

Indonesia wants to export moderate Islam

The world's largest Muslim-majority country enters the Islamic debate



Sunni, sea and sand image: angga budhiyanto/zuma press/eyevine

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On Christmas eve 22 years ago, jihadist terrorists planted bombs at churches in cities across Indonesia, killing 18 people. Every Christmas since then, members of the country's largest Muslim group, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), have gathered outside churches in Indonesia to ensure that Christians can worship in safety. Now the powerful Islamic organisation has a more ambitious goal: to spread its moderate views across the Muslim world.

Despite being the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, Indonesia has long punched below its weight in the big Islamic debates. The dominant Muslim ideas, spiritual and political, long emanated from the conservative Middle East. This is apparent among Indonesia's 237m Muslims. Demonstrations of Middle-Eastern-style public piety have become much more common in recent decades. Many more women now wear a Muslim headscarf, or *hijab*. Yet most Indonesians still hew to the region's syncretic traditions. In East Java, NU's heartland, they mingle Islam with local Javanese beliefs called *kejawen*.

The country's state ideology, known as *pancasila*, encourages such moderation. It forbids atheism but allows religious freedom. Indonesia has six official religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism. Its main Muslim organisations are now pushing for a more inclusive, tolerant Islam that reflects the spirit of *pancasila*.

The views of NU, in particular, have leapt. The group claims to have over 100m followers—including several members of President Joko Widodo's cabinet—and runs 23,000 Islamic boarding schools and over 250 universities. In February over a million of its followers clogged the streets of Sidoarjo, a city in East Java, for the group's centenary celebrations. Many of the country's top political figures, including the president (who is known as Jokowi), attended the event. NU used it to formally call for the abandonment of the caliphate, a notional authority that is considered to oversee all Muslims...

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