



Can Indonesia's Humanitarian Islam inspire a Hindu nationalist equivalent?

“Reawakening the ancient spiritual, cultural, and socio-political heritage of the Indianized civilizational sphere”

JAKARTA and NEW DELHI, May 9, 2022 — Amid rising hostility between the world's great powers, Hindu and Muslim leaders have begun to explore strategies to “stem the tide of chaos” and preserve a rules-based international order, by strengthening “the humanitarian values of the East.”

These discussions are unfolding against the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine; ongoing wars and the threat of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East; China's Belt and Road Initiative; and the continuing spread of identity-based conflicts in Asia, Africa, Europe and North America. Significantly, Indonesia will host leaders of the world's largest economies (the “G20”) in November of 2022, while India will hold the G20 presidency next year.

On May 9, Hindu social and political leader Ram Madhav Varanasi traveled to Jakarta to meet with NU Chairman Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf and C. Holland Taylor, co-founders of the [Humanitarian Islam movement](#) and the [Center for Shared Civilizational Values](#).

Mr. Madhav serves on the executive committee of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist organization founded in 1925, which gave birth to India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and a wide range of other organizations within the Hindu nationalist umbrella movement known as Sangh Parivar. Previously, Mr. Madhav served as BJP's National General Secretary. He is known to be close to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other government and civil society leaders in India.

Mr. Staquf, who previously served on Indonesia's Presidential Advisory Council, works in close coordination with President Joko Widodo and various members of his administration. Mr. Staquf's younger brother, the Honorable Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, serves as Indonesia's Minister of Religious Affairs.

Commenting on the May 9th meeting in Jakarta, and previous engagement between Nahdlatul Ulama and RSS/BJP, geopolitical analyst Dr. James Dorsey observed, “There's a potential silver lining in Hindu nationalism's endorsement of Indonesia's Humanitarian Islam. That is if the approval produces a Hindu equivalent.”

Leaders of Humanitarian Islam and the Movement for Shared Civilizational Values believe that such an historical equivalent already exists. In the words of [Dr. Timothy Shah](#) and Mr. Taylor, from their article “[The ‘Ashoka Approach’ and Indonesian Leadership in the Movement for a Pluralist Reawakening in South and Southeast Asia](#)”:

Building on their transformative work in support of religious pluralism in Indonesia, NU spiritual leaders are seeking to mobilize like-minded religious and political

figures throughout South and Southeast Asia to foster a renewed appreciation for the spirituality and respect for pluralism that were once defining features of the Indianized cultural sphere, and forge concrete avenues of cooperation between profoundly spiritual and humanitarian expressions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Their explicit goal is for South and Southeast Asia to re-emerge as a cohesive, vital, and proactive civilizational sphere, which functions as a powerful, independent pillar of support for a rules-based international order founded upon shared civilizational values.

During his visit to Jakarta, Mr. Madhav and Nahdlatul Ulama leaders discussed potential cooperation linked to Indonesia's, and India's, hosting of the G20. They also discussed various possibilities for regional, and global, engagement.

As Dr. Dorsey wrote in an article titled "[Indian civilisationalism: a potential next flashpoint?](#)":

In another positive sign of engagement, Hindu and Muslim religious leaders and religious nationalists are quietly exploring whether they can find common ground in shared humanitarian values.

RSS executive committee member and former BJP secretary-general Ram Madhav said in an interview last week with this writer that "Eastern civilizations (and) Eastern religions all share the same civilizational value system." Mr. Madhav referenced Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, and 'an Islam with an Eastern value system like Indonesian Islam.'

Mr. Madhav, widely viewed as a moderate among Hindu nationalists, was referring to a concept of Humanitarian Islam put forward by Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's and Indonesia's largest Muslim civil society movement.

Nahdlatul Ulama advocates reform of what it calls "obsolete" and "problematic" elements of Islamic law, including those that encourage segregation, discrimination, and/or violence towards anyone perceived to be a non-Muslim. It further accepts the Universal Declaration of Human Rights without reservations and envisions inter-faith relations based on shared common values.

