

At the G20, Islamic clerics are mainstreaming pluralism

BY MUDDASSAR AHMED, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 11/09/22



A Muslim pilgrim prays on top of the rocky hill known as the Mountain of Mercy, on the Plain of Arafat, during the annual hajj pilgrimage, near the holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia, Friday, July 8, 2022. (AP Photo/Amr Nabil)

A remarkable transformation has been taking place in the Muslim world, a years-long shift towards pluralism and tolerance belying common assumptions about Islam.

Maybe we missed this earlier: A lot has been going on, after all. But last week in Bali, at the G20's ground-breaking Religion Forum, the R20, that transformation took center stage. Not only is it an epochal moment in modern Islam, but this moment also helped create the world's most important interfaith conversation.

By expanding beyond the G7 to the G20 — the world's 20 largest economies — the developed world has created more space for non-Western populations to enter the space

of global governance and bring their perspectives and insights with them. That extends to India, with the world's largest Hindu population and a massive Muslim minority, as well as three Muslim-majority countries: Turkey, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia.

Over the course of a week in Bali, I watched, spellbound. Three hundred senior leaders from the world's major faith traditions explored how to interject religious frameworks into questions of global governance. Whether for climate change or civil conflicts, the discourse was always sophisticated and substantive. Given that this was happening through and at the G20, it's not an exaggeration to say the R20 may be, in just its first year, the world's most important interfaith venue.

It's not only the world's many people of faith who gain from having their religious leaders exposed to high-level political conversations that connect the West and other parts of the world. The same can be said for secular leaders enriched by the insights of faith leaders they might never have otherwise interacted with — how, after all, can Western leaders pursue global challenges without understanding what shapes most global sentiments?

But what if I told you that's not the most important thing about the R20?

Indonesia — a secular democracy — is the world's most populous Muslim country. Saudi Arabia is the historic birthplace of Islam; its wealth, the sacred mosques in Mecca and Medina, and the hajj (a pilgrimage that is the fifth pillar of Islam) mean it has always had an outsized impact — especially on Muslim-majority countries. While for Western Muslims many of these conversations may not feel so urgent, topical, or even interesting, that hardly means they are not hugely significant for hundreds of millions.

Hugely significant would be an understatement.

A remarkable partnership helped shape the R20, and specifically this inaugural R20.

The R20 is driven by the Indonesian Islamic organization Nahdlatul Ulama, building on its shared religious vision with the Muslim World League, headquartered in Saudi Arabia. Nahdlatul Ulama counts tens of millions of Indonesians as members. The NU has long backed Indonesia's foundational secularism and continues to support its relatively recent transition to democracy; it also promotes interfaith collaboration including with Buddhists and Hindus and always strongly critiques extremism.

In turn, the Muslim World League is the Islamic world's largest NGO.

Headquartered in the historic birthplace of the faith, the Muslim World League enjoys a concomitantly massive influence, including over 1,000 clergy in dozens of countries. Its secretary general, Abdul-Karim Al-Issa, is a highly regarded Islamic scholar who has visited Auschwitz with Jewish leaders, toured Christian Evangelical churches in America and invited Hindu and Buddhist leaders to Riyadh — in a country where, a few years ago, it was taboo even to celebrate holidays from other faith traditions.

Just how far will this partnership go? Opening the R20, NU Chairman Yahya Cholil Staquf called for faith leaders to work with secular leaders to promote social development,

interfaith solidarity and more sustainable economies. Echoing and embodying that spirit, Al-Issa announced the Muslim World League was establishing a humanitarian fund for victims of war, a new and substantial initiative that will aim to aid civilians, including those in Ukraine. This is exceptional, yes. But it is also not unusual.

The Muslim World League was the force behind the Makkah Charter. This pioneering treatise, ratified in Islam's holiest city, signed by over 1,000 Muslim scholars and endorsed by 6,000 more Muslim thinkers and visionaries, lays out a stunningly ecumenical vision for a moderate, peaceful and plural Islam. (Signatories come from over 130 countries.) It emphasizes, among other things, Islam's commitment to female empowerment, environmental preservation and tolerance for all religious and sectarian differences.

For those who aren't Muslim, or invested in faith, perhaps the initiatives the Nahdlatul Ulama and Muslim World League are spearheading seem unimportant — though I'm hard-pressed to see how the world's fastest-growing and second-largest faith is meaningfully incidental to anyone.

In just days, United Kingdom Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, President Joe Biden and the leaders of other powerful nations will convene in Bali. They'll have much to talk about, from Ukraine to the climate crisis. But their task will be harder because the world has fragmented. The West, too, is in a precarious position, under pressure from without and within.

Whatever happened to enlightened self-interest?

Capitalizing on the emergence of a hugely influential, transnational Muslim civil society partnership emphatically backing global cooperation from the halls of the G20 seems an urgent thing to do. Right now, after all, the West needs all the friends we can find. Where once we dictated to the Muslim world, perhaps now we could even learn some very important things from the Muslim world. The R20 builds upon and concretizes evolutions that go back to the Makkah Charter and still further.

Should we be so surprised? We've long been tempted to see the Islamic world as incompatible, irrelevant, or even incendiary. But all along it's been so far more than that: A complex, recently volatile but nevertheless kindred civilization, which shares much in terms of ancestry and has proven itself, like Western culture, to be capable of reaching out across the world.

At a time when our challenges include and stretch beyond all of us, our approaches should too.

Muddassar Ahmed is a visiting fellow with the German Marshall Fund's Transatlantic Leadership Initiatives. He is a former U.K. government advisor. Follow him on Twitter: @mmuddassarahmed.

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