



ASEAN Shared Civilizational Values

World's largest Muslim organization launches a movement for pluralist re-awakening in South and Southeast Asia

NU coordinates with the Government of Indonesia and ASEAN to build consensus regarding values that may serve as the foundation for an emerging global civilization

“[S]hared civilizational values can play an important role in mobilizing a vast constituency to support a more peaceful and harmonious global civilization, founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being”

*~ KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf
General Chairman, Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board*

SURABAYA, Indonesia — On 15 June, 2023, religious leaders from around Indonesia and across its faith traditions gathered in East Java for a workshop socializing Nahdlatul Ulama’s vision and strategy to consolidate South and Southeast Asia as an alternate pillar of support for a rules-based international order founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being.

Addressing participants, Nahdlatul Ulama Chairman KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf said:

The world is currently undergoing an intense competition regarding what values will form the basis of a new global civilization. This competition is embodied in social movements, some of which are religious and others purely secular and ideological. These movements are competing against each other to establish the moral and political dominance of their respective values within societies and the world at large.

At present, those who exert the greatest influence in this global competition are championing ideas and values that have originated in a secular rather than a religious context. This is clearly evidenced by political dynamics throughout the world. For example, the ideas and values associated with modern secular environmentalism are rapidly consolidating into a global political and economic movement ostensibly designed to counter the “existential threat” posed by climate change.

The concept of inclusivity provides another example. The core idea of inclusive activism is to acknowledge and empower marginalized groups, which have historically possessed little social influence. This agenda, however, has morphed to become almost limitless in scope. For example, gender inclusivity (feminism) has redefined gender itself to include sexual orientation and gender fluidity — resulting in the rise of an extraordinarily powerful LGBTQ movement across the world, which is politically and economically supported by Western governments, corporations, and the United Nations itself.

It is logical to ask, where does religion stand within these social and geopolitical dynamics? Are religions offering humanity a set of values that are capable of being widely accepted as the basis for a new civilization?

Unfortunately, to this day, religions remain embroiled in conflict. This manifests in both inter-religious and intra-religious conflicts around the world.

The lion's share of armed conflicts throughout the world today are heavily colored by religion. These conflicts are occurring while a new, global civilizational construct is coming into existence that will be based upon the values that win the competition currently underway. It is clear to me, however, that the world's major religions do not have a strategy to ensure that they will play a constructive role in the emergence of this new civilization.

As a Muslim and a man of faith, it is unacceptable to me that a new civilization may be born in which religion is marginalized. It is unacceptable that a new civilization may come into being in which religion is not granted a strategic and constructive role. I do not accept this, and I am certain that religious leaders across the world also do not accept this. Naturally, religious leaders want a space in which religious faith can be articulated and become a part of public discourse.

At present, however, religions do not have access to the major currents shaping the emergence of a new civilization. This process is extremely complex and the arena in which it is occurring is enormous, but the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board has concluded that we must engage in a systematic effort to meet this historic challenge.

The workshop in Surabaya, East Java, focused on the upcoming "ASEAN Conference on Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue," an initiative of Nahdlatul Ulama, which will co-host the event with Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of Indonesia's official agenda for its 2023 Presidency of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The socialization workshop was jointly hosted by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs' Directorate General of Islamic Community Guidance. Participants included senior delegates from Indonesia's Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Catholic and Protestant communities, in addition to Sunni, Shia, and Ahmadiyya Muslims.

"We hope that our friends throughout Indonesia — especially religious leaders — will actively participate in this process and that, together, we will achieve substantive results," said Nahdlatul Ulama Chairman KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf.

"Praise be to God, the [Indonesian] Foreign Ministry has already succeeded in introducing the agenda of the Conference on Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue as an official element of the 2023 ASEAN Summit. The movement that results from this conference will, God willing, be included in Summit's official declaration."

Mr. Staquf's [keynote address](#) was heavily covered by Indonesian print, broadcast, and social media. Indonesia's national wire service, Antara, published a story titled "[NU Awakens the Memory of the Indo-Pacific's Shared Civilizational Heritage](#)."

In his address — excerpted and edited for publication below — Mr. Staquf introduced the [Ashoka Approach](#) to a national audience, encouraging Indonesia’s diverse religious communities to actively participate in the strategy’s execution during and after the upcoming ASEAN Conference on Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue.

Ladies and gentlemen, at the ASEAN Conference on Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue, we want to introduce a discourse about our historical experiences, which constitute a shared civilizational legacy that unites the nations of the Indo-Pacific. In the past, there already were “shared civilizational values” accepted by societies across the region.

These values can legitimately be claimed to be integral to Buddhism, and are characterized by a culture of tolerance that promotes harmony and prevents conflict between groups. The history of the region reflects this, for these values were propagated through a successful campaign conducted by a great Indian Buddhist ruler called Ashoka [Emperor of the Maurya Dynasty from 268 to 232 BCE].

In *Nusantara* itself (the Malay Archipelago), a great civilization was subsequently born that lasted an age, and was founded upon the values of tolerance and harmony spread by Ashoka. This was the civilization of the Kingdom of Srivijaya, which endured for over seven hundred years, from the seventh until the fourteenth centuries.

