the massive 2016 rallies against Jakarta’s former Christian governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, called for a boycott of French goods and said it would not stop any Muslims who retaliated against French citizens living in the country, CNN Indonesia reported.



Yahya Staqf, the secretary general of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama, the world’s largest Muslim organisation. Photo: Handout

Indonesia’s Foreign Ministry has summoned the French ambassador in Jakarta to express its concern over the situation in France.

Muhammadiyah, Indonesia’s second-largest Muslim organisation, termed Macron’s comments “unwise”, saying they displayed “intolerance” towards Islam.

Dadang Kahmad, a member of Muhammadiyah’s executive board, said Macron’s words were deeply “regrettable” and raised concerns they could trigger “Islamophobia” within French society.

In neighbouring Muslim-majority [Malaysia](#), Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein said the country strongly condemned “hate speech and defamation of Islam”, and he expressed concern over growing hostilities towards Muslims.

“As a matter of principle, we strongly condemn any inflammatory rhetoric and provocative acts that seek to defame the religion of Islam as the world has recently witnessed in the forms of

populist speeches and publication of blasphemous caricatures depicting the Holy Prophet Mohammed,” Hishammuddin said.

Hadi Awang, president of Malaysia’s Islamist Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), which is a member of the ruling coalition, called for a boycott of French goods, saying Macron’s attitude shows he is an enemy of Islam.



French President Emmanuel Macron is coming under withering criticism from Muslim groups worldwide. Photo: AFP

Opposition leader [Anwar Ibrahim](#) said Macron’s statement that Islam is facing a crisis around the world is “offensive as it is unreasonable” and that it promotes the very impasse it seeks to denounce. He added that it did “nothing to advance open debate, mutual understanding and common cause against the evil of terrorism”.

In response to the swirling controversy, the French embassy in Kuala Lumpur released a statement on Wednesday saying the “freedom to practice religion” has been recognised since 1905, when the Law on the Separation of the Church and State came into effect.

“The French State does not favour or stigmatise any religion and guarantees their peaceful coexistence within the laws and principles of the Republic,” the statement said, adding that Macron had not intended to target the Muslim community in France.

The embassy noted that in recent days, calls to boycott French products have emanated from certain quarters in the Middle East and have been relayed by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.



A child holds a photograph of France's President Emmanuel Macron, stamped with a shoe mark, during a protest against France in Istanbul on Sunday. Photo: AP

“We note that some personalities have tried to start such a campaign in Malaysia. We are heartened by the assurances given to us by the Malaysian authorities that the Malaysian government does not condone such appeals,” said the statement.

Erdogan had compared the treatment of Muslims in Europe to that of Jews before World War II, with Turkey joining calls for a boycott of French goods, which Paris said had had minimal impact so far.

Malaysia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the Chargés d’Affaires of the French embassy in Kuala Lumpur to express Malaysia’s concern about what it said were the growing hostilities, hate speech and defamation of Islam in France, the ministry said in a statement on Wednesday.

The ministry said Malaysia is of the view that “such elevated tension does not bode well for the peaceful coexistence of all religions”.

<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3107500/indonesian-muslim-group-calls-calm-amid-islamic-worlds-fury>