



The Conversation: “Humanitarian Islam is different”

Does Nahdlatul Ulama offer a solution to the Muslim world’s authoritarian malaise?

Award-winning Turkish scholar:

“In terms of membership, the organization hugely outstrips that of the Taliban – yet this face of Islam has not been sufficiently recognized on the international stage”

SAN DIEGO, September 23, 2021: One of the world’s preeminent scholars of political Islam — Turkish American Professor Ahmet T. Kuru — has highlighted Humanitarian Islam’s transformative potential as an alternative to the mosque-state alliance that has kept much of the Muslim world trapped in a cycle of authoritarianism, underdevelopment and violence for centuries.

Titled “How the world’s biggest Islamic organization drives religious reform in Indonesia,” Professor Kuru’s article originally appeared in [The Conversation](#), a multi-lingual network of media outlets that publishes news stories written by academic experts and researchers. The article was also prominently featured by a number of leading news, educational and foreign policy outlets — including AP, Religion News Service, *International Policy Digest* and Britannica — and translated into [Bosnian](#), [French](#), [German](#), [Indonesian](#), [Spanish](#) and [Turkish](#).

BusinessMirror (the Philippines) featured the article in its weekly “Faith Sunday” segment accompanied by a photograph of Indonesia’s first democratically elected president and former NU Chairman H.E. KH. Abdurrahman Wahid, who inspired the birth of the global Humanitarian Islam movement.

Director of the Center for Islamic and Arabic Studies at San Diego State University, Dr. Kuru authored the seminal work [Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2019), which popularized the term “state–ulama alliance” to describe the relationship between Islamic clerics and the state. This alliance solidified in the 11th century and, says Professor Kuru, “should be held responsible for the scientific and socioeconomic stagnation, as well as the authoritarianism, witnessed in most Muslim-majority countries today.”

Professor Kuru’s analysis is the latest in a series of [high-profile articles](#) to highlight Nahdlatul Ulama’s unique and expanding international role. Writing in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Dr. Rainer Hermann — one of Europe’s top experts on the contemporary Middle East — [observed](#) that Nahdlatul Ulama has secured Indonesia a “‘points advantage’ within the intra-Islamic competition to become the leading religious ‘soft power’ in the Muslim world.”

Geopolitical analyst and Senior Fellow at National University of Singapore’s Middle East Institute, Dr. James M. Dorsey, [describes](#) the 90-million-member Indonesian organization as “a bottom-up alternative to state-controlled religion that seeks to ensure the survival of autocratic regimes and the protection of vested interests.”

The full text of Prof. Ahmet T. Kuru’s article on Humanitarian Islam may be read below.

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

How the world's biggest Islamic organization drives religious reform in Indonesia – and seeks to influence the Muslim world

by [Ahmet T. Kuru](#) | September 23, 2021



A gathering during the 73rd anniversary of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), in Jakarta, Indonesia in 2019.

After its return to power in Afghanistan, the Taliban are again imposing their [religious ideology](#), with restrictions on [women's rights](#) and other repressive measures. They are presenting to the world an image of Islam that is intolerant and at odds with social changes.

Islam, however, has multiple interpretations. A humanitarian interpretation, focusing on "rahmah," loosely translated as love and compassion, has been emphasized by a group [I have studied](#) – Nahdlatul Ulama, which literally means "Reawakening of the Islamic Scholars."

Nahdlatul Ulama, or NU, was founded in [1926 in reaction](#) to the Saudi conquest of Mecca and Medina with their rigid understanding of Islam. It follows [mainstream Sunni Islam](#), while embracing Islamic spirituality and accepting Indonesia's cultural traditions.

Functioning in Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population, Nahdlatul Ulama is the world's biggest Islamic organization with about [90 million members and followers](#). In terms of membership, the organization hugely outstrips that of the Taliban – yet this face of Islam has not been sufficiently recognized on the international stage.

In 2014, [NU responded](#) to the rise of the Islamic State group and its radical ideology by initiating an [Islamic reform](#). Since then, it has elaborated on this reform that it calls “[Humanitarian Islam](#).”

Humanitarian Islam

During the past seven years, NU’s general secretary, [Yahya Cholil Staquf](#), has organized several meetings of the organization’s Islamic scholars with a reformist agenda. They made public declarations for reforming Islamic thought on controversial issues, including political leadership, equal citizenship and relations with non-Muslims.

