

South China Morning Post

THIS WEEK IN ASIA / Politics

Pompeo's Indonesia visit to focus on Muslim youth group and engaging with 'humanitarian Islam'

- US secretary of state will speak with youth wing of Nahdlatul Ulama on freedom of religion
- Address is said to be part of US plan to 'stimulate a conversation across nations' about common human principles

Joe Cochrane | 23 October 2020



In addition to addressing the Muslim youth group Ansor, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will also meet with Indonesian President Joko Widodo. Photo: Reuters

When US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visits Indonesia next week, China, the [South China Sea](#) maritime disputes, freedom of navigation and regional security will top his agenda in talks with Indonesian leaders to “preserve a free and open Indo-Pacific”, as he told reporters in Washington on Wednesday.

But the real catalyst for his first-ever official visit to [Indonesia](#), a one-day trip on Thursday to the capital Jakarta, is not about China but a scheduled address to the world’s largest Islamic youth organisation focusing on a recently released US State Department Commission on Inalienable Rights – key among them religious freedom.

The 5 million-member youth group, commonly known as Ansor, operates under the auspices of Nahdlatul Ulama, or NU, the world’s largest mass Muslim organisation, boasting 90 million members.

This setting of Pompeo’s visit – the world’s most populous Muslim-majority nation – is salient. It further places Indonesia and in particular its civil society-led international movement as a global example of modern, pluralistic 21st-century [Islam](#) and repudiation of ultraconservative Islamic ideology such as Wahhabism in the Middle East and terrorist organizations including Islamic State and al-Qaeda, according to analysts.

While being mostly Muslim, with more than 200 million faithful, Indonesia also has a secular constitution and government, and small but influential Christian, Hindu and Buddhist minorities.

The NU’s global initiative, called “Humanitarian Islam”, seeks to reform obsolete tenets of Islamic orthodoxy written in the Middle Ages to conform with modern civilizational norms, including relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, governance, non-violence and the rejection of barbaric conduct of warfare exhibited by Islamic extremist and terrorist groups such as [Islamic State](#).

Pompeo is scheduled to meet separately with Indonesian President [Joko Widodo](#) and Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi before delivering his address to Ansor.

Ansor had invited Pompeo to visit in early September, following the much-anticipated release of a report by the US State Department’s Commission on Unalienable Rights in late August. He added the trip to Indonesia after his visits to India and [Sri Lanka](#), and the meetings with Joko and Retno were piggybacked onto the agenda.

“The trip originated with the invitation from Ansor and Nahdlatul Ulama,” Peter Berkowitz, director of policy planning at the State Department and executive secretary of the commission, told *This Week in Asia*, “to speak to the group, to speak about the report on inalienable rights.

“This event, for us, exemplifies one of our hopes for the report – to stimulate a conversation across nations, across people about common human principles: no genocide, no torture, no arbitrary arrests and detention, religious liberty in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to provide a minimum standard of principles among peoples,” he said.

The commission's report resonated among Indonesian civil society groups, led by NU, promoting "Islam Nusantara," or "East Indies Islam" – a progressive Islamic movement dating back more than 500 years that promotes non-violence and acceptance of other religions through a spiritual interpretation of the religion.

"Over the past year, the more the members of the Commission on Unalienable Rights grappled with difficult questions about human rights, the more we hoped that our report would stimulate further discussions among friends of human rights in other countries," said Mary Ann Glendon, the commission's chairwoman and a senior adviser to Pompeo. "So we are enormously encouraged by the interest that Nahdlatul Ulama has displayed in our report, especially since there seems to be a significant correspondence between the findings of our report and the core teachings of humanitarian Islam."

The "Islam Nusantara" theology developed within Indonesia, where Hinduism and Buddhism were the dominant religions before the introduction of Islam in the 13th century.

Rather than through outright conquest, Islam for the most part immersed itself peacefully within Indonesia, resulting in a multi-religious society despite having a Muslim majority. The country has six officially recognised religions, and many Indonesians also adhere to ancient spiritual beliefs with maintaining their faith to Islam, Christianity and other religions.

Yahya Cholil Staqf, general secretary of the Nahdlatul Ulama supreme council, said the coupling of human rights and religious freedoms – the absolute right of freedom to worship without fear – is a crucial element of his organisation's global initiative.

"We want to contribute to the cause we believe is needed by the whole global civilisation. We have ideas we believe are useful, and we want to cooperate with any other actors who have the same aspirations," he said. "And we are seeing this initiative taken by the Department of State, which has aspirations that are in alignment with ours in terms of a rules-based order, and the need for a set of civilizational values."

James M Dorsey, a senior fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, as well as the Middle East Institute, both based in [Singapore](#), said that Pompeo has previously engaged with NU, in particular on religious freedom, which triggered this visit.

"You have a battle for religious soft power, which involves on the top level the Saudis, the Emiratis, the Turks, the Iranians, and the NU. On the second level there is Malaysia, Pakistan," Dorsey explained about the geopolitics of Islam.

"The NU is different because first, NU is not a state, whereas all the others are states. The second marker is that – leaving the Turks aside for a second, and the Saudis and Emiratis – it's all about projection of a certain interpretation of the faith and the state representing that interpretation," Dorsey said.

“In my mind, putting forward modern concepts of Islam and putting together a dialogue of equals, separation of state and religion, Indonesia is the only country in this rivalry that has a separation of state and religion,” he said, noting that the Indonesian government is not involved.

“In that sense, what NU is doing is much more real to me.”

<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3106855/pompeos-indonesia-visit-focus-muslim-youth-group-and-engaging>