Mr. Madhav spoke on the eve of his second visit to Indonesia in two years for talks with Nahdlatul Ulama.

"Maybe we all can stand up and talk about these values... commit ourselves to those values including respect for pluralism, inclusivity, and commitment to the nation-state idea, (and) patriotism... If something can be worked out jointly, we would be definitely happy to do that," Mr. Madhav said.

In Mr. Madhav's mind, the RSS's vision of Hindu nationalism or Hindutva already incorporates principles of humanitarianism as articulated by Nahdlatul Ulama.

The movement's critics reject that assertion. Moreover, the RSS's alleged association with widespread inter-communal violence and perceived discrimination of Indian Muslims calls it into question.

What follows is the complete text of James Dorsey’s article, “Can Indonesia’s Humanitarian Islam inspire a Hindu nationalist equivalent?” A second article by Dr. Dorsey, “Indian civilisationalism: a potential next flashpoint?” may be read [here](#).

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Can Indonesia’s Humanitarian Islam Inspire a Hindu Nationalist Equivalent?

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James M. Dorsey | May 9, 2022



There's a potential silver lining in Hindu nationalism's endorsement of Indonesia's Humanitarian Islam. That is if the approval produces a Hindu equivalent.

At first glance, Hindu nationalist Ram Madhav's call on Indian Muslims to embrace one, if not the world's most moderate expression of Islam, seems patronising and out of step.

Mr. Madhav is a member of the executive of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an almost century-old militant right-wing Hindu nationalist paramilitary volunteer organisation; former national secretary-general of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); and a close associate of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In an [essay published by Open](#), an Indian current affairs weekly, Mr. Madhav, widely viewed as a moderate among Hindu nationalists, called on Indian Muslims to adopt a moderate form of Islam propagated and practiced by Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's and Indonesia's largest Muslim civil society movement.

Nahdlatul Ulama advocates reform of what it calls "obsolete" and "problematic" elements of Islamic law, including those that encourage segregation, discrimination, and/or violence towards anyone perceived to be a non-Muslim.

Humanitarian Islam further recognises equal rights for Muslims and non-Muslims, unrestricted acceptance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and inter-faith relations based on shared common values.

If adopted by Mr. Madhav's RSS and BJP, it would be an approach that would contribute to the restoration of a semblance of societal harmony in India and help halt the backsliding of the country's democracy.

Several Nahdlatul Ulama-associated bodies welcomed Mr. Madhav's endorsement "as an opportunity to [place humanitarianism at the heart of interaction between different faith groups](#) — regardless of religion and across different sectors of society, ranging from mass organizations to governments — in order to promote peaceful coexistence and enshrine equal rights before the law."

Mr. Madhav's essay appeared against the backdrop of mounting Hindu-Muslim communal violence that critics believe is fuelled by the BJP and RSS's anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies. Muslims account for 14 per cent of India's 1.4 billion population.

Last week, the Delhi working-class neighbourhood of Jahangirpuri witnessed some of the latest incidents. Riots erupted when participants in a Hindu procession allegedly brandished weapons and chanted anti-Muslim slogans as they passed through predominantly Muslim areas. "There was chaos," said Sudarshan Prasad, a 71-year-old Hindu. "I've always lived here in peace. This has not happened in the last 40 years."

Days later, authorities imposed a curfew and cut off Internet connections in an area of Jodhpur, the capital of northern India's Rajasthan state, following [altercations between the Hindu and Muslim communities](#). The crackdown occurred as Muslims celebrated Eid al Fitr, the holiday at the end of Ramadan, and Hindus commemorated the festival of Parshuram Jayanti.

At about the same time, tension was building in the state of Maharashtra, home to India's financial capital Mumbai, after Hindu leaders demanded that Muslims remove loudspeakers from their mosques because the call to prayer constitutes noise pollution.

Bucking the trend, one Hindu village in the state [gifted a loudspeaker to the mosque](#) in a neighbouring Muslim hamlet as a gesture of harmony.

In his essay, Mr. Madhav insisted that the RSS had distanced itself from “violent language and talk of annihilation of an entire community” that he termed “un-Hindu.”

