Autocratic vs. Democratic Islam

"Dr. James Dorsey has drawn a stark contrast between Nahdlatul Ulama's democratic vision and the autocratic view of Islam represented by Shaykh Abdullah bin Bayyah"

SINGAPORE — The world's largest Muslim organization, Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama, is moving to dismantle a key legacy of President Suharto's 32-year authoritarian regime (1966 – 1998), as part of its continuing effort to reconcile Islam and democracy.

Majelis Ulama Indonesia (the Indonesian Council of Islamic Scholars, or MUI) is a quasi-governmental body created in 1975 by the Suharto regime, which sought to by-pass the religious authority of Nahdlatul Ulama — an organization that has steadfastly maintained its independence from government since its founding in 1926. Following President Suharto's relinquishment of power in 1998, in the wake of the Asian financial crisis, dozens of extremist organizations infiltrated MUI and have sought to use its perceived authority to advance an Islamist agenda, backed by a government-issued monopoly on the certification of *halal* products.

Writing in *The Times of Israel*, geopolitical analyst and scholar Dr. James M. Dorsey has drawn a stark contrast between Nahdlatul Ulama's democratic vision and the autocratic view of Islam represented by Shaykh Abdullah bin Bayyah, Chairman of the United Arab Emirates Fatwa Council. An 87-year-old Mauritanian-born scholar of classical Islamic law — who for many years played a key role in Saudi Arabia's and Qatar's propagation of ultra-conservative Sunni Islam — Shaykh bin Bayyah severed his close ties with Muslim Brotherhood figure Yusuf al-Qaradawi in the wake of the Arab Spring and moved to Abu Dhabi.

Illustrating a deep-rooted phenomenon within the Middle East, which Turkish-American scholar Dr. Ahmet Kuru has termed the "*ulama*-state alliance," Shaykh bin Bayyah advocates an autocratic approach to constrain radical discourse within Islamic societies, in order to avoid what he describes as "the chaos of the fatwa." Nahdlatul Ulama, by contrast, employs grass-roots education and a profoundly spiritual understanding of Islam to counter extremist narratives within a democratic framework.

In 2009 — while Shaykh bin Bayyah was still actively involved in Saudi efforts to propagate Wahhabi/Muslim Brotherhood ideology worldwide — spiritual leaders of Nahdlatul Ulama and of Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's second-largest Muslim organization, published *Ilusi Negara Islam* (*The Illusion of an Islamic State: The Expansion of Transnational Islamist Movements in Indonesia*), a 333-page volume "which demonstrates how an alliance of moderate Islamic leaders can effectively isolate, and discredit, the ideology of religious hatred, supremacy and violence that underlies and animates terrorism."

Edited by former NU Chairman and Indonesia's first democratically-elected president, KH. Abdurrahman Wahid (1940 – 2009), *The Illusion of an Islamic State* went viral on the Internet and ignited a national firestorm of controversy, discrediting Islamist ideology and movements as a threat to the nation and to Islam itself. The book dramatically impacted Indonesia's 2009

elections, derailing the ambitions of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated political party PKS and other Islamist groups, which sought to undermine Indonesia's multi-religious and pluralistic state philosophy of *Pancasila* and transform the world's largest Muslim-majority nation into an Islamic state.

Today, Shaykh bin Bayyah serves as the public face of the UAE's effort to project religious soft power within the Islamic world and the West.

Meanwhile, Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, a disciple of President Wahid, was recently elected General Chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama, with a mandate to "foster the emergence of a truly just and harmonious world order, founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being."

