



**Co-founder of the Humanitarian Islam Movement
Appointed as Indonesia's Minister of Religious Affairs**

**“Religion should be an inspiration for society,
not a vehicle for the political aspirations of those who seek worldly power”**

***Antara News*: “Yaqut is an active leader of GP Ansor, and has an extensive network stretching from the very center of power all the way to Indonesia's grass roots”**

PRESIDENTIAL PALACE, JAKARTA, Indonesia: On December 22, 2020, Indonesian President Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”) appointed H. Yaqut Cholil Qoumas (“Gus Yaqut”) — Chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama’s 5-million-member young adults organization, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, and co-founder of the global Humanitarian Islam movement — as Indonesia’s Minister of Religious Affairs. The appointment, which received viral coverage across Indonesian print, broadcast and social media, signals the Jokowi administration’s determination to block the political weaponization of Islam and neutralize its potentially destabilizing effects in the run-up to Indonesia’s 2024 national elections.

The appointment also signals a growing awareness among Indonesia’s political elites of Humanitarian Islam’s ability to project [strategic influence](#) worldwide, as demonstrated by the October 2020 [visit](#) of U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo to Jakarta, at the invitation of GP Ansor; the [January 2020 meeting](#) of the world’s largest political network, Centrist Democrat International (CDI), in Yogyakarta, Indonesia; and the Humanitarian Islam movement’s [engagement](#) with Pope Francis and the Vatican.

Gerakan Pemuda Ansor is the primary vehicle for the grassroots mobilization of NU’s more than 90 million followers. It has long served as a bulwark against persistent and at times violent efforts by Islamists and their allies, both foreign and domestic, to [undermine](#) Indonesia’s unique traditions of religious pluralism and tolerance. As BBC news [reported](#): “The appointment of Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, who is ‘firm and uncompromising,’ is intended to ‘curb hardline Islamic groups.’”

Gus Yaqut is the son of Kyai Haji Muhammad Cholil Bisri (1942 – 2004), who co-founded Indonesia’s largest Islamic political party, PKB, in 1998 with H.E. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid and other prominent NU leaders. H. Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, who served as a PKB member of Indonesia’s National Assembly from 2014 until his appointment to the Ministry, is the younger brother of current Nahdlatul Ulama General Secretary [Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf](#). Mr. Qoumas is also the nephew of [Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri](#), who is a former Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council; co-founder and Chairman of Bayt ar-Rahmah; spiritual leader of the Humanitarian Islam movement; and one of Muslim Southeast Asia’s preeminent religious figures.

In a [speech](#) delivered at the Presidential Palace, Yaqut promised to serve the people and nation of Indonesia by fostering a spirit of fraternity between Muslims (*ukhuwah islamiyah*), fellow citizens (*ukhuwah wathaniyah*) and humanity at large (*ukhuwah basyariyah*) — the “[trilogy of](#)

[brotherhood](#)” that lies at the heart of Nahdlatul Ulama efforts to recontextualize (i.e., reform) obsolete and problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy, such as the legal concept of infidel (*kafir*). As Indonesia’s leading newspaper, *Kompas*, [reported](#):

“According to the Minister, Indonesia won its independence from colonial occupation through a unified national struggle in which not only Muslims, but also Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Confucianists fought side-by-side.

“Therefore, no single religion or sect thereof has the right to claim exclusive ownership of Indonesia, nor the right to impose its will on others.

“‘Every Indonesian is a legitimate and rightful heir to our nation’s precious heritage,’ declared Yaqut.

“Quoting a companion of the Prophet Mohammed, Yaqut said that ‘If two people are not ‘brothers in faith,’ they should nevertheless regard and treat one another as members of a single, and universal, human fraternity.’”

On December 24, Gus Yaqut delivered an [address](#) that was televised nationwide from his office at the Ministry of Religious Affairs, in which he said:

“The atmosphere of Christmas, which our beloved Christian brothers and sisters feel so strongly at this time of year, is peaceful and harmonious. Indeed, we all aspire to create a global order that is peaceful, just and harmonious. A world that is free of conflict, violence, exploitation and war. In such an atmosphere, humanity could dwell in a spirit of brotherhood, loving one another and treating each other with kindness and respect.

“This is the true and ultimate human ideal, which should be understood and enlivened when celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. We are all aware that our nation is highly diverse, consisting of numerous tribes, religions, ethnicities, languages and cultures. There is no way a nation can flourish amidst such diversity except by building solidarity, respecting one another and valuing our differences.

“We should be grateful for this diversity, realizing that it is, in fact, a blessing from God Almighty. Embracing this attitude towards diversity will lead religions back to their fundamental message, which is to summon each and every one of us to strive for the well-being of humanity as a whole, so that this earth may become a beautiful dwelling place for everyone — whose peace and tranquility we must, of course, safeguard and preserve together.”

