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The executive board of Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation, speaking to media about the upcoming G20 Religion forum (R20). [NU Online](#)

The G20's first religious summit includes India's militant Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh – it's a bold move for global peace

by Hadza Min Fadhli Robby | Oktober 31, 2022

Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population, will hold the Group of 20's first-ever Religious Forum Summit ahead of the upcoming G20 conference in Bali.

Being held on November 2 to 3, the "R20" forum has been organised by the country's largest Muslim organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU).

The R20 aims to encourage discussions among global religious leaders to find shared solutions for issues of religious extremism, by promoting the value of human equality. The event is an opportunity to assert the role of religion as a source of global solutions for global economic and political problems.

The event will bring together more than 400 participants, including 160 inter-religious figures from the world's 20 largest economies.

Religious organisations invited to attend include the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, the World Evangelical Alliance, the World Muslim League – and, surprisingly, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, an Indian militant right-wing Hindu nationalist paramilitary volunteer organisation.

According to NU, Rashtriya has confirmed its attendance.

As an international relations scholar who focuses on Indian politics, I consider the NU's decision to invite Rashtriya is a bold move, given Rashtriya's notorious role in violent conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in India.

Despite Rashtriya's controversies, I would argue that NU can still conduct a productive discussions between global religious leaders in the forum, as long as the presence of Rashtriya is also diplomatically managed.

How engaging Rashtriya can drive religious harmony

Rashtriya opposes the agenda of “appeasing minorities, particularly Muslims” in India. Together with India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, it has pushed for “Akhand Bharat”, a geopolitical vision that discriminates Muslim identities and tramples the historical narratives of Indian Muslims.

Due to its background, many are sceptical about Rashtriya's presence at the R20 event.

However, taking a more optimistic perspective, we can see that involving Rashtriya can kickstart a global movement of interfaith harmony driven by religious communities.

But, there are several steps that NU needs to do with Rashtriya to ensure the forum's goals are met.

First, NU should be fully aware that Rashtriya is still facing a huge challenge of moderating its religious and political thoughts. It is also still trying to contain extremist elements within its organisation.

So, NU should bring up topics on religious moderation between Rashtriya and Hindu communities at large, before any further talks between Rashtriya and Muslim communities take place.

Indonesia can share its success story in maintaining its democracy and inter-religious harmony as a result of commitments by Muslim communities and organisations to practice and spread the moderate version of Islam.

This first step is expected to be not really challenging as Rashtriya is already showing signs that it is open to change and moderating its political position.

Despite its endorsement of a series of “Islamophobic” policies, Rashtriya has recently intensified its engagement with Indian Muslim communities.

Second, NU should engage with like-minded groups who are also promoting the ideas of moderate Islam, such as three Delhi-based organisations – All India Imam Organization, the Center for Peace and Spirituality, and All India Ulama & Mashaikh Board – as well as Kerala-based Markazu Saqafathi Sunniya, which is recognized by Al-Azhar University.

NU should understand that the profiles of Muslim organisations are diverse in its spiritual authority, religious understanding and political positions. Thus, NU should be considerate in building engagements and alliances with Indian Muslim communities.

NU should not only focus on its engagement with Indian Muslim clerics, but also Muslim intellectuals who are known for their contribution to Indian Muslim community. These figures include former Minister of State of External Affairs of India, Salman Khurshid; visiting fellow at Observer Research Foundation, Rasheed Kidwai; and secretary of Forum for the Promotion of Moderate Thought in Islam, A. Faizur Rahman.

At the R20 event, NU should emphasise that all religious communities must work together to tackle and fight against religious-based hatred.

Efforts to sustain peace and build trust among conflicting communities should only be continued on the basis of eliminating the existing discrimination against not only Indian Muslim communities, but also other minority communities at large.

By implementing these approaches in the R20 forum, it is possible that NU – together with various religious organisations and Rashtriya – could inspire meaningful changes that would contribute to building more cohesive societies, especially in conflict-ridden zones.

The challenges ahead for India – the next G20 host

As the world’s fifth largest economy and one of the biggest Muslim-populated countries, India needs to find a new way of thinking that could help mitigate the rising potential of conflicts between Muslims and Hindus.

NU, as the organiser of the G20’s Religious Forum meeting, could facilitate and mediate future engagements between Rashtriya and Indian Muslim organisations.

NU could also help Rashtriya set