The civilization of Srivijaya was extraordinary: it united almost the entire archipelago into a single international network of trade, while maintaining a policy of tolerance towards the political traditions of the archipelago’s various islands. “Inland politics,” was left independent, but the maritime network consolidated by Srivijaya constituted a major economic and political power that lasted for centuries.

Srivijaya built and maintained naval forces that dominated the archipelago. The heart of Srivijaya lay at Palembang on the banks of the Musi River in southern Sumatra, which was an extremely strategic location at the time. Attack via land was virtually impossible, and an assailant would not be able to reach the center of the Kingdom without detailed prior knowledge of the river. At this time the Musi River was broad and deep, capable of hosting a large navy and trading vessels that were key to Srivijaya’s maritime power.

Srivijaya was founded upon values promoted by the Emperor Ashoka. This incredible civilization endured for seven centuries before collapsing, in large part due to the very cause of its success: its reliance upon maritime power. Sedimentation of the Musi River made it more shallow and prevented large ships from being able to navigate the river. As the technology necessary to dredge the river was not available at this time, Srivijaya’s maritime strength began to wane, and it ultimately failed to maintain the regional consolidation it had achieved.

Nevertheless, the values of Srivijayan civilization endured. The reason these values persisted was the rise of the Empire of Majapahit [1293 – 1527 CE] — which was shaped by religious conflict between Hindus and Buddhists. This interreligious conflict was ultimately resolved by returning to the fundamental values of Srivijayan civilization, which were powerfully expressed in Indonesia’s national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (“Oneness Amid Diversity”).

This heritage of harmony and tolerance originated in the values propagated by the Emperor Ashoka, then lasted for seven centuries embodied within the civilization of Srivijaya, before subsequently being officially proclaimed by [the 14th Century Majapahit court poet] Mpu Tantular with the phrase *bhinneka tunggal ika*.

“Bhinneka tunggal ika, tan hana dharma mangrwa.” (“The diverse forms of the universe are indeed different, yet simultaneously One, for Truth is indivisible”).

This motto expresses the following attitude, which has long been characteristic of the Ashoka-sphere: “There’s no need to problematize differences. If something is true, then of course its essence is identical to that of anything that embodies the same essential truth. Assuming, of course, that both are actually true. If not, that means one or both have not yet arrived at the Truth.” [Audience laughs].

This attitude is fascinating, for it demonstrates a civilizational legacy of tolerance and harmony based upon the values that Ashoka fostered, and which lasted for seven centuries within Srivijaya.

Politically, *bhinneka tunggal ika* was a declaration that Majapahit was not an empire founded upon religious exclusivism. [Applause].

This is relatively unique in world history. In other regions, the political consolidation of empires has generally entailed the promotion of a single religious identity. With its articulation of *bhinneka tunggal ika*, however, Majapahit refused to adopt or enforce a single religious identity, instead taking the position that — if religions are based upon ultimate Truth — then their fundamental messages are essentially the same.

That’s why in Majapahit it was considered normal for the monarch to be Hindu, and his Chief Minister Buddhist, or vice versa. Later, the daughters of these monarchs were married to Islamic preachers. They simply brushed religious differences aside.

Majapahit allowed people to convert to Islam, and allowed Islam to develop everywhere unhindered. This reality was due to the worldview expressed by the phrase *bhinneka tunggal ika tan hana dharma mangrwa*. This is amazing.

Ladies and gentlemen, the civilizational values inherited from Ashoka are extremely extensive, as they spread from India throughout *Nusantara* (the Malay Archipelago) and mainland Southeast Asia.

The values of this shared inheritance can be consolidated into a set of “shared civilizational values.” I believe that these shared civilizational values can play an important role in mobilizing a vast constituency to support a more peaceful and harmonious global civilization, founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being.

God willing, this will become an active endeavor for all of us, and Nahdlatul Ulama would like to invite everyone to take part.

Praise be to God, the [Indonesian] Foreign Ministry has already succeeded in introducing the agenda of the Conference on Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue as an official element of the 2023 ASEAN Summit. The movement that results from this conference will, God willing, be included in Summit's official declaration.

We hope that our friends throughout Indonesia — especially religious leaders — will actively participate in this process and that, together, we will achieve substantive results.

Because in fact we already possess the necessary ingredients for success. Those who do not want to live in harmony with others, do not want to tolerate differences, are the very same people who refuse to acknowledge the fact that this shared [Ashokan] heritage is extraordinarily valuable, and can deeply touch upon the lives of our citizens.

[Paraphrase of the Preamble to the 1945 Indonesian Constitution:] For in fact independence is the right of all nations and, therefore, colonialism must be abolished, for it is not in accordance with the principles of humanity and justice. We aspire to participate in founding a world order based upon freedom, social justice, and enduring peace.

We will not cease striving until we have accomplished this objective: a world founded upon freedom, social justice, and enduring peace, for we believe in the principles of *Pancasila*, including faith in the Divinity Who is the Great “One,” and a just and civilized humanity.

If you have forgotten, please ask your elders, and they will tell you that the principles of *Pancasila* were inspired by shared religious and civilizational values. Indonesia's founding fathers were god-fearing men, and each contributed that which was most noble from their respective religions.

Once more I repeat: this is our precious heritage, which we are reviving and offering to the world so that — God willing — it may prove beneficial to all humanity.

[Read the full text of Mr. Staquf's address.](#)