On Christmas Eve Gus Yaqut travelled to Semarang, capital of the heavily populated province of Central Java, where he participated in a service held at a Protestant church built in 1753. During a speech delivered to the congregation and assembled news media, the newly appointed Minister declared that Indonesia’s Ministry of Religious Affairs exists to serve all citizens equally and called for discarding obsolete [norms](#) that assume religion advocates conflict between those of different faiths.

Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, the organization Mr. Qoumas led prior to his appointment, has a long history of defending religious minorities.

On the evening of December 24, 2000, a 25-year-old Banser militiaman named Riyanto discovered a suspicious bag on a pew in Ebenezer Church in Mojokerto, East Java. He grabbed the bag, rushed outside and was killed when a bomb exploded in his arms.

Within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) circles, Riyanto is widely considered to be a martyr. Every year at Christmas, NU members celebrate the memory of this humanitarian hero (“*Pahlawan Kemanusiaan*”) alongside their Christian brethren.

“Riyanto has proven himself to be deeply religious and profoundly imbued with humanitarian values. May he be recompensed [by God] for the full measure of his sacrifice.”

~ H.E. KH. Abdurrahman Wahid (“[Gus Dur](#)”)

On Christmas Day, Mr. Qoumas visited his home town of Rembang, to seek the blessings and advice of his paternal uncle, the revered Muslim scholar Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri (“Gus Mus”).

“Seeing how many people have congratulated my nephew on his appointment, it appears that many of our people still view the position of Minister as a boon. Thank God, Yaqut does not. He is aware that this position is a sacred trust and solemn responsibility. All I can do is join others in praying that he will be capable of fulfilling this sacred trust and meeting his responsibilities. May God grant him success in doing so...”

~ s.kakung (“grandfather”)
KH. A. Mustofa Bisri

As widely reported in Indonesian media, Mustofa Bisri advised his nephew to avoid all improper behavior, including corruption, and to embrace and encourage every Indonesian, regardless of his or her religion, to unite in love of their homeland. “It’s not important what religion, ethnicity or group they belong to. All should be treated equally and invited to join in developing our nation,” Gus Mus told his nephew.

The following day, *Kompas* [reported](#) that “Indonesia’s newly appointed Religious Affairs Minister, Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, said the government will protect the rights of Shia and Ahmadiyah religious groups in the country.” In recent decades, these two Muslim minority groups have been under heavy pressure from Islamist extremists, who have exploited Indonesian democracy to propagate their ideology and persecute religious minorities.

Reporting on a nationwide interfaith webinar titled “Strengthening National Unity Amid Diversity,” Indonesia’s national wire service, *Antara*, [noted](#) that the newly appointed Minister had declared: “All citizens of this nation possess equal rights before the law, whether they are Ahmadiyah, Shia, Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah or anything else. For that reason, the government has a duty to protect them as citizens of our nation.”

On December 30, Indonesia’s Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, Mahfud MD., announced a [formal ban](#) of the extremist group Front Pembela Islam (Front for Defenders of Islam, or FPI), which was established immediately after the fall of President Suharto and had long been backed by elements of Indonesia’s political, business and military elites, as a means to weaponize Islam for political purposes. FPI attracted international attention in December of 2016 when it served as the “public face” for a complex web of political and business actors who sought to undermine President Jokowi by attacking Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (“Ahok”), the Chinese Christian governor of Jakarta, who lost the 2017 gubernatorial election and was sentenced to two years imprisonment for blasphemy.

In announcing the ban, the Coordinating Minister referenced FPI’s long history of violating the law; its rejection of Indonesia’s Pancasila ideology, which enshrines multi-religious pluralism

within the nation's 1945 Constitution; and the conviction of dozens of FPI members on charges of terrorism.

Observers noted that the Jokowi administration carefully timed its move against FPI to coincide with Gus Yaqut's appointment as Minister of Religious Affairs and, hence, the return of this strategic portfolio to Nahdlatul Ulama and the NU-based political party, PKB, to which Yaqut belongs.

As President Jokowi declared at a [rally](#) of over 100,000 Banser members in Pekalongan in November of 2018, which was hosted by Gus Yaqut:

“Gerakan Pemuda Ansor is living proof that our nation stands heir to the courage of warriors and the sincerity of heroes. GP Ansor is not easily intimidated; that is the true spirit of Indonesia. Like Ansor, we must all bravely demonstrate that Pancasila is the foundational ideology of the Indonesian nation state and cannot be replaced by other ideologies, including imported ideologies [propagated by transnational Islamist movements].”

As Indonesian media outlet *Independensi* observed in an [article](#) published on December 23, 2020:

“The competitive map for presidential candidates in 2024 may shift dramatically following the appointment of Yaqut Cholil Qoumas to the position of Minister of Religious Affairs. At a minimum, he will serve as a major obstacle to any presidential candidate seeking to weaponize radical Islam.”