



## Politics and Islam in potent new mix in Indonesia

(MENAFN- Asia Times)

JAKARTA – A powerful factor in President Joko Widodo's re-election victory in 2019, the mass Muslim organization Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) appears to be in the process of broadening its political base in a move that will likely give it an enduring influence over the 2024 presidential race.

Until now, the NU banner has been carried by the fourth-ranked National Awakening Party (PKB), mostly by default given PKB's origins in the tumultuous early days of democratic rule when 48 parties contested the first free elections in 1999.

But the recent selection of ruling Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle (PDI-P), Golkar Party and United Development Party (PPP) figures to the NU executive board (PBNU) has led to some confusion over new leader Yahya Cholil Staquf's promise to return the organization to political neutrality.

Clearly, that means different things to different people. "Political neutrality does not mean political abstinence," says one political analyst, noting that only members of Staquf's leadership team are forbidden from seeking elected office.

The former secretary-general has also explicitly stated that NU will not be involved in nominating a presidential or vice-presidential candidate in 2024, but that does not exclude it from either tacitly endorsing someone or applying pressure behind the scenes.

Concern over NU becoming too intertwined in politics came to the fore in 2019 when the front-running Widodo was compelled to choose the organization's 78-year-old supreme leader, Ma'ruf Amin, as his running mate to guarantee its support.

Widodo had originally selected Mahfud MD, the current coordinating minister for political affairs, for the vice-presidential slot, but had an almost overnight change of mind when it was made known to him that NU did not approve of his choice.



Indonesian Vice President Ma'ruf Amin in a file photo. Photo: Twitter

As it turned out, NU voters in populous East and Central Java, in particular, played a crucial role in his hard-fought victory over opposition candidate Prabowo Subianto,

despite him losing heavily in West Java, home to many of the country's hardline Islamists.

A former religious adviser to ex-president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Amin has virtually disappeared from view in the past 18 months, with one report claiming that most of his day is taken up videotaping speeches for events he can't attend.

The absence of a No 2 who habitually appeared in sarongs and sandals has left chief maritime minister Luhut Panjaitan as Widodo's right-hand man, responsible for everything from containing the Covid-19 pandemic to guiding progress on the nation's new capital.

Amin's predecessor, first-term vice-president Jusuf Kalla, a Golkar Party and also vice-president to Yudhoyono, was anything but a silent partner to Widodo, crossing swords with Panjaitan on occasion and staying very much in the public eye.

Indonesians who feel an affiliation for NU could amount to as many as 100 million, or about half of the Muslim population, but not all carry identifying cards and the membership cuts across political party boundaries and different strains of Islam.

Analysts believe Staquf is intent on trying to put some distance between NU and PKB to make the organization more politically inclusive – not less political, which for better or worse has been part of its DNA since its founding in 1926.

Among those included on the new board are two-term Golkar legislator Nusron Wahid, PDI-P members Nasyrul Falah Amru and Mardani Maming, Central Java deputy governor and PPP politician Taj Yasin Maimoen and PPP stalwart Mushtofa Aqil Siroj.

Nusron, 48, who becomes PBNU vice-chairman for 2022-2027, is a former head of NU's Ansor Youth Movement. Described by one political source as a “real operator,” he is a three-term Golkar legislator and previously head of the Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency.

Maming, 40, the chairman of the Indonesia Young Businessmen's Association, is the new treasurer of the NU board under secretary-general Saifullah Yusuf, mayor of the East Java city of Pasaruan, former NU youth leader and a veteran PKB official.

“They may say otherwise, but it is wise to remember that although they have party affiliations, it is always NU first,” says a NU insider, who sees its influence potentially critical if the 2024 presidential election ends up as a three-way race.

Part of NU's inclusive process also has been the naming of nine women to the executive board for the first time, led by Sinta Nuriyah Wahid, widow of president Abdurrahman Wahid, her daughter, Alissa Wahid, and East Java Governor Khofifah Indar Parawansa.



NU's Yahya Cholil Staquf in a file photo. Image: Twitter

The 55-year-old Staquf, who comfortably beat incumbent chairman Said Aqil Siradj, 68, by more than 100 votes at NU's national congress last month, comes from one of the organization's four founding clans which has long been steeped in politics.

His father, Cholil Bisri, was a United Development Party (PPP) legislator during the Suharto years and was responsible for co-founding PKB in time to contest the first democratic elections in 1999, where it won 51 seats in the new 462-seat Parliament.

His uncle, Ahmad Mustofa Bisri, 77, is a prominent cleric from the clan seat of Rembang in Central Java, with a sideline in poetry and painting; he was a close confidante of president Wahid and served as NU's temporary supreme leader in 2014-15.

Staquf himself was spokesman for Wahid, the renowned pluralist who proved a thorn in Suharto's side as NU chairman between 1984 and 1999. More recently, the new chairman served for a year on Widodo's Presidential Advisory Council.

He is also the brother of Religious Affairs Minister Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, another former head of NU's youth wing and a PKB lawmaker for Rembang between 2015 and 2020 when he was given his current post in Widodo's second Cabinet.

The new chairman has traveled widely to the US and Europe in his efforts to promote NU's moderate doctrine. But his 2018 meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu came under fire in Indonesia, where the Jewish state has always raised a red flag.

He was, however, following in the footsteps of Wahid who, ignoring the furor at home, visited Israel at least six times. As he told the Tel Aviv newspaper Haaretz in 2004:“I think there is a wrong perception that Islam is in disagreement with Israel.”

Although NU has a conservative wing, as embodied by Amin, Staquf has pledged to persevere along a well-trodden moderate path based on Islam Nusantara, the home-grown concept first spelled out in 2015 which challenges the use of Islamic orthodoxy to justify violent acts.

Critics complain, however, that unlike Muhammadiyah, its smaller, mostly urban-based counterpart, NU remains too reliant on state resources and patronage to deliver social services, raising further questions about its commitment to political neutrality in the years ahead.

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