[The Nahdlatul Ulama declarations include crucial decisions](#) that differentiate “Humanitarian Islam” from other interpretations. First of all, they reject the notion of a global caliphate, or a political leadership that would unite all Muslims. The concept of a caliphate has been accepted by both [mainstream Islamic scholars](#), such as those in [Al-Azhar](#) – Egypt’s world-renowned Islamic institution – and radical groups, such as the Islamic State group and al-Qaeda.

Moreover, the NU declarations emphasize the legitimacy of modern states’ constitutional and legal systems, and thus reject the idea that it is a religious obligation to establish a state based on Islamic law.

Additionally, these declarations stress the importance of equal citizenship by refusing to make a distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims as legal categories.

They call for a deeper cooperation among Muslims, Christians and followers of other religions to promote world peace.

Nahdlatul Ulama has taken practical steps for realizing these aims. For example, it has established a working relationship [with the World Evangelical Alliance](#), which claims to represent 600 million Protestants, to promote intercultural solidarity and respect.

These NU declarations may sound insufficient from a Western liberal point of view, since they do not touch upon some issues such as LGBTQ rights. To better understand the importance of NU’s perspective and its limits requires an examination of the Indonesian context.

Indonesia's tolerant Islam



Yahya Cholil Staquf, general secretary of Nahdlatul Ulama.

[My research](#) on 50 Muslim-majority countries finds that Indonesia is notable because it is one of the few democracies among them.

Indonesia's foundational credo, [Pancasila](#), means "five principles" and basically refers to the belief in God, humanitarianism, Indonesia's national unity, democracy and social justice.

About 88% of Indonesia's population of 270 million are Muslim. Both Nahdlatul Ulama and [Muhammadiyah](#), the country's second-biggest Islamic organization, have been respectful of these principles. Like NU, Muhammadiyah also has tens of millions of followers, and these two organizations often [cooperate against radical Islamist groups](#).

[Robert Hefner](#), a leading expert on Indonesia, documents in [his 2000 book "Civil Islam"](#) how NU and Muhammadiyah made important contributions to the country's democratization in the late 1990s. During this process, the leader of NU, Abdurrahman Wahid, became Indonesia's first democratically elected president in 1999.

Wahid, who died in 2009, left a religious legacy, too. During my conversations, senior [NU members](#) repeatedly referred to Wahid's reformist ideas as the main source of inspiration for Humanitarian Islam.

Indonesia's intolerant Islam

Not all Islamic theories and practices in Indonesia are tolerant toward diversity. The country's Aceh province has enforced certain rules of Islamic criminal law, including the punishment of caning for those who sell or drink alcohol.

Another example of religious and political intolerance is the country's [blasphemy law](#), which resulted in the 20-month imprisonment of the capital city Jakarta's Chinese Christian governor, [Basuki Purnama](#) in 2017-2018, for a [statement about a verse](#) in the Quran.

In January 2021, the story of a Christian female student being pressured by the school principal to wear a Muslim headscarf went [viral on Facebook](#). In two weeks, the Indonesian government responded with a decree that banned [public schools from making any religious attire compulsory](#).

In short, there is a tug-of-war between tolerant and intolerant interpretations of Islam in Indonesia. Even within NU, there exist disagreements between conservatives and reformists.

Nonetheless, Nahdlatul Ulama reformists are becoming more influential. One example is the current minister of religious affairs, [Yaqut Cholil Qoumas](#), a leading NU member and the younger brother of NU's reformist general secretary. He was one of the [three ministers who signed](#) the joint decree banning the imposition of headscarves on students in February.

NU's Humanitarian Islam movement might be crucial to promote tolerance among Indonesia's Islamic majority. But can it have an effect beyond Indonesia?

Influencing the Middle East

This reform movement's [reception in the Middle East](#), the historical center of Islam, is important if it is to have a global impact. Humanitarian Islam has been mostly ignored by scholars and governments of Middle Eastern countries, who generally see it as [a competitor of their own attempts to influence the Muslim world](#). As a nongovernmental initiative, Humanitarian Islam is different from Middle Eastern efforts to shape the Muslim world, which are mostly government-led schemes.

With its reformist emphasis, Humanitarian Islam may appeal to some young [Middle Eastern Muslims](#) who are [discontented](#) with their countries' [political and conservative](#) interpretations of Islam.

In order to reach a Middle Eastern audience, the Humanitarian Islam movement is launching [an Arabic-language version](#) of its English website. Whether this Indonesian initiative can have an impact in the Middle East and become a truly global movement for Islamic reform remains to be seen.