



## The Classical Intellectual Heritage of Islam Nusantara

### Nahdlatul Ulama challenges Middle East claims to possess a monopoly on Islamic authority and religious discourse

#### Nahdlatul Ulama Chairman:

**“Re-awakening the rich intellectual heritage of East Indies *ulama* will enable us to contribute significantly to the future of world civilization in partnership with stakeholders from other great civilizations, including Europe, India, China and the Middle East”**

JAKARTA, Indonesia, March 14, 2022: In a move reminiscent of Martin Luther’s challenge to the authority of Rome in the 16<sup>th</sup> century — which launched the Protestant Reformation and paved the way for an explosion of scientific and technological progress in Europe — Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is [challenging](#) Middle East governments’ claim to possess a monopoly on Islamic authority and discourse.

Islamic institutions and public discourse are tightly controlled by governments throughout the Arab world, as well as in Iran and Turkey. Nahdlatul Ulama — a traditional Sunni Muslim organization with over 90 million followers — offers a [stark contrast](#) to such authoritarian-friendly models of Islam, and to the extreme violence perpetrated by ultraconservative Sunni groups such as [ISIS](#) and al-Qaeda.

Fiercely independent, NU has played a decisive role in shaping modern Indonesian history, including its transition from authoritarian rule to become the world’s most successful Muslim-majority democracy.

NU’s assertion of religious authority and autonomy may be seen as a response to “the brutal conflicts now raging across a huge swath of territory inhabited by Muslims, from Africa and the Middle East to the borders of India; rampant social turbulence throughout the Islamic world... [and] the spread of a de facto Islamist revolutionary movement that threatens the stability and security of the entire world, by summoning Muslims to join a global insurrection against the current world order” ([Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam](#), points 25 and 26).

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In early February, 2022, Nahdlatul Ulama’s Central Board and the City of Jakarta co-sponsored a [series of events](#) titled “Shaykh Nawawi of Banten Memorial Week: Re-awakening the Classical Intellectual Heritage of Islam Nusantara as a Contribution from Indonesia to Global Civilization.”

The week’s events included the publication and launch of the first in a series of books titled *Great Works of Nusantara Ulama Through the Ages*. The Arabic-language book features

eleven manuscripts written by Nusantara religious scholars from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The volume was compiled and edited by *Komunitas Nahdlatut Turats* (Community to Promote the Intellectual Heritage of Nahdlatul Ulama), the NU Central Board's philological division.

The February celebration of Indonesia's classical Islamic heritage was named in honor of the great 19<sup>th</sup>-century scholar, Shaykh Muhammad Nawawi al-Jawi al-Bantani. Born on the western tip of the island of Java in 1813, Shaykh Nawawi was the 12<sup>th</sup> generation offspring of the first Muslim ruler of Banten, Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin (d. 1570) and a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. Accused of supporting Prince Diponegoro's rebellion against Dutch colonial rule (1825 – 30), Shaykh Nawawi migrated to the birthplace of Islam, where he lived for the remainder of his life (d. 1897). During this time Shaykh Nawawi authored approximately 115 books, including major works in the field of Islamic jurisprudence, Qur'anic interpretation, hadith and Sufism (Islamic mysticism). Recognized as a preeminent religious authority, Shaykh Nawawi was appointed Imam of *Masjid al-Haram*, or the Great Mosque in the city of Mecca, where he taught countless disciples in close proximity to the sacred Kaaba.

The week's events also included an exhibition organized by *Komunitas Nahdlatut Turats*, which was held in the Grand Ballroom of the Sultan Hotel. Indonesian Vice President Kyai Haji Ma'ruf Amin (above) [addressed](#) participants, stating:

As heirs to a rich tradition of Islamic scholarship, it is appropriate that the people of Indonesia revive our collective memory regarding the intellectual splendor and spiritual greatness of our ancestors. This will encourage the creation of new works on Islam, which are full of wisdom and reflect the changed circumstances of our modern era, while continuing to invite others to follow the path of virtue and thereby strengthen our nation's unity.

The Vice President went on to describe a visit he received in December 2021 by Sultan Faisal Al Rumaithi, Secretary General of the Council of Muslim Elders. The organization is headed by Ahmed el-Tayyeb, the Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar University, and is headquartered in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. [According](#) to the Vice President, Secretary General Al Rumaithi said:

I did not come here to teach Indonesians, especially not about the issue of tolerance. I came here to learn, because Indonesia is known to be a very tolerant country and may serve as a valuable reference in the context of developing Islam throughout the world....

Intellectual works written by Indonesians must be translated into Arabic, because religious values characterized by respect and tolerance for others are, in fact, deeply infused within the life of the Indonesian people.

On January 30, 2022, Nahdlatul Ulama Chairman KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf attended a similar exhibit in Balikpapan, East Kalimantan, held in conjunction with NU's 96<sup>th</sup> anniversary (according to the Gregorian calendar) and the inauguration of its Central Board. At that event Mr. Staquf [said](#):

This exhibit is part of a much larger initiative undertaken by young NU *kyais* (religious scholars) who have established *Nahdlatut Turats*, or Revival of the Intellectual Heritage of Nusantara Scholars.

This exhibit demonstrates the strength of our claim that Islam Nusantara and its Muslim community have authentic, legally valid, and solid references for our religious insights.

This exhibit also demonstrates that NU possesses a structure of religious authority that is no less strong and solid — indeed, no less qualified — than various structures of Islamic religious authority in other parts of the world.

If Muslims who dwell throughout the Malay Archipelago can understand, appreciate, value, preserve and strengthen our indigenous religious authority, especially within Nahdlatul Ulama, this will directly ensure NU's autonomy [i.e., freedom from external interference in its affairs, whether by foreign or domestic actors].

Re-awakening the rich intellectual heritage of East Indies *ulama* will enable us to contribute significantly to the future of world civilization, in partnership with stakeholders from other great civilizations [including Europe, India, China and the Middle East].

Indonesia's Minister of Religious Affairs, the Honorable Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, expressed his hope that the initiative demonstrated by young NU *kyais*, who organized the exhibits in East Kalimantan and Jakarta, will swiftly grow into a powerful movement. Furthermore, said Minister Qoumas, this movement should not simply strive to collect, preserve, study and display classic intellectual works by Nusantara *ulama*.

“This movement should also arouse a passion among gifted Muslim intellectuals to create new scholarly works that we, in turn, shall bequeath to future generations.”