Nahdlatul Ulama Centennial

Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf:
"Welcome to the second century of Nahdlatul Ulama!"

"In the view of Nahdlatul Ulama, the most appropriate and effective means to promote the wellbeing of Muslims worldwide is to foster the wellbeing of all humanity, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and to acknowledge the brotherhood of all human beings."

~ Nahdlatul Ulama Centennial Proclamation

SIDOARJO, Indonesia — On 7 February 2023 nearly two million people converged upon a small town in East Java to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world's largest Muslim organization. The crowd was so large that the motorcade of popular Indonesian president Joko Widodo ("Jokowi") ground to a halt several hundred meters from the entrance to Gelora Delta Stadium. President Jokowi and his wife waded through a joyful throng of NU supporters to join participants who had camped overnight in anticipation of the celebration.

In order to reach the event, Khofifah Indar Parawansa — the Governor of East Java and former head of Muslimat, the Nahdlatul Ulama women's movement — abandoned her own motorcade and rode on the back of a motorcycle, while other VIPs left their vehicles and walked up to ten kilometers to the event, which was thronged with celebrants approaching from every direction.

A majority of the participants in the First International Convention on Islamic Jurisprudence for a Global Civilization, which was held the previous day in nearby Surabaya, were unable to reach the event in Sidoarjo despite leaving their hotel shortly after dawn. Imam Talib Shareef, head of the Nation's Mosque in downtown Washington, DC, compared his experience of Sidoarjo to participating in the *haj*, which draws approximately 2.5 million Muslims annually to Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

As reported by CNN, the event — which was televised nationwide and massively covered by print, broadcast, and social media — lasted more than 24 hours, from early in the morning of 7 February and through the following night.

Following an hour-long *istighosah kubro* (collective prayer petitioning for divine aid in the fulfilment of Nahdlatul Ulama's civilizing mission) and *shalawat* (the recitation of prayers and peace upon the Prophet Muhammad), Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf welcomed participants and viewers worldwide "to the second century of Nahdlatul Ulama."

Twelve thousand elite members of Banser — selected from among NU's eight-million-member militia — gathered upon the playing field of Gelora Delta Stadium (above), where they joined religious leaders, senior politicians, and a crowd of Nahdlatul Ulama cadres in singing Indonesia's national anthem and the Nahdlatul Ulama March, *Hubbul Wathon Minal Iman*

(*Love of Nation is Integral to Faith*), which NU co-founder KH. Wahab Chasbullah composed nearly a century ago, during the Dutch colonial occupation of the East Indies.

"Love of Nation is Integral to Faith"

Oh, fellow citizens!
Love of nation is integral to faith
And it's not forbidden [in Islam] to defend one's country
Oh, fellow citizens! Awake and realize (your duty to God and country)
Indonesia is my nation and my homeland
My sacred inheritance and source of pride
Whoever comes to threaten you shall certainly perish beneath your thorns

In his address to Nahdlatul Ulama and the nation, President Jokowi said, "As NU enters its second century, God willing, it will grow ever more powerful: a shining example of moderate Islam, inspiring others through its vision of Islam that embodies the heights of noble character and civilization."

President Jokowi's address immediately followed a reading of the *Nahdlatul Ulama Centennial Proclamation*, in Arabic and Indonesian, by former Chairman of the NU Supreme Council KH. A. Mustofa Bisri and Yenny Wahid, the daughter of former NU Chairman and Indonesia's first democratically elected president, H.E. KH. Abdurrahman Wahid.

Analyzing the significance of the International Convention on Islamic Jurisprudence for a Global Civilization and the *Nahdlatul Ulama Centennial Proclamation*, former *Wall Street Journal* correspondent and Middle East expert Dr. James Dorsey wrote an article titled "Who are genuine Muslim moderates? Separating the wheat from the chaff." The full text of Dr. Dorsey's article may be read below.

THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

Who are genuine Muslim moderates? Separating the wheat from the chaff

James M. Dorsey | FEB 7, 2023

If you think Islamic scholars discussing the religious legitimacy of the United Nations and the nation-state will put you to sleep, think again.

A call by Nahdlatul Ulama or the Revival of Islamic Scholars, arguably the world's most moderate Muslim civil society movement, to anchor the nation-state and the United Nations in Islamic law (as opposed to a caliphate) is at the forefront of the ideological fight against extremism and jihadism as advocated by groups such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

The call, launched on Tuesday at a mass rally in the Indonesian city of Sidoarjo commemorating the Indonesian group's centennial and a gathering a day earlier of Islamic scholars from across the globe, lays down a gauntlet for the Muslim world's autocratic and authoritarian leaders.

Anchoring the United Nations and its charter in religious law would legally oblige non-democratic regimes to respect human rights.

The charter compels states to honor "fundamental human rights… the dignity and worth of the human person, (and)… the equal rights of men and women" and makes it legally binding for its Muslim signatories, according to religious law.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo seemingly endorsed the call by speaking at the rally immediately after senior Nahdlatul Ulama leaders read it in Arabic and Bahasa Indonesia at the gathering.

The call constitutes the latest move in a sustained Nahdlatul Ulama effort to spark reform of Islamic jurisprudence and inspire other faiths to take a critical look at their potentially problematic tenets as a way of countering extremism and religiously motivated violence.

