



2019_04_25_Calls for U.S. to Engage with Nahdlatul Ulama in the Wake of Indonesia's Presidential Election

Professor, Policy Expert and Religious Freedom Advocate A.J. Nolte:

“NU... represents one of the few genuinely influential, well-organized, and politically powerful voices of moderate Islam”

United States diplomats, government departments and foreign policy practitioners are being encouraged to engage with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—the world's largest Muslim organization, with over 90 million followers—after NU-oriented voters from the heavily-populated island of Java, which constitutes the geographic, political and economic center of Indonesia, proved “decisive” in re-electing moderate Muslim leader Joko Widodo (Jokowi) to his second and final term in office. Writing in Christian foreign policy journal *Providence*, A.J. Nolte—assistant professor of politics at Regent University's Robertson School of Government—noted how “Jokowi's winning coalition was based almost entirely on support from areas of East and Central Java dominated by the Islamic organization Nahdlatul Ulama.”

“Indonesia may be undergoing a kind of electoral ideological sorting into three camps, whose differing views on the relationship between Islam and the state will have a huge impact on the country moving forward,” observes Nolte. Whilst the heavily-Javanese NU supports religious toleration, a second emerging bloc, which voted overwhelmingly for Jokowi's rival Prabowo Subianto, represents “an ominous trend worth watching.” This bloc is “committed to a rigid application of political Islam in Indonesia” and consists of “two groups: West Javanese, whose version of Islam is influenced by Wahhabi teachings brought back to Indonesia from Mecca, and Malay Muslims from the so-called ‘out-islands,’ who have generally been somewhat more rigid in their orthodoxy than their Javanese counterparts for centuries.”

Describing Jokowi's results as a “Victory for Moderate Islam,” *Reuters* noted that “Many of the hardline Islamist clerics and groups backing Prabowo's presidential bid were the same as those who in 2016 and 2017 led mass protests to topple the ethnic-Chinese, Christian governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, a one-time close ally of the president.” Committed secularists among religious minorities and elites, the third camp, supported Jokowi.

Asia Times observed that “[W]ithout a massive flow of votes from Central and East Java and the special region of Jogjakarta, a whopping 10-12% more than in 2014, Widodo may have been struggling to get his nose in front as constituents on the big outlying islands weighed in against him... Joined by the base of Widodo's ruling Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle (PDI-P), influential NU clerics and Islamic boarding houses played a major role in giving the president as much as 77% of the vote in Central Java and 67% in East Java... Across the rest of eastern Indonesia, religious minorities turned out in droves to support the president, giving him landslide victories on the Hindu island of Bali (91%) and in Christian-populated East Nusa Tenggara (86%)... Maluku [61%], Papua and West Papua [81% and North Sulawesi 77%] – margins far greater than in 2014.”

“The implication then is that these Javanese voters linked to NU will be the key swing demographic group in Indonesia’s elections moving forward,” writes Nolte, who recommends that the U.S. government: 1. “strongly express its support for Jokowi as a responsible partner both in the region and the Muslim world” and say “a few nice, but diplomatically phrased, things about the value of Indonesia’s distinctive form of Islam”; 2. work to decrease “the influence of Wahhabi clerics in Saudi Arabia... [which] may well have positive and long-lasting effects in Indonesia”; 3. “the State Department and other U.S. agencies, when interacting with Muslim religious leaders at a high level, [should] be sure to include representatives of NU”; and 4. “develop a body of foreign policy practitioners familiar... with [Islam’s] concrete, local variations in places like Indonesia.”

The overwhelming support of Javanese voters for President Jokowi is unsurprising, as Java represents both the focal point of NU and its profoundly spiritual tradition of *Islam Nusantara* (“East Indies Islam”), which teaches that *rahmah* (universal love and compassion) is the primary message of Islam. Javanese NU leaders were decisive in the foundation of Indonesia as a multi-religious and pluralistic nation state. “[L]eaders within NU were becoming concerned about the possibility of a government that might actually implement an Islamic populist [i.e., Islamist] vision for Indonesia,” says Nolte. “For the nearly 100-year-old organization founded to preserve Indonesia’s unique, local Islam, that would be far from a desirable outcome.”

The results of Indonesia’s 2019 elections suggest that the Nahdlatul Ulama may wield significantly more political influence during President Jokowi’s second term in office, as it strives to defend the [Javanese tradition](#) of religious pluralism and tolerance, and seeks to expand its [Humanitarian Islam](#) movement worldwide.