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The Voice of Moderate Muslims

In Indonesia, the renewal of Islam is easier than in the Arab heartland

By Rainer Hermann

The encounters were important simply because of their symbolism. However, they have not produced a sustainable Christian-Islamic dialogue. In 2019, Pope Francis issued a declaration on the fraternity of all people with the Egyptian Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyeb, and in 2021 he visited the Shiite Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Iraq. As early as 2007, the then Saudi King Abdullah was a guest of Pope Benedict XVI in the Vatican State. However, this has not led to theological cooperation.

Greater hopes are attached to the dialogue currently led by two large independent organizations: the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), whose national member organizations include several hundred million Christians, and the Indonesian Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world's largest independent Islamic organization with more than 90 million members. A year ago, they founded a joint working group that wants to be a voice against religiously motivated violence and religious persecution.

They reaffirmed their cooperation at an event on July 13 at a mosque in Washington and with a book on Christian-Islamic dialogue published by both sides. WEA Special Envoy for Engagement [with Humanitarian Islam] and co-editor Thomas K. Johnson said that despite all the differences between the two religions that continue to exist, it is possible to live peacefully together, beyond the paths of jihad and the Crusades. That doesn't rule out proselytism from either side.

In addition to the American Johnson, the German theologian Thomas Schirrmacher, currently Secretary General of the WEA, is the driving force behind the cooperation with Nahdlatul Ulama. In recent years, Schirrmacher has also succeeded in pushing back the dominance of American evangelicals in the WEA. (Evangelical in German means the theological-traditional and values-conservative portion of state- and free-church Protestantism.) Nahdlatul Ulama and the World Evangelical Alliance have a common enemy: radical Islam. In addition, the WEA is attractive for Nahdlatul Ulama because of its conservative values.

WEA has chosen to work with the Indonesian reform movement because it has unreservedly embraced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, accepted religious freedom and reassessed obsolete Islamic teachings. Nahdlatul Ulama theologians have been proceeding like their Christian

counterparts, who uphold the Ten Commandments as universally valid religious norms but reject the Old Testament's punishments, said Johnson.

A milestone was the *Nusantara Manifesto* of 2019 [Translator's note: 2018], in which Nahdlatul Ulama addressed discriminative elements within Islamic law such as "*kafir*" (infidel) and "*dhimmi*" (conquered and subordinate infidels) as no longer suitable in our modern era. Everyone should be citizens and equal. There should be no more discrimination, and extremists must also be disarmed [of their theological weapons]. An orthodoxy must be developed that justifies neither hatred nor a claim to superiority and violence, says NU General Secretary Yahya Cholil Staquf.

Nahdlatul Ulama's reforms are the result of independent work and thus credible. The WEA now acknowledges this pioneering work. The most populous Islamic country has thus acquired a "points advantage" within the intra-Islamic competition to become the leading religious "soft power" in the Muslim world. Indonesia and the Nahdlatul Ulama are in competition with Saudi Arabia in particular. Its crown prince Muhammad bin Salman has announced a "moderate Islam" and cut financial support for extremist Muslims. In Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, officially recognized Islam serves the interests of the state. The political leadership decrees what is religiously desirable. However, politically prescribed changes to religious norms are not sustainable.

Saudi Arabia is suspicious of its rival Indonesia for two reasons. On the one hand, the dictator Suharto was overthrown by protests in 1998 after more than three decades of rule. A fate that befell four long-time Arab rulers in 2011. Indonesia is a model for the transition from an autocratic to a democratic system. On the other hand, Nahdlatul Ulama was founded in 1926 in response to the spread of radical Wahhabi Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. Currently, Saudi Arabia supports the Islamist party in Indonesia, which is considered the main political rival of Nahdlatul Ulama. The influence of Islamists in Indonesia has increased in recent years.

It is true that Saudi Arabia is breaking away from the extreme excesses of Wahhabi Islam. Recently, the kingdom has also taken up the cause of religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue. It hopes to improve its image as a country that routinely commits severe human rights violations, and to become more attractive as an investment location. In addition, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman wants to secure the loyalty of the young generation and consolidate the power of the ruling dynasty by acquiring broad approval in society.

For in the Arab world, pressure from below is growing. Arab youth are increasingly distancing themselves from state-institutionalized Islam. In an annual opinion poll of Arab youth – the Arab Youth Survey – nearly 80 percent called for a reform of religious institutions in 2019. As early as 2012, five percent of Saudis described themselves as committed atheists, and 19 percent described themselves as non-religious. The situation is not much different in most Arab nations. For those countries in which Islam is a pillar of state legitimacy, yet fails to renew itself from within, this aversion is becoming a challenge that Indonesia does not know.