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## Progressive Muslim scholar elected leader of Indonesia's influential Nahdlatul Ulama



As part of the Presidential Advisory Council in 2018, Mr Yahya Cholil Staquf gave advice on religious, domestic and global matters. PHOTO: SCREENGAB/YOUTUBE

Arlina Arshad | December 24, 2021

SINGAPORE - A well-regarded Islamic scholar hailed as a “symbol of the new generation” has been elected chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia’s influential Muslim group and the world’s largest Islamic organisation.

Mr Yahya Cholil Staquf, 55, defeated incumbent and two-term chairman Said Aqil Siradj and three other candidates in a tightly contested race on Friday (Dec 24) at NU's national congress.

His late father Cholil Bisri co-founded Indonesia's major Islamic political party, the National Awakening Party (PKB), and his younger brother is Religious Affairs Minister Yaqut Cholil Qoumas.

"Not only is he younger (than Mr Said), his thinking is also more progressive. NU members are bored of the current administration and want to see change," Mr Muh Taufiqurrohman, a senior researcher at the Jakarta-based Centre for Radicalism and Deradicalisation Studies, told The Straits Times.

"Mr Yahya's focus will be on how to empower NU members and provide welfare, while Mr Said had been focused on involving NU in national politics," he said.

Mr Yahya's election has raised questions over whether the organisation of more than 90 million followers would further entrench itself in domestic politics, and exert any influence over foreign policy.

He is after all no stranger to the government. As a member of the Presidential Advisory Council in 2018, he had advised Indonesian leader Joko Widodo on religious, domestic and international matters.

Mr Said, his 68-year-old predecessor, was perceived as key in bringing NU closer to politics.

Save in 1999 when former NU chairman, the late Abdurrahman Wahid, became Indonesia's president, NU leaders have generally not played a crucial role in politics in the last two decades. But in 2019, President Widodo picked former NU leader Ma'ruf Amin as his running mate in the election, not only sealing his victory, but also marking NU's return to serious politics.

The PKB, NU's political vehicle, currently occupies 58 seats in the 575-strong House of Representatives, and boasts four ministers.

But NU has always been supportive of the government historically, said Mr Taufiqurrohman.

"NU has no option. It has to be political if it wants to make a big change in Indonesia because the change can mostly be done through politics," he added.

In the context of global engagement, analysts noted that Mr Yahya leans politically towards the United States, while Mr Said has been known to be friendly towards China.

Mr Yahya co-founded US-based organisation Bayt ar-Rahmah, or Home of Divine Grace, aimed at expanding NU's operations in North America, Europe and the Middle East.

In 2018, he received backlash at home when he visited Israel at the invitation of the American Jewish Committee Global Forum. Indonesia has no formal diplomatic ties with Israel and has long opposed its occupation of Palestinian territory.

NU, under Mr Said, had been criticised for being seemingly less vocal about China's alleged oppression of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang.

Analysts believe Mr Yahya has enough political savvy to not take sides, aligning with Indonesia's foreign policy, and will maintain good relations with China.

In fact, the reformist prefers to settle disputes through dialogue, unlike Mr Said, who tends to be vocal against radical or extreme groups, said Mr Taufiqurrohman, and his closeness to the US means he will be able to work well with it in countering terrorism threats.

Mr Robi Sugara, executive director of non-governmental organisation Indonesian Muslim Crisis Centre, said: "But there's a possibility he might pay less attention to issues in China such as Uighur Muslims, as compared to the Taliban in Afghanistan."

One certainty, analysts say, is that the NU will advocate religious tolerance and pluralism under the leadership of Mr Yahya, continuing the approach taken by Mr Said. It will also promote Islam Nusantara or "Islam of the Archipelago", NU's brand of moderate Islam that incorporates local customs and traditions in understanding the faith.

Mr Robi said the challenge for the new chairman is to find a way to replicate NU's success in Indonesia to Muslim societies elsewhere.

He added: "NU's concerns are no longer just about Indonesia, but the world. The NU has always promoted the middle way, the moderate path, and the challenge will be how to market this globally."

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