Even so, Mr. Madhav went on to say that “the Indian social leadership needs to stand up to the forces of hatred and violence by invoking peace, inclusive and a nation-first narrative. India's narrative of the decade should be ‘it's the economy, stupid.’ The onus lies on all of us.”

In an interview with the author, Mr. Madhav insisted that Hinduism was “very inclusive and very open.” He asserted that no “ideological or philosophical movement that proclaims exclusivity” exists in Hinduism.

Mr. Madhav argued further that there was no difference between Hinduism and Hindutva, the Hindu nationalism of the BJP, and the RSS. However, he conceded that “when confronted with very hardline things like Wahhabi Islam, it created some kind of a reaction in some sections, possibly, but Hindutva is not about that. Hindutva is about core Hindu values.”

Mr. Madhav's reference to Wahhabism was to a Saudi-inspired austere, ultra-conservative, and supremacist interpretation of Islam.

Mr. Madhav acknowledged that Hindu-Muslim tensions would undermine Indian efforts to ensure that the country witnesses the kind of transformative economic growth that China experienced in the 1980s.

Asserting that the leadership of Indian Muslims, the world's third-largest Muslim community and its biggest Muslim minority, adhered to Wahhabism, Mr. Madhav wrote that violent elements, whether “Muslim or Hindu, do not and should not represent our respective mainstream communities.”

Mr. Madhav suggested that the hijab, a head covering worn by a large number of non-Wahhabi Muslim women, signalled belief in Wahhabism's purported purpose of pitting Muslims against non-Muslims. “A more inclusive and humanitarian Islam on the lines of the one promoted by organisations like Nahdlatul Ulama... must be the way forward for them,” Mr. Madhav wrote.

Many of Nahdlatul Ulama's women activists and followers sport a hijab while embracing the concept of Humanitarian Islam.

In the interview, Mr. Madhav suggested that his reference to the hijab was related to a dispute over the headdress after the BJP-governed state of Karnataka [banned it in schools](#) because it violated the school uniform. A court later upheld the ban.

“In India, there is no restriction for the hijab. In marketplaces, private gatherings, public moments, everywhere, those who want to wear a hijab will wear it. Only when you insist that

even in going to a school, I have to violate the school discipline because this is my religion's mandate, I call that Wahhabi influence," Mr. Madhav said.

In 2020, Mr. Madhav first met with senior Nahdlatul Ulama leaders on the sidelines of an executive committee meeting of the conservative Centrist Democratic International (CDI), the world's largest alliance of political parties, hosted in the Javan city of Jogjakarta by the Indonesian movement's political party, National Awakening Party (PKB). Mr. Madhav attended the CDI meeting as an observer.

Some European and American officials privately hope that increased engagement with India in response to the war in Ukraine and big power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific will strengthen the hand of the more moderate wing of the BJP and the RSS.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has invited Mr. Modi to attend a summit in June of the Group of 7 (G-7) in the Bavarian Alps. The G-7 groups Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Britain, and the United States.

Mr. Madhav's embrace of Humanitarian Islam and Nahdlatul Ulama's engagement hark back to notions of an Indianized civilizational sphere that encompassed South and Southeast Asia for nearly fifteen centuries before the arrival of China, Europe, and Islam in the region.

In a gesture at a time when religious and cultural sites have been at the centre of disputes and conflict in India and elsewhere, Indonesia agreed in February to [open Prambanan Temple and Borobudur Temple in Java to worship by Hindus and Buddhists](#). The sites had been mainly closed for decades for worship.

In the interview, Mr. Madhav said he wished to avoid "loaded phrases" like an Indosphere stretching across Asia's parts. However, "I would say that Eastern civilizations (and) Eastern religions all share the same civilizational value system." Mr. Madhav referenced Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, and "an Islam with an Eastern value system like Indonesian Islam."

Mr. Madhav suggested that "maybe we all can stand up and talk about these values...commit ourselves to those values including respect for pluralism, inclusivity, and commitment to the nation-state idea, (and) patriotism... If something can be worked out jointly, we would be definitely happy to do that."