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Politics, Plurality and Inter-Group Relations in Indonesia

Islam Nusantara & Its Critics: The Rise of NU's Young Clerics

By Alexander R Arifianto

Synopsis

Two years after it was first introduced, the Islam Nusantara theology of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Indonesian Islamic organisation, continues to face opposition from more conservative factions. This is casting a shadow over NU's effort to promote the middle ground and toleration in Indonesia.

Commentary

TWO YEARS after the idea of Islam Nusantara was first introduced as a reinterpretation of the Nahdlatul Ulama's basic theological tenets, it continues to face opposition from conservative factions. Backing the resistance are theological critiques from younger clerics who seek to eradicate liberal influences from the organisation, the largest in Indonesia.

The rift between the factions of NU current chairman Said Aqil Siradj and former general chairman Hasyim Muzadi can be seen in the East Java strongholds of NU. The opposition by NU Garis Lurus (NU True Path), consisting of influential young clerics, constitutes a serious challenge to NU's theological frame that had been instituted by former President Abdurrahman Wahid and his followers over three decades. These popular young clerics argue that Islam Nusantara is an invention of "liberal" thinkers while there is only one universal Islam for all Muslims that does not require "localised" interpretations such as Islam Nusantara.

Reinterpretation of NU theology

Introduced during NU's national congress in Jombang, East Java two years ago, Chairman Said Aqil Siradj, said Islam Nusantara is the reinterpretation of NU's basic theological tenets, which combines classical Islamic theology (*aqidah*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and localised practices, such as offering prayers to the deceased (*tahlilan*).

It emphasises the understanding that Indonesian Muslims do not necessarily have to forgo their national and local identities. Instead, these values can coexist with their Islamic identities and together, they can lead one to be a devout Muslim and an Indonesian nationalist at the same time.

This reinvention of NU theology has two purposes. Firstly, it is to respond to radical interpretation of Islam such as those expressed by the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS), which has gained attraction among some young Muslims worldwide, including those living in Indonesia. Secondly, it is to distinguish NU theology from more conservative organisations such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and other similar groups. NU leaders believe these groups are actively seeking new supporters from the ranks of NU followers, mainly those under 30.

Critiques of Islam Nusantara Idea

NU has held multiple seminars and conferences promoting Islam Nusantara for Indonesian as well as international audiences. It held two international conferences of Islamic scholars in November 2015 and May 2016. Its Research and Human Resources Development Institute (Lakpesdam), and affiliated NU faculty at the State Islamic Universities (UIN) system, have regularly sponsored workshops on Islam Nusantara in numerous localities throughout Indonesia.

However, despite these numerous activities, opposition against Islam Nusantara remains strong, not just from outside of the organisation, but also from numerous clerics and activists among NU's followers. Some of this opposition can be attributed to factional rivalries within NU, especially between current chairman Said Aqil and the previous chairman Hasyim Muzadi.

The previous chairman unsuccessfully challenged Said Aqil's re-election bid as NU chairman during the 2015 muktamar. The failed attempt created a feud between the two factions that has not been fully resolved to this day.

The rift can be seen clearly in East Java province, which historically is one of NU's most important strongholds. As Hasyim Muzadi was the head of the organisation's East Java branch before he was elected NU chairman in 2000, he commands significant following from senior clerics (*kya*) and activists from the province. These clerics in turn order their boarding schools (*pesantren*) and students (*santri*) to oppose Islam Nusantara to reject Said Aqil's legitimacy as NU chairman.

Influential NU pesantrens such as Lirboyo in Jombang district and Sidogiri in Pasuruan district have announced their rejection of Islam Nusantara, causing a blow to Said Aqil's effort to promote the theology among NU followers living in East Java.

Rise of NU Garis Lurus

Critiques of the idea of Islam Nusantara also come from the theological ground. A group of young NU kyai have formed a new organisation called the 'True Path NU' (*NU Garis Lurus*) in 2015. Kyai Muhammad Idrus Ramli, the organisation's founder and chairman, states that it wishes to eradicate 'liberal' theological influence from the NU, as he argues that they have corrupted the organisation's original aim as an Islamic organisation adhering to Sunni principles (*Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah*).

These 'liberal' influences are not just limited to the ideas articulated by progressive NU activists such as Ulil Abshar Abdalla, but also those articulated by the late Abdurrahman Wahid, NU's long-time chairman (1984-1999) and Indonesia's fourth president (1999-2001). Wahid successfully led NU to embrace values such as democracy and religious tolerance; NU Garis Lurus serves as the most serious challenge towards NU's theological frame that Wahid and his successors have instituted within the organisation over the past three decades.

A number of young NU clerics with significant popular following have affiliated themselves with NU Garis Lurus. This includes Buya Yahya, a charismatic preacher who is widely considered to be a future leader of the NU. He has become a strong critic of Islam Nusantara, arguing that it is invented by 'liberal' thinkers such as Ulil Abshar Abdalla and Azyumardi Azra. Buya Yahya believes that there is only one universal Islam for all Muslims and thus, there is no need for 'localised' Islamic interpretations, whether they are Islam Nusantara, Middle Eastern Islam, or others.

NU Garis Lurus activists are also known for their close alliance with activists from conservative Islamist groups, including Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI), bypassing the theological divide that sharply distinguishes NU from these groups. Its activists participated in the 4 November and 2 December 2016 rallies in Jakarta, calling for the trial of the city's governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama for allegedly committing a blasphemous act against Islam.

NU Garis Lurus Not To Be Ignored

The NU leadership tends to dismiss NU Garis Lurus as a fringe group that does not represent the organisation and does not attract many followers. However, it would be a mistake for them to continue dismissing it, given its prominent role during the Jakarta rallies and given that propagation (*dakwah*) seminars organised by its affiliated ulama have attracted tens of thousands followers throughout Indonesia.

NU already faces criticisms for losing its moral authority in the aftermath of the 4 November and 2 December rallies. It should pay more attention to the challenge from NU Garis Lurus and its activists, as the group could one day change its outlook and worldview. If this happens, NU would be a completely different organisation from the one that is widely-known today.

Alexander R Arifianto PhD is a Research Fellow with the Indonesia Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. This is part of a series.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg