

*RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: [RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg) for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.*

---

## **Islam Nusantara: NU's Bid to Promote "Moderate Indonesian Islam"**

*By Alexander R. Arifianto*

### **Synopsis**

*Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation, has sponsored an international conference as part of its strategy to promote "Islam Nusantara" worldwide. However, the concept remains deeply contested, even within the NU itself.*

### **Commentary**

INDONESIA'S LARGEST Muslim organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has launched a drive to promote what it calls "Islam Nusantara" – or Islam from Indonesia – with an international conference in Jakarta attended by delegates from over 40 countries, including Islamic scholars (ulama) from the Middle East, Europe and the United States. A number of prominent ulama and intellectuals spoke during the conference on 9-10 May 2016, including Ahmad Muhammad Ahmad El-Tayeb, the Grand Mufti of the al-Azhar Mosque in Egypt, Muhammad Yunus, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and founder of the Grameen Bank, and Hamza Yusuf, co-founder of Zaytuna College, the first Muslim liberal arts college in the United States.

The conference also received support from Indonesian President Joko Widodo (Jokowi). This can be seen from the fact that the meeting was opened by Vice President Jusuf Kalla, with speeches delivered by a number of high level officials from his administration, including Luhut Panjaitan, Coordinating Minister for Political and Security Affairs; Commissioner General of Police Tito Karnavian, Head of the Indonesian National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT); and Sutiyoso, Head of the Indonesian National Intelligence Agency (BIN).

### **Islam Nusantara as Defined by NU**

The conference serves as a venue for NU to promote Islam Nusantara – its brand of moderate Islamic thought – to the conference participants. NU defines Islam Nusantara as the application of Islamic teachings in the Indonesian socio-cultural context. It combines classical Islamic theology (*aqidah*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) with Sufism and localised practices and rituals originated from Java – where the majority of NU’s claimed 60 million followers live.

Islam Nusantara’s proponents, including Said Aqil Siradj, NU general chairman, considers it as an antidote against radicalism and extremism, especially those expressed by terrorist organisations such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS). They also believe these organisations derived their ideas from an ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam originating in the Middle East, which seeks to eradicate other Islamic interpretations, including those advocated by NU.

Said Aqil believes that such literalist interpretation is not a reflection of the Islamic faith. Instead, it is grounded in Middle Eastern culture which is very different from those that most Indonesian Muslims grow up in. As an alternative to the nihilistic vision proposed by extremist groups, he argues that Islam Nusantara can promote tolerance and peace in Muslim societies currently suffering from violent conflict, such as Iraq, Libya, and Syria. It also can show how Islamic values can be made compatible with secularist values, such as democracy and nationalism.

### **Exporting Islam Nusantara?**

By sponsoring this international conference, NU seeks to promote Islam Nusantara to other countries. This can be seen from the conference’s concluding declaration. While it does not explicitly call for the ‘exportation’ of Islam Nusantara beyond Indonesia, the declaration considers it as “an idea that needs to be learned and practised by other Muslims throughout the world”. It also clarifies that Islam Nusantara is not a new school of Islamic thought (*madhab*) within Islam and is not in conflict with the fundamental tenets of Islamic law (*shari’a*).

A number of Islamic scholars who attended the conference have declared their intention to establish NU affiliates (*jamiyah*) within their own countries, to promote moderate Islamic principles similar to Islam Nusantara. Abdul Nasheer Jabri, a Lebanese Islamic scholar, states that “Moderate Islamic paradigms like those promoted by the NU need to be supported, because this is the real essence of Islam propagated by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)”.

NU plans to work with the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote ‘cultural diplomacy’ in the Middle East in order to explore and tackle the root causes of radicalism and extremism in the region.

### **Potential Obstacles**

However, such efforts face a number of serious obstacles. Boston University’s political scientist Jeremy Menchik argues that as Islam Nusantara is grounded in the Indonesian (primarily Javanese) interpretation of Islam, the localised practices and institutions that help to sustain it cannot be replicated beyond Indonesia’s borders.

The concept is running into fierce opposition from other Islamic organisations which argue that Islam Nusantara is an innovation (*bid'ah*) that should be prohibited from Islam.

For instance, Irfan Awwas, head of the Indonesian Mujahideen Council (MMI), believes that “Islam Nusantara is not Islam, because it believes [its teachings] is different to Islam in the Arab world. Thus, it is damaging the real essence of Islam”.

Such views are not just expressed by scholars outside of NU, but also by some NU ulama. For instance, Buya Yahya, a conservative scholar with a popular following within the NU, has argued that Islam Nusantara is “a form of ‘liberal Islam’ that seeks to replace the fundamental Islamic teachings prescribed by the *Qur'an*, the *hadith*, and the ulama consensus (*ijma*). It is promoted by liberal thinkers such as Said Aqil Siradj and Uilil Abshar Abdalla. Thus, we should not use this label to describe Islam as it is practised in Indonesia”.

Lastly, some NU senior leaders oppose Islam Nusantara due to factional rivalries that tend to afflict the organisation. Hasyim Muzadi, Said Aqil’s predecessor as NU general chairman, has accused him of promoting the concept in order to seek support from President Jokowi for his re-election bid as NU general chairman in last year’s national congress (*muktamar*). Accordingly, Muzadi and his supporters have boycotted NU events designed to promote Islam Nusantara, including this summit.

By hosting this international conference, NU shows its commitment to promote Islam Nusantara to other Muslim societies. However, as it is considered to be a controversial idea – even “un-Islamic” by some of its opponents, including those within the organisation - NU’s campaign to promote it as an alternative to Islamic extremism will face strong hurdles ahead.

---

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

---