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NU and the Mission to Realize a Universal Humanism

The founding of Nahdlatul Ulama is inextricably linked to *Nusantara* scholars' aspiration to establish a new civilization after the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate. The basis of this new civilization is “universal humanism.”

By MAHDI MUHAMMAD | February 23, 2022



Pictures of Nahdlatul Ulama figures line the entry hall at NU headquarters in Jakarta, Tuesday (6/8/2019).
KOMPAS/RADITYA HELABUMI

As Nahdlatul Ulama approaches its centenary, according to the *hijriyah* (Islamic) calendar, there is widespread anticipation and hope that NU will make a greater contribution to global civilization. This hope was clearly expressed during a ceremony held on February 17, 2022 at the

pesantren (Islamic boarding school) of Shaykh Muhammad Kholil al-Bangkalani (1820 – 1923) to commemorate NU's 99th anniversary.

Nahdlatul Ulama's vision, history, and socio-cultural/religious capital — which are enabling it to appear more consistently upon the world stage — were actually instilled by its founder, Hadratus Shaykh Kyai Haji Hasyim Asy'ari, when the organization was established in 1926. KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf, Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board (PBNU), described this background in an interview with *Kompas* on Tuesday, February 15.

He quoted a speech delivered by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari at the NU's first national congress, stating that NU was founded to serve as a vehicle for “consolidating the universe.” This vision is expressed in the NU logo, which displays a globe. It is also important to note that global events helped shape the founding of Nahdlatul Ulama, in particular the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate, which was dissolved in 1924.

The dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate made Muslims feel as if they had lost the foundational structure underpinning Islamic civilization. According to Gus Yahya, the founders of NU campaigned for Nahdlatul Ulama to serve as a vehicle for the struggle [spiritual *jiḥād*] by Muslims educated in classical Islamic teachings — centered on *pesantren* within the Malay Archipelago — to develop a new and universal civilization. “NU is a vessel for consolidating the universe, which was symbolized by incorporating an image of the earth in its logo,” he said.

Great ideals lay behind the founding of NU: that is, to forge a new path for civilization. “From the existing records, NU was established to forge a new path for future civilization, to replace the old civilizational construct that was lost,” said Gus Yahya.

The old civilization, which was lost, refers to the Ottoman Caliphate. Hasyim Asy'ari's 1926 speech, known as *Mukaddimah Qanun Asasi Nahdlatul Ulama* ([*Introduction to the Fundamental Principles of Nahdlatul Ulama*](#)), is now incorporated in the Preamble of the *NU Articles of Association and Bylaws*. This means that a global vision has been ingrained within the DNA of the organization since its birth, and is deeply rooted within its very foundation.



KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf with Indonesian President Joko Widodo

Now, the question is how to realize NU's global vision and ideals? At the 34th NU Congress held at the end of December 2021, one of the interesting ideas to emerge was Gus Yahya's commitment to "revive Gus Dur." Gus Dur is a familiar way of referring to the late Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, General Chairman of PBNU for three terms (1984 – 1999) and also the Republic of Indonesia's fourth president (1999 – 2001).

According to Gus Yahya, although Gus Dur never spoke explicitly about the vision of a new NU-style civilization, as discussed by its founders, Abdurrahman Wahid's intellectual discourse exemplified his struggle to forge "a new path towards the development of a new civilization." "Gus Dur concluded that the basis of the new civilization will be universal humanism," explained Gus Yahya.

Global conditions

The vision and reality of our shared "universal humanity" is, according to Gus Yahya, highly relevant amid current global circumstances. Geopolitical dynamics today are heavily colored by a struggle for supremacy between various regional and world powers, including those armed with nuclear weapons.

"Mankind today has practically only two choices: to survive and prosper together, or be destroyed together," said Gus Yahya.

This awareness has driven Nahdlatul Ulama towards an inevitable conclusion: namely, that it must help forge a global consensus to create a more peaceful and secure civilizational order, if we are to avoid widespread chaos and destruction. Specifically, said Gus Yahya, “We must strive to establish a universal consensus that respects the equal rights and dignity of every human being.”



NU General Secretary KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf (left) with Pope Francis (right) during an audience at the Pope’s residence in the Vatican on the evening of Wednesday, January 15, 2020. (Documentation for *KOMPAS*)

In order to establish and firmly embed universal humanism within the world's socio-cultural, religious, and geopolitical structures, NU seeks to leverage its extensive global networks. Nahdlatul Ulama's engagement with religious leaders and political authorities from other nations constitutes a significant element within its efforts to establish a global consensus regarding universal humanism and a new civilizational order.

For example, on several occasions NU has undertaken initiatives to resolve the decades-long conflict in Afghanistan, such as participating in negotiations with the Taliban. Afghan scholars' attraction to Nahdlatul Ulama's system of moral and religious values led them to establish Nahdlatul Ulama Afghanistan.

Gus Yahya acknowledged that NU's role within the global arena needs to be further strengthened. What is clear, and paramount, is that sharing the vision of a universal humanity — i.e., *universal humanism* — has already become an integral part of NU's efforts to project strategic influence upon the world stage.

“Nahdlatul Ulama, as a vital component of Indonesian society, has a mandate from our nation's founders to undertake this mission. If Indonesia does not act decisively to accomplish this, we are betraying the mandate of our nation's founders,” said Gus Yahya.

Editor: **MUHAMMAD SAMSUL HADI**