



Dawn

Ongoing dialogue between Nahdlatul Ulama and Hindu nationalists attracts increasing global attention

“Indonesia has been contributing significantly to the development of discourse on Islamic jurisprudence.”

~ Dawn (Pakistan)

KARACHI, Pakistan, 2 April 2023 — Pakistan’s newspaper of record and most influential English-language daily, *Dawn*, has published an article praising Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama and its significant contribution to the development of discourse on Islamic jurisprudence.

In an article titled “[End of ideology](#),” prominent security analyst and columnist Muhammad Amir Rana noted that “Nahdlatul Ulama has been advocating for abolishing the concept of caliphate and replacing it with the idea of the nation state. It has also issued a decree or fatwa to erase the concept of *kafir* or infidel from Islamic jurisprudence and replace it with the idea of citizenship.”

“It is hard to imagine one initiating such debates in Pakistan,” the article continues. “Those who had the courage to do so faced consequences. Constitutionally, Pakistan is an Islamic state, and, according to the Council of Islamic Ideology, most of its laws are compatible with Islamic laws. However, religious parties still demand compliance with Sharia in the country. This is not an issue of their political economy but is deeply rooted in the idea of a ‘caliphate’ state. Many such parties cannot imagine a Muslim society following the model of a nation state, fully or partially.”

“It is worth mentioning,” Rana added, “that Nahdlatul Ulama has initiated a dialogue with the hard-line Hindu Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, in which Indian Muslim organisations have also been engaged. Though the process is slow, many have hoped for a dialogue between Muslim groups and the RSS.”

The Pakistani security analyst went on to suggest that his own country’s religious scholars follow Nahdlatul Ulama’s example and “initiate a dialogue with RSS to ease tensions and gain a greater understanding of the changing dogma in Hindu religion.” Rana also criticized Pakistan and its *ulama* for their failure “to produce minds that can join in the current debate in Muslim societies.”

The article in *Dawn* drew widespread domestic and international attention, including an essay published by *The Times of Israel* titled “[A battle for the soul of Islam plays out in a Bahrain courtroom](#).” In that piece, geopolitical analyst Dr. James M. Dorsey wrote:

This week, there was more at stake in a Bahrain courtroom than the fate of three free speech advocates.

At stake was a fundamental question that divides believers across the Muslim world and challenges autocratic rulers' religious legitimization: Does Islamic jurisprudence need to be reformed to ensure it is more pluralistic, inclusive, and aligned with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?....

The case was remarkable for what was said in the judicial proceedings as well as for the unmentioned backdrop that framed it on a global scale.

The case was part of pushback by state-backed supporters of an autocratic version of 'moderate' Islam that opposes reform of religious jurisprudence but favors greater social freedom grounded in civil law or decrees rather than Sharia or Islamic law.

Autocrats' definition of moderate Islam also legitimizes repression and curtailing of political rights and demands absolute obedience to the ruler.

Increasingly, proponents of the autocrats' definition, such as Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and United Arab Emirates President Mohammed bin Zayed and their religious surrogates, have been challenged by Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest and most moderate Muslim civil society movement.

With 90 million followers, tens of thousands of religious scholars, educational institutions, a five million-strong militia, and an [affiliated] political party with ministers in President Joko Widodo's Cabinet, Nahdlatul Ulama advocates what it calls Humanitarian Islam.

The concept embraces the need for reform of what the group terms "obsolete" tenets of Islamic law and pluralism. It endorses unambiguously the Universal Declaration of Human Rights....

Proponents of an autocratic version of moderate Islam have tried but failed to co-opt [Nahdlatul Ulama].

As a result, they are forced to compete with the Indonesian group for influence in some of the world's most important political and religious arenas. This includes corridors of power in world capitals, and influential faith groups such as the Vatican and powerful Hindu associations.

In a separate article, titled "[Putting Hindu nationalists on the spot](#)," Dr. Dorsey, like Mr. Rana, chose to "spotlight [the] dialogue between the RSS and Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest, most moderate Muslim civil society movement."

Dr. Dorsey also focused upon "[t]he widening dichotomy between Mr. Modi's BJP and the RSS, [which] has consequences that extend far beyond inter-communal relations in India." He noted, for example, "that a senior RSS official implicitly argued that the RSS, unlike Mr. Modi's BJP, was not looking at its dialogue with Indian Muslims for electoral gains. With elections scheduled for next year, the BJP is widely believed to see inter-communal tension and polarization as a way of winning votes.

“We are not looking for any electoral gains or any political benefit. We are not choosing any specific group of Muslims. We are reaching out to everyone... interested in a long-term solution. We all are working for a social civilisational solution to this age-old communal conflict,’ the [RSS] official said.”

Dr. Dorsey’s article goes on to observe that

Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim-majority country and democracy, last year institutionalised religion as an official G20 engagement group with a summit of religious leaders in Bali in November. A Nahdlatul Ulama think tank manages the permanent secretariat of the Religion Forum 20 or R20.

A participant in the Bali R20, the RSS has sought to forge a partnership with Nahdlatul Ulama even though the Indonesian group sees Muslim religious reform as an incentive for other faiths, including Hinduism, to take a critical look at their potentially problematic tenets.

Nahdlatul Ulama’s approach, including its R20 initiative, has allowed it to forge ties with major faith groups across the globe. These include some of the most influential Indian Hindu religious leaders.

Those relationships raise the significance of the RSS’s ties to Nahdlatul Ulama, independent of government attitudes.

Even so, the RSS’s failure to engage with Indian Muslims more proactively, acknowledge the Supreme Court ruling, and distance itself from anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence is likely to increasingly raise eyebrows about Nahdlatul Ulama’s willingness to engage.

In the ultimate analysis, the question for the RSS and powerful Hindu religious leaders is how long they can afford to seemingly endorse, at least tacitly, anti-Muslim sentiment and expect Muslims to engage rather than radicalize.

Nahdlatul Ulama sees engagement as a process that takes time to produce results. The problem is that amid the mounting anti-Muslim sentiment in the run-up to next year’s elections, Indian Muslims feel time is a luxury they don’t have.

As a result, the question for Nahdlatul Ulama is at what point does it demand from the RSS as well as Hindu religious leaders that they either fish or cut bait.

In an [official statement](#) signed by NU Chairman KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf in September of 2022, during the run-up to the R20 Summit of International Religious Leaders in Bali, the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board addressed criticism of its engagement with the RSS by stating:

Nahdlatul Ulama believes that the only way to overcome entrenched historical grievances and promote peaceful co-existence is to engage all parties and refuse to indulge in the sentiment of enmity and hatred, based upon a claim of unique communal victimhood.

Nahdlatul Ulama is aware of the potential for genocide in South Asia, not only because of contemporary geopolitical dynamics, but also due to the history of the region, including the Bangladesh genocide of 1971; the massacres that accompanied Partition in 1947; British colonial policies of divide and rule; and centuries of invasion from the northwest, accompanied by massive destruction, slaughter, and enslavement. Even the Emperor Ashoka is known for his massacre of over 100,000 inhabitants of Kalinga during the third century B.C.E., prior to his conversion to Buddhism.

Nahdlatul Ulama encourages people of good will of every faith and nation to reject the weaponization of identity and join in promoting solidarity and respect among the diverse peoples, cultures, and nations of the world — employing the principle of ‘the highest common denominator,’ founded upon the noblest aspirations of every civilization. This is the mission of the G20 Religion Forum (R20), both now and in future years.