

## Raymond J. de Souza: New G20 Religion Forum brings hope for peace and understanding

*The 'R20' may achieve something of what the global political summits were originally intended to do*

[Father Raymond J. de Souza](#) | December 4, 2022



A G20-related "Religion Forum" was launched in November by Indonesian President Joko Widodo, who hosted this year's summit. PHOTO BY GETTY IMAGES

The great human drama of the World Cup — Belgium fails to advance after a nil-nil thriller! — has brought wide attention to the Muslim character of host Qatar, on matters as weighty as human rights and as trivial as beer sales. It is an example of how the relatively small Muslim

populations of the Arabian Peninsula have an outsize impact on the global understanding of Islam.

Yet the biggest recent news in the Islamic world took place earlier in November, in Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world. While Arabia remains central to Islamic history and identity, the majority of the world's Muslims are Asian. The four largest Muslim populations in the world are in Indonesia, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

Hosting the G20 this year, Indonesian President Joko Widodo decided to lift up his own country's experience as an Islamic democracy. Noting that in 2023 the G20 will be in India, home to the world's largest Hindu population, and in 2024 in Brazil, the world's largest Catholic population, Widodo launched the "Religion Forum," called colloquially the "R20." The R20 will be convoked for a second time in New Delhi next year.

While the R20 brought together religious leaders of all sorts, shapes and sizes — Pope Francis sent a written message to the gathering — the key and encouraging developments were in regard to Islam. Widodo gave the leadership of this first R20 to Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), an Indonesian Muslim group with some 110 million members.

NU is the world's largest Muslim organization and it promotes an Islam that is both open and tolerant of pluralism. NU's general chairman, Yahya Cholil Staquf, invited the secretary general of the Muslim World League (MWL), Sheikh Mohammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa, to co-chair the R20 with him.

That is immensely significant. The MWL is based in Saudi Arabia and has long been associated with the Wahhabi vision of Islam promoted for decades by the House of Saud, both home and abroad. Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince, has moved away from Wahhabism and cut funding for extremism overseas. That has been reflected in major shifts at the MWL, which has moved under Mohammad Al-Issa toward religious tolerance and co-operation between faiths. The NU invitation to MWL was in recognition by the former of "recent dramatic changes in policy" by the latter.

The NU has size and the MWL has influence, and fruitful co-operation between the two is of potentially enormous impact in shaping global Islam. It might be strange to consider the R20 — a meeting of many religious traditions — in light of intra-Islamic co-operation, but interfaith gatherings are quite routine the world over. For the NU to invite the MWL to joint leadership in Bali was a truly new development.

In 2019, Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar — the influential Muslim centre of scholarship in Egypt — signed the "Abu Dhabi Declaration" on human fraternity, which received international attention. The NU-MWL co-operation may well have more impact.

Like the G20, the R20 issued a final communiqué. It committed the participants to "prevent the political weaponization of identity," "curtail the spread of communal hatred," and "promote solidarity and respect among the diverse peoples, cultures, and nations of the world."

## *Final communiqué committed participants to promote solidarity and respect*

That's an acknowledgment that religion can be — and has been — a source or justification for conflict. In recent decades, Islam has been wrestling with just that. In bringing the NU tradition to international attention, the R20 offered new resources for the civilization-shaping project of Islamic reform. In bringing the NU and MWL into joint leadership of the R20, practical points of contact were established and an alternative Islamic experience was offered from Asia to Arabia.

The R20's path from Bali to Delhi is critical. The Hindu-nationalist government of India has exacerbated tensions with the large Muslim minority in India, some 200 million souls. The status of Muslims and other religious minorities in India will be a major topic of the R20 in 2023, and the NU leadership was clear about the dark side of Hindu nationalism in India.

Given that G20 leaders will be reluctant to criticize India next year, it may be that the R20 offers the better forum to bring attention to the rough edges of Hindu identity politics in India. Preparatory encounters between an NU/MWL delegation and assertive Hindu leaders in India would be an auspicious step forward.

The G20 has become something of a bloated movable feast, with everyone and his dog showing up at the margins. The international conferencing class hardly needs another set of delegates to join the G20 jamboree. Yet the R20 might be an exception to that rule, achieving something of what the summits were intended to do.

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