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The 2015 NU *Muktamar*: Further Conservative Turn in Indonesian Islam?

By Alexander R Arifianto and Adri Wanto

Synopsis

One key issue contested during the recent Nahdlatul Ulama congress is the debate over Islam Nusantara. However, the idea was drowned by a tussle for leadership.

Commentary

ON 5 AUGUST 2015, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation, concluded its five-yearly National Congress (*muktamar*) in controversy over theology and leadership succession. With a membership of approximately 40 million Indonesian Muslims, the NU *muktamar* is closely watched by observers for indicators of the direction of Islam in Indonesia.

Islam Nusantara, the application of Islamic teachings in the Indonesian socio-cultural context, was the theme for the recent 33th congress in Jombang, East Java. But the notion of practising Islam within the Indonesian cultural context proved difficult to be fully accepted, even though the idea is not entirely new to NU. The concept of Islam Nusantara is based on Ash'arite theology (*Tawhid*), Ghazalian Sufism (*Tasawwuf*), and the Shafi'i school of law (*Shari'ah and fiqh*). These three elements shape and influence, to differing degrees, Muslim behaviour in Indonesia.

Localisation of Islamic teachings?

The understanding of shari'ah on the part of NU's ulama (religious scholars) is fundamentally different from the proponents of formal shari'ah in Indonesia. NU's ulama believe that it is impossible to control the esoteric or deeper aspects of shari'ah. They believe that Shari'ah has its spiritual dimension namely, *Tasawwuf* (such as Sufism), as a central notion in moral education, and *Tauhid* (theology especially with regards to the essence of Allah).

Shari'ah provides the Muslims with guidelines on how to live and do good deeds (*a'mal*). As the good deeds alone are empty if the motivation is impure, therefore Tauhid establishes the basic guidance of faith and Tasawwuf is needed to instill moral and ethical values in believers. NU ulama also believe that shari'ah is flexible and can be applied to every time and place.

The late *Kyai Haji* (KH) Abdurrahman Wahid, NU's former general chairman (1984-1999) who became Indonesian president (1999-2001), conceptualised the localisation of Islamic teachings. He

argued that the cultural assimilation between Islamic teachings and local culture was justified in the eyes of Islam. Prophet Muhammad adopted many *'Urf* or *A'dah* (local culture) that existed in the pre-Islamic era so long as they were not in conflict with Islamic precepts.

Proponents within NU proposed the concept of Islam Nusantara as an effort to combat radicalism and terrorism and to ward off any ideas that threaten Islam as a religion of peace and moderation in Indonesia. However, the idea came under serious opposition during the congress from a significant number of NU ulama. For instance, KH Misbahussalam, a senior ulama, argued that Islam Nusantara as a concept accommodates "Shi'a, Liberal Islam, and other ideologies that contradict the basic tenets of Islam".

While there were lively exchanges between supporters and opponents of the idea of Islam Nusantara during the muktamar, it ended with no firm consensus whether NU should endorse it as its guiding thought on how the practice of Islam should be adapted to the Indonesian context.

Leadership politics in NU

Like previous NU muktamar, leadership succession in this year's congress was very contentious. Two senior leadership positions were contested: that of general chairman, who leads the management of NU, and that of the supreme leader (*rais aam*), who is the final authority on theological matters within the organisation.

Current general chairman Said Aqil Siradj was challenged in his re-election bid by Salahudin Wahid, younger brother of the late Abdurrahman Wahid. At the same time, the position of supreme leader saw a contest between the acting rais aam Mustofa Bisri and Hasyim Muzadi, the former NU general chairman (1999-2010).

The tussle for the two leadership positions was very divisive, with both sides using negative campaigning to portray their opponents to be in conflict with NU's traditionalist theology. To end the divide, Mustofa decided to withdraw from the rais aam race, leaving Hasyim without any competitor.

Controversially however, Said Aqil's camp decided to hold the rais aam election not through direct election by congress participants, but instead by the consensus of 11 of the most senior NU ulama. In this way, the senior ulama decided to select another NU religious scholar Ma'ruf Amin to be the new rais aam. He is also a deputy chairman of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) and was the author of a number of literalist and exclusivist legal opinion (*fatwa*) issued by MUI. Some fatwa declared liberal, secularist, and pluralist tendencies within Islam to be unlawful (*haram*), apart from a fatwa reaffirming the Ahmadi community as a prohibited deviant sect throughout Indonesia.

Ma'ruf's election as the new rais aam appears to be the result of a compromise between Said Aqil's faction and the conservative NU religious leaders to secure his re-election as NU chairman. This can be seen from the fact that the new NU ulama advisory board (*syuri'ah*) formed at the muktamar's conclusion was dominated by figures from NU's conservative wing.

They included Maimun Zubair, chairman of the *syu'ra* (advisory) board of the United Development Party (PPP). Zubair is also a patron of the "True Path NU" movement (*NU Garis Lurus*), a purist faction within the organisation that adheres to a stricter interpretation of Islam. He has issued condemnations against minorities within the Muslim community, most notably the Shi'a, in contrast to Said Aqil, who had argued that while it has a different interpretation of Islam, Shiism is not a heretical sect.

Concluding Observations

We make the following observations of this year's NU congress. Firstly, the exclusion of Said Aqil's opponents from the muktamar has cast doubts on his democratic credentials. Secondly, Said Aqil's decision to ally with conservative NU religious leaders to secure his re-election also means that the organisation might take a further conservative turn.

The election of Ma'ruf Amin as rais aam and the inclusion of renowned conservative figures such as

Maimun Zubair within the new syuri'ah board also mean that the organisation might turn a blind eye to future cases of religious assertiveness against the Ahmadi and Shiite followers.

Finally, Mustofa Bisri's withdrawal from the rais aam election leaves uncertain the future of Islam Nusantara as a major idea within the NU, as he was its key proponent. Conservative ulama in the NU syuri'ah board might also not be as keen now to view it as a new concept to combat the threat of Islamist extremism in Indonesia.

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