



Nahdlatul Ulama Circular Letter: Executive Summary

Nahdlatul Ulama moves to prevent foreign and domestic interference in its affairs

NU General Secretary: “NGOs often weave ‘beautiful narratives’ to impress donors, while in reality undermining progress or even placing others in jeopardy”

Nahdlatul Ulama has a track record of acknowledging and addressing Indonesia’s internal problems, without provoking social unrest and political instability

JAKARTA, Indonesia, September 20, 2021: The Central Board of Nahdlatul Ulama, the world’s largest Muslim organization, has instructed all of its chapters, institutions and autonomous bodies to cancel or suspend all activities with an Indonesian NGO and two of its foreign partners, and to submit any proposed future activities for approval by the Central Board. The order is designed to protect and enhance minority rights while preserving social harmony and political stability, rather than seeking to curtail NGOs’ freedom to engage in activities of their choice.

The order was issued in the form of a [circular letter](#) distributed to those who govern Nahdlatul Ulama, in response to efforts by the Leimena Institute, a Jakarta-based NGO and its foreign backers — the U.S.-based Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) and the American Jewish Committee (AJC) — to harness Nahdlatul Ulama and Indonesia’s powerful Ministry of Religious Affairs in service of a potentially disruptive agenda dictated by foreign actors, who seek to reshape Indonesia’s complex socio-cultural, religious and political landscape.

For the past century, Nahdlatul Ulama has consistently sought to block the [infiltration](#) of Wahhabism, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements into Indonesia’s religious mainstream. The unanimous decision by NU’s Supreme Council and its Executive Board to cancel or suspend any and all cooperation with Leimena, IGE and AJC suggests that NU is also concerned about Western NGOs acting in pursuit of agendas that have the potential to induce social unrest and political instability in Indonesia.

Kyai Miftachul Akhyar, Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council, recently warned of “external parties that seek to infiltrate the NU wearing masks,” in order to manipulate the world’s largest Muslim organization as if it were “a bonsai tree that is malleable in their hands.”

Nahdlatul Ulama [spiritual leaders](#) are aware that Indonesia faces a wide range of challenges, including many [serious problems](#) that need to be honestly acknowledged and addressed. These include corruption, crony capitalism, religious extremism and environmental degradation. These domestic problems are often exacerbated by [foreign actors](#) seeking to acquire cultural, ideological, religious, economic and/or political influence within the world’s most populous Muslim-majority nation and democracy, which lies astride maritime trade routes within the Indo-Pacific.

Islamist movements originating in the Middle East; China’s Belt and Road initiative; and Western governments and NGOs routinely seek to identify and recruit local actors willing to facilitate their agendas. The cooptation of local elites by foreign powers has a long and disreputable history in Indonesia, which experienced over 350 years of Dutch colonialism, from 1596 – 1949. Nahdlatul

Ulama is deeply rooted in those elements of Indonesian society that historically refused to collaborate with tyrants (*tāghūt*), whether foreign or domestic.

Commenting on these developments, KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf — General Secretary of the NU Supreme Council — said: “We welcome those who wish to cooperate with Nahdlatul Ulama in solving problems, but cannot endorse grandstanding NGOs or advocacy groups that seek to hijack the institutional structure of Nahdlatul Ulama in pursuit of their objectives. Such behavior threatens to undermine social harmony, political stability and the well-being of religious minorities. We advise Western governments and NGOs to exercise caution in choosing partners in Indonesia. Domestic organizations acting at the behest of foreign donors — even if they seek to accomplish worthy objectives — may be incapable of accomplishing those objectives, due to lack of knowledge, institutional infrastructure and a popular base.”

Mr. Staquf added, “Recent events in Iraq — where an ill-advised [conference](#) played into the hands of Islamist militias and extremist political parties on the eve of national elections — illustrate the dangers posed by NGOs that weave ‘beautiful narratives’ to impress donors, while in reality undermining progress or even placing others in jeopardy.”

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From its founding in 1926, Nahdlatul Ulama has consistently taught its tens of millions of followers that there is an inescapable link between individual and collective moral responsibility. This is reflected in a well-known tenet of traditional Sunni Islam that “it is forbidden to pursue a noble objective by using ignoble means.”

This view fundamentally distinguishes Nahdlatul Ulama and other traditional Sunni organizations from ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Boko Haram.

NU spiritual leaders established the [Humanitarian Islam](#) movement and the [Center for Shared Civilizational Values](#) to create institutional platforms through which people of goodwill of every faith and nation may systematically examine and address profound moral issues, including the relationship between individual and collective behavior.

In a distinct yet related development, in July of 2021 Indonesia’s Ministry of Religious Affairs affirmed that every Indonesian citizen has a constitutional right to freedom of conscience, including Baha’is, Sikhs, Taoists and Jews. The current Minister of Religious Affairs, the Honorable Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, is the scion of a prominent Nahdlatul Ulama family and senior NU figure himself.

[Read: Indonesia’s Ministry of Religious Affairs affirms the constitutional right to freedom of conscience](#)

These developments vividly illustrate the contrast between pro forma and [substantive](#) actions to foster [religious pluralism](#) and [tolerance](#), and the need to [address](#) serious [problems](#) in a [manner](#) that reflects a deep [understanding](#) of any given country’s [internal dynamics](#), including its [history](#), [culture](#), [religion](#) and [politics](#).

Conclusion

Indonesia is a democracy with 270 million inhabitants spread over a vast archipelago. It also has a history of periodic, violent conflict rooted in ethnic, religious and/or ideological differences.

Eighty-eight percent of Indonesia's population is Muslim, and over 90 million of these Muslims self-identify with Nahdlatul Ulama. As Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, which helped establish and for over 75 years has defended the Republic of Indonesia as a *Pancasila* ("multi-religious and pluralistic") nation state, Nahdlatul Ulama is responsible for helping to preserve social harmony and to address any threat to the nation, whether foreign or domestic.

In his introduction to the enormously influential book, [*The Illusion of an Islamic State*](#) (*Ilusi Negara Islam*, 2009), former Nahdlatul Ulama Chairman and Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid described the danger posed by an alliance between Muslim extremists and opportunistic politicians "driving our nation towards a deep chasm, which threatens destruction and national disintegration. They care nothing about, and indeed, are actively engaged in sacrificing the future of our multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation. It appears that they place importance only upon their private political ambitions, in order to acquire wealth and power."

It is in light of these dangers — i.e., the [perennial threat](#) posed by an alliance between Muslim extremists and self-aggrandizing politicians — that the Nahdlatul Ulama [Circular Letter](#) published on September 20, 2021, should be understood.

As the intense polarization currently roiling much of the West demonstrates, the weaponization of identity can swiftly undermine even well-established democracies, to say nothing of those societies, such as Indonesia's, that have recently undergone a transition from authoritarianism to democracy.

In this perilous environment, the behavior of even well-intentioned actors who lack the requisite knowledge of Islam, and sufficient experience, may easily produce unintended and devastating consequences.

Hence, the Nahdlatul Ulama Circular Letter may be viewed as a timely reminder to anyone who wishes to promote equal rights for religious minorities in the Muslim world: it is essential to conduct such efforts in a manner that strengthens, rather than undermines, the fabric of social harmony and political stability that are essential to a nation's well-being and ensuring the rule of law.