"Nahdlatul Ulama believes it is essential to the well-being of Muslims to develop a new vision capable of replacing the long-established aspiration, rooted in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), of uniting Muslims throughout the world into a single universal state, or caliphate," the group said in the declaration read out at the rally.

"It is neither feasible nor desirable to re-establish a universal caliphate that would unite Muslims throughout the world in opposition to non-Muslims. As recently demonstrated by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, attempts to do so will inevitably be disastrous and contrary to the purposes of *shari'ah* (Islamic law): i.e., the protection of religion, human life, sound reasoning, family, and property," the declaration went on to say.

Yahya Cholil Staquf, the chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama's executive council, framed the group's proposition in questions about the need for jurisprudential reform that he posed at the scholars' conference.

Mr. Staquf's questions were based on an unpublished discussion paper that asserted that the view that Muslims "should have a default attitude of enmity towards non-Muslims, and that infidels… should be subject to discrimination is well established within *turats al-fiqh* (the tradition of Islamic jurisprudence)."

The attitude towards non-Muslims described in the paper is at the core of the response of the Muslim world to religious extremism and jihadism.

An open letter to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the late leader of the Islamic State, written after he declared in 2014 a caliphate with himself as caliph, signed by 126 prominent Islamic scholars, including participants in this week's convention, insists that "there is agreement (*ittifaq*) among scholars that a caliphate is an obligation upon the *Ummah* (Muslim community)."

The letter was typical of Muslim leaders, parroted by their Western counterparts, who, for more than two decades since 9/11, have insisted that Islam and Islamic jurisprudence need no reform. Instead, they assert that jihadis misrepresent and misconstrue the faith.

In doing so, autocrats drown out criticism of their brutal, repressive rule that brooks no dissent and potentially provokes violence.

Moreover, casting jihadists as deviants rather than products of problematic tenets of jurisprudence that justify violence stymies criticism of the justification of autocracy as a necessary means to combat violence and promote moderate Islam.

As a result, the Nahdlatul Ulama challenge goes to the core of a battle for the soul of Islam that involves a competition for religious soft power and leadership in the Muslim world as well as who will define what constitutes moderate Islam.

The ideological rivalry pits Nahdlatul Ulama's concept of Humanitarian Islam, which calls for religious reform and unambiguously endorses pluralism, the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights against an autocratic definition of moderate Islam that rejects religious and political reform but supports a formalistic, ceremonial form of inter-faith dialogue and the loosening of social restrictions long advocated by orthodox Islam.

Among signatories to the 2014 open letter to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi were proponents of autocratic forms of moderate Islam.

They included Egyptian Grand Mufti Shawqi Allam; Egypt's former grand mufti, Ali Goma, who religiously endorsed the killing on a Cairo square in 2013 of some 800 Muslim Brotherhood protesters by security forces; several members of Egypt's state-controlled Fatwa Council; and scholars at Al Azhar, Cairo's citadel of Islamic learning.

Also among the signatories were Abdullah Bin Bayyah, the head of the fatwa council of the United Arab Emirates, and one of its other members, popular American Muslim preacher Hamza Yusuf, men who do the Gulf state's religious bidding.

The strength of the Nahdlatul Ulama challenge was evident in the fact that some of the world's foremost opponents of the Indonesian group's reformism felt the need to be represented at this week's conference in one way or another, even if some backed out of the conference after initially suggesting that they would attend.

Messrs. Bin Bayyah and Goma chose not to attend. Mr. Allam used his video remarks to express opposition to Nahdlatul Ulama's call for replacing the caliphate with the notion of the nation-state and endorsing the United Nations.

Muhammad Al-Issa, the head of the Muslim World League, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's vehicle for propagating his autocratic version of moderate Islam, chose to ignore Nahdlatul Ulama's proposition. Mr. Al-Issa made his remarks on video after cancelling his attendance.

Nahdlatul Ulama threw down its gauntlet by asserting that Muslims need to choose between maintaining the obligation to create a caliphate or reforming Islamic jurisprudence so that it would "embrace a new vision and develop a new discourse regarding Islamic jurisprudence,

which will prevent the political weaponization of identity; curtail the spread of communal hatred; promote solidarity and respect among the diverse peoples, cultures, and nations of the world; and foster the emergence of a truly just and harmonious world order," according to the declaration.

In its unpublished paper, Nahdlatul Ulama asserted that "Muslims should acknowledge that a socio-political construct (or imperium) capable of operationalizing these normative views across the Muslim world no longer exists" and that "as a consequence of choosing to retain the established *fiqh* view and norms associated therewith… would automatically be a religious duty incumbent upon Muslims to revive the imperium. This, in turn, would necessarily entail dissolving any and all existing nation-states, under whose governance Muslims currently live."

With one-third of Indonesia's 270 million inhabitants identifying themselves as Nahdlatul Ulama and a religious authority of its own, the group is likely to formally announce its reform of relevant Islamic jurisprudence, potentially supported by various non-Indonesian scholars, mosques, and other Muslim associations, irrespective of opposition to its moves.

While the group's legal move would not be binding in a Muslim world where legal authority is decentralized, it lays down a marker that other Muslim legal authorities will ultimately be unable to ignore in their bid to be recognized as proponents of a genuinely moderate Islam.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. James M. Dorsey is an award-winning journalist and scholar and a Senior Fellow at the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute. He is the author of The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer.