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‘About time’: Indonesia’s NU welcomes women to top leadership

For the first time in its near 100 year history, women are on the decision-making body of the world’s largest Islamic organisation.



A female member of Indonesia’s largest Muslim organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama, stands among hundreds of other participants as they hold umbrellas to form Indonesia’s national flag [File: Supri/Reuters]

By Gemma Holliani Cahya | 19 Mar 2022

Jakarta, Indonesia – Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world’s largest Islamic organisation, has welcomed women into its top leadership roles for the first time since it was founded nearly 100 years ago.

NU inaugurated more than 150 members, including 11 women, to its central board for a five-year term.

Among the women appointed to the most senior roles in February was Alissa Wahid who told Al Jazeera that while the change was “about time and inevitable”, it was also the result of a continuous process and discussion on women’s roles within NU, which has some 90 million members.

Joining 48-year-old Alissa is incumbent East Java Governor Khofifah Indar Parawansa.

In their new roles, the two women will have input into the movement’s policy.

“I’m really happy with this change,” said Alissa, the daughter of Indonesia’s late President Abdurrahman Wahid, better known as Gus Dur, NU’s leader for 10 years before turning to politics. “Until now NU has been giving more room for women in public spaces [in the organisation], but now for the first time in history, it gives room for women at a higher leadership level.”



Alissa Wahid is the daughter of late Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, popularly known as Gus Dur, who led NU for a decade before heading into politics [Courtesy of Alissa Wahid]

The appointments are an indication of how NU Secretary General Yahya Cholil Staquf, who was elected last December, plans to modernise an organisation that was founded in 1926 and has long been seen as a champion of religious tolerance in the archipelago.

In a speech to mark the launch of his book ‘The Big Struggle of NU’ ahead of his election, Yahya argued that NU must work together with other Islamic organisations and different religious groups to shape a better world.

“We are all in the same boat on earth in search of a new form of civilisation that is better for all mankind,” he said.

In recent years, there has been growing concern about increasing religious conservatism and the appeal of hardline groups in Indonesia, the world’s most populous Muslim country.

In 2017, Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, better known as Ahok, and a Christian of Chinese descent, found himself jailed for two years on [blasphemy charges](#) after he was accused of “insulting Islam” for referring to a verse in the Quran during his campaign for re-election.

Last year, about 20 people were injured after [two suicide bombers attacked a cathedral in Makassar on Palm Sunday](#).

And in September, hundreds of people calling themselves the Muslim People Alliance attacked and burned a mosque used by the minority Ahmadiyya community in Sintang, West Kalimantan.

Wasisto Raharjo Jati, a political researcher from the National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), told Al Jazeera that NU’s campaign for a moderate and inclusive Islam was crucial to counter more hardline discourses.

“NU as the world’s largest Islamic organisation needs to take part in providing an alternative view ... by presenting a moderate and inclusive narrative of Indonesian Islam,” he said, noting the organisation’s strategy of tolerance and support for interfaith dialogue.

“The challenge for NU in the future is to become a ‘big house’ for Indonesian Muslims, which currently are still fragmented. It is important that Indonesia’s Islamic orientation is more grounded and contextual rather than just based on Islam in the Arabian Peninsula.”

Yahya, who was a spokesperson for Gus Dur and more recently a member of current President Joko Widodo’s advisory council, has also expressed the need for a separation between politics and religion after a [divisive 2019 presidential election](#) between Widodo and former general Prabowo Subianto.

During the campaign, Subianto’s supporters accused Widodo of being anti-Islam and a sympathiser of the long-banned Indonesian Communist Party.

Widodo’s supporters, meanwhile, accused Subianto of being in the thrall of hardline religious groups and claimed he was promoting the establishment of a caliphate in the archipelago.

“The wounds from this past polarisation must be healed immediately and there must be no new wounds,” Yahya said in an interview to mark the 12th anniversary of Gus Dur’s death last year, saying that he would not support candidates for president or vice president from NU.

Subianto is now [defence minister in Widodo’s government](#).

‘Meaning and purpose’

Women in NU have always had pivotal roles in the organisation, leading NU’s strong female wings, Muslimat (for women) and Fatayat (for young women), and many other social movements.



Badriyah Fayumi, a Muslim leader, says the appointment of women to NU’s board underlines its commitment to moderate Islam [Courtesy of Badriyah Fayumi]

NU women also initiated the first-ever congress of the Indonesian Women’s Ulema in 2017, which issued a historic fatwa that included a mandate that all political parties must take a stance to fight child marriage.

Alissa, who is also the national director of a non-governmental organisation endorsing Gus Dur's ideas and values, says she hopes that having women on the board will enable NU to improve the welfare of women across the archipelago.

"I hope we can eliminate harmful practices on women," she said. "Now we have women in NU on leadership level to fight for these issues."

Badriyah Fayumi, a Muslim leader appointed to the A'wan, a group of scholars who provide assistance to NU's Supreme Council, says the inclusion of women on the leadership boards is an example of NU's spirit of moderate Islam.

The 50-year-old says when groups become more conservative, it is usually women who are targeted and find themselves marginalised.

"We can see that NU has taken a completely different path from that," Badriyah told Al Jazeera.

"The difference between moderate Islam and the ultra-conservatives is how they treat women. The ultra-conservative group sees women as objects, as reproductive machines, while the moderate Islam sees women as subjects who can build this civilisation together with men. That's why it's important for women to be in the leadership structure with men."



Yahya Cholil Staquf says having women in more prominent decision-making roles is key to the reforms he is undertaking at Nahdlatul Ulama [File: Caron Creighton/AP Photo]

In a [recent talk show](#) on Indonesian broadcaster KompasTV, Yahya echoed that view, stressing that women were vital to the organisation's future development.

"I really need them in NU. Their abilities and positions are relevant to the strategies that I'm thinking about," he said.

With women now in a more prominent position, their perspectives should start to have a more meaningful impact on the organisation's policies.

Badriyah notes that at NU's last national congress, there were discussions about climate change and, specifically, how it would affect women and children.

"Women in the central board don't just exist," she said. "There is a meaning and purpose in their existence."

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