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NU's 2021 National Congress: Contestation Within

By Alexander R. Arifianto

SYNOPSIS

Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation, will hold its national congress tentatively in December 2021. Several leaders representing different theological viewpoints within the organisation have announced their candidacies to be NU's next chairman.

COMMENTARY

NAHDLATUL ULAMA (NU) — Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation with a claimed following of some 90 million — has recently announced that its long-postponed *muktamar* (national congress) [will be held](#) tentatively [in December 2021 or January 2022](#) in Lampung, Sumatra.

The *muktamar* — the organisation's most important meeting traditionally held once every five years — [had to be postponed](#) due to the COVID-19 pandemic that has impacted Indonesia this past year. The main agenda of the national congress is to elect a new chairman who will lead the organisation for the next five years. Said Aqil Siradj, the current chairman, has completed two consecutive terms as leader of the largest Islamic organisation in the world.

Said Aqil and Islam Nusantara

Said Aqil was a close associate of the late Abdurrahman Wahid — NU's long-serving chairman who initiated reforms [to promote the compatibility](#) between Islamic teachings and norms like democracy and religious tolerance within the organisation.

His most significant contribution as NU chairman was to codify the thoughts of Abdurrahman, better known as Gus Dur, and other leading *ulama* of the organisation

into an Indonesian interpretation of Islamic practice called *Islam Nusantara*. This term literally means [“Archipelagic Islam” but effectively refers to Indonesian Islam as perceived and contextualised by Said Aqil and his NU faction.](#)

Said Aqil controversially implemented *Islam Nusantara* as the organisation’s official adaptation of Islamic doctrine to the Indonesian context, taking into account local culture and customs. This move drew stiff opposition from some conservative [NU clerics](#) who considered it as *bid’ah* or a religious heresy.

Despite the heavy criticism, Said Aqil managed to push through *Islam Nusantara* by aligning NU closely with President Joko (‘Jokowi’) Widodo, an alliance that was credited for the latter’s [re-election victory](#) in 2019. This alliance also paid off handsomely for NU leaders.

[Ma’ruf Amin](#), formerly NU supreme leader, was co-opted as Jokowi’s running mate, eventually getting elected as Indonesia’s vice president. Another NU leader, [Yaquut Cholil Qoumas](#), who was the chairman of the youth wing, Ansor, is the current religious affairs minister.

Said Aqil himself was appointed [president of the board of commissioners](#) of Indonesia’s state-owned railway company, which invited criticism from rank-and-file NU activists that the appointment might create a [potential conflict of interest](#) with the organisation’s religious mission.

Potential Aspirants

Controversially as well, Said Aqil has announced his intention to run for a third term as NU chairman. He argued that by-laws of the organisation [did not limit](#) his chairmanship to two consecutive five-year terms. However, some NU clerics have argued that it is better for him [to step aside](#) and pave the way for a younger *ulama* with fresh ideas and perspectives to lead NU.

On 11 October 2021, Yahya Cholil Staquf, NU’s secretary general, [formally declared](#) his intention to contest the NU chairmanship. As the number two person in the leadership board, Yahya is known informally as NU’s “foreign minister” due to his role as the chief promoter of *Islam Nusantara* [in the international arena](#). He is also Yaquut’s elder brother.

Both Yahya and Said Aqil come from NU’s self-styled [progressive faction](#) with not much ideological or political differences between them. However, Yahya has declared in a speech that he wished to bring NU back to becoming a [politically neutral organisation](#) should he be elected as chairman.

However, several conservative NU clerics have raised objections to Yahya’s candidacy, based on his past decisions. Specifically, they objected to [his 2018 visit to Israel](#), in which he met with then prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. While Yahya stated that he affirmed his support for Palestine’s full sovereignty during his meeting with Netanyahu, his NU critics cited the visit as evidence of Yahya’s [‘liberal’ views](#).

Potential Challengers

Several clerics from NU's conservative faction have expressed an interest to seek the NU chairmanship as well. Among them are [Ahmad Bahauddin Nursalim](#) (popularly known as Gus Baha) and [Abdul Somad](#), a traditionalist preacher with a strong following in social media.

Baha was a student of the late Maimun Zubair, a well-respected senior NU cleric who was a long-time supreme leader of the United Development Party (PPP). His tutelage under Zubair gave Baha a strong genealogical linkage that strengthens support for Baha's candidacy among NU's conservative faction.

Abdul Somad is a popular and charismatic internet preacher with approximately [six million followers](#) on Instagram. He has recently been in the news for a controversial lecture that upset some non-Muslims over his public use of the word *kafir* (infidels).

The non-Muslim criticism, however, has had the effect of giving Abdul Somad popular legitimacy among NU's conservative members, many of whom have banded together in a network called ['Straight Path NU' \(NU Garis Lurus or NUGL\)](#).

This group believes that the organisation has strayed from the path of 'true Islam' under the leadership of 'liberal' clerics such as Gus Dur and Said Aqil. [NUGL calls](#) for NU to return to the teachings of its founder Hasyim Asj'ari and to turn away from the policies advocated by its current leaders who they see as supporting Western-inspired norms such as democracy and pluralism.

Back to Non-Partisanship?

Despite challenges from the conservative clerics, the next NU chairman is likely to come from the organisation's progressive faction. This group controls both the organisation's leadership board (*Tanfidzyah*) and religious advisory board (*Syuriah*) — which hold authority over NU's by-laws and the congress' procedural rules.

They will surely utilise these rules to prevent the emergence of a strong conservative contender for the organisation's chairmanship.

Having said this, the new chairman — whoever he may be — should pay heed to the [concerns expressed](#) by some NU rank-and-file activists regarding NU's alignment with the Jokowi administration.

It should also use its upcoming muktamar as a time to reaffirm its commitment as a politically neutral civil society organisation that holds to account any political leader who is found to have violated democratic principles and institutions.

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