In a recent interview, Dr. David H. Warren — author of *Rivals in the Gulf: Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Abdullah Bin Bayyah, and the Qatar-UAE Contest Over the Arab Spring and the Gulf Crisis* — said:

> *"In terms of the impact of fiqh al-silm, this jurisprudence of peace, the project that Abdullah bin Bayyah is theorizing and promulgating… I see it as something that is first and foremost being produced as part of the state-branding project of the UAE. The Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies was created in 2014 as a marquee project. It has every December an enormous interfaith gathering, as the marquee event in the interfaith calendar, where you have Americans and Europeans, Jewish and Christian religious leaders, diplomats, those invested in international religious freedom [gather in Abu Dhabi]…*
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> *"I think a big part of those kinds of projects are for showing foreign powers the importance of the UAE as a partner in reforming Islam from within, as the saying would go, or promoting moderate Islam, but I don't think there is actually anything real, or necessarily any effort to implement or promulgate or disseminate whatever the UAE is attempting to theorize, in a meaningful or sincere way."*

"Nahdlatul Ulama's critical mass of Islamic scholars… offer a bottom-up alternative to state-controlled religion that seeks to ensure the survival of autocratic regimes and the protection of vested interests."
~ *Horizons*

"Indonesians Seek to Export a Modernized Vision of Islam:
The youth wing of Nahdlatul Ulama, an Indonesian Islamic group, is pressing governments around the world to bring Islamic law into line with 21st-century norms."
~ *The New York Times*

"'I don't see any other Muslim leaders coming to Europe, standing up like a tower and saying, 'Look, we are prepared to take this on.' Terrorism expert Magnus Ranstorp says these Indonesian Muslim leaders are breaking new ground by proposing to make changes to Islamic law to better fit the modern era."
~ CNN

What follows is the complete text of James Dorsey's article:

THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

Autocratic vs. Democratic Islam
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UAE vs. Indonesia

James M. Dorsey | March 23, 2022

Indonesia has emerged as a primary battleground between democratic and autocratic visions of Islam in the 21st century.

The battle pits Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world's largest civil society movement with 90 million followers and powerful ministers in Indonesian President Joko Widodo's cabinet, against Abdullah bin Bayyah, an Abu Dhabi-based, Mauritanian-born religious jurist. Mr. Bin Bayyah, a Sunni Muslim high priest for Middle Eastern autocracy, provides religious legitimacy to the autocratic rulers of the United Arab Emirates.

Mr. Widodo risks finding himself in the battle's crossfire. Although closely associated with Nahdlatul Ulama, Mr. Widodo has agreed to cooperate with the UAE on religious affairs in return for massive Emirati investment in the Southeast Asian archipelago nation.

At the heart of the battle between rival theologically packaged visions of governance is the relationship between Islamic clerics and the state.

Mr. Bin Bayyah favours a state-controlled clergy that stifles free-flowing debate by avoiding what the jurist terms the "chaos of the fatwa." Bin Bayyah heads the Emirates Fatwa Council, established in 2018 "to take the fatwa out of the hands of terrorists and extremists."

Hamdan Al Mazroui. the head of the Emirati General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments at the time, said the Fatwa Council had been created to "ensure alignment of fatwas in the country and ensure preaching of moderate Islam." Control of religious debate in the UAE mirrors the country's crackdown on freedom of expression in general.

The Fatwa Council counts among its members, Professor Amany Burhanuddin, a prominent Islamic scholar, who heads the Indonesian Council of Scholars for Women and Youth.

In diametric contradiction to Mr. Bin Bayyah and the UAE, Nahdlatul Ulama, under the leadership of its newly elected chairman, Yahya Cholil Staquf, a proponent of Humanitarian Islam that propagates democracy, respect for human rights, and pluralism, has launched a frontal attack on the once-powerful Indonesian Ulema Council (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, or MUI).

MUI is a remnant of erstwhile state control that many view as the country's top body of Islamic scholars, made up of representatives of all strands of Sunni Islam.

The assault is designed to marginalise MUI, which seeks to retain its authority as a de facto independent group. By undermining MUI, Nahdlatul Ulama encourages the very "chaos of the fatwa" that Mr. Bin Bayyah and his UAE backers would prefer to repress.

Created in 1975 by then-President Suharto as a quasi-independent body, MUI has long projected itself as the authoritative voice of Islam. However, control of MUI was up for grabs after Mr. Suharto was toppled in 1998 by a popular revolt, even if successive Nahdlatul Ulama supreme guides have since chaired it.

MUI long propagated discriminatory policies against Muslim sects accused of being heretical, such as Ahmadis and Shiites and gender minorities. It did so with the support of conservative clerics of Nahdlatul Ulama, including Mr. Jokowi's Vice-President, Ma'ruf Amin.

Mr. Amin played a key role as chairman of MUI in mass protests that in 2017 brought down Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, aka Ahok, an ethnic Chinese Christian, and led to his sentencing to two years in prison on charges of blasphemy against Islam.

The Nahdlatul Ulama assault started with the group's supreme leader Miftachul Akhyar last week resigning his post as chairman of MUI. The resignation, which has yet to be accepted by MUI, appears to have thrown it into disarray.

At the same time, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has deprived MUI of its de facto monopoly on halal certification by opening the sector to competition.

Halal certificates are big business. The Halal Product Assistance Agency issues the certificates based on a fatwa issued by MUI to companies in the food, fashion, education, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, tourism, media, travel, medical, health, art, culture, and finance sectors.

With the undermining of MUI, Nahdlatul Ulama is attempting to remove the last remnants of state influence on the issuance of fatwas.

It no doubt opens the door to what Mr. Bin Bayyah fears most. Echoed in statements by top UAE officials, Mr. Bin Bayyah blames instability and volatility in the Middle East on a cacophony of fatwas that fuel unfettered debate rather than provide uniform state-approved guidance to the faithful.

In Mr. Bin Bayyah's mind, autocracy, uninhibited by religious jurists who do not know their proper place, is best positioned to ensure societal peace. Mr. Bin Bayyah remained silent when his Emirati paymasters rendered his theory obsolete with military interventions in Libya and Yemen. The interventions fueled civil wars, while political and financial support for anti-government protests in Egypt, which overthrew the country's first and only democratically elected president in 2013, produced a brutal dictatorship.

More than 800 protesters against the coup were killed in its immediate aftermath. The UAE's intervention in Yemen, in cooperation with Saudi Arabia, sparked one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, while UAE support for Libyan rebel leader Khalifa Haftar, in contravention of a United Nations arms embargo, helped push the North African nation into protracted violent conflict.

Mr. Bin Bayyah's silence on the regional chaos fueled by Emirati autocrats suggests that he "is not opposed to 'chaos' unconditionally, but rather he only [describes] as 'chaos' efforts to oppose autocracy on the part of democratically-oriented forces in the region," said Usaama al-Azami, a British Middle East scholar of South Asian descent who also trained as a classical Islamic scholar.

Mr. Bin Bayyah's silence was grounded in his belief that jurists should not impinge on the decisions of a ruler because they do "not know the facts of the matter or the consequences of particular courses of action." Moreover, Mr. Bin Bayyah argues that Islamic scholars may not be aware of a country's "internal tensions or external concerns that may lead to civil war, which need to be taken into account in matters of state. By contrast, the ruler understands the underlying reasons for his decisions and deals with situations that are hard for others to understand," Mr. Bin Bayyah said.

Rather than subordinating Islamic scholars to state control, Mr. Staquf, the newly elected Nahdlatul Ulama chairman, has pledged to take the group out of politics. The assault on the Indonesian Ulema Council may be the first step in that direction. Still, the litmus test will be the future of the numerous Nahdlatul Ulama activists that serve in Mr. Widodo's Cabinet and as ambassadors and board members of state-owned enterprises.

"While the new chairman has publicly pledged to return NU to being a politically neutral organisation, signs suggest it may well retain its close ties with the Jokowi regime, working with the government to promote the brand of 'moderate Islam' Jokowi endorses at home and abroad," said Indonesia scholar Alexander R. Arifianto.

Nahdlatul Ulama could conclude that preventing Mr. Jokowi, tempted by UAE financial largesse, from buying into the Gulf state's autocratic notion of 'moderate' Islam is a good reason to maintain the group's close ties to the president.

UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed has pledged to lead a committee that will oversee the construction of a new US$32.5 billion capital city for Indonesia and invest $10 billion in the country's sovereign wealth fund, with a focus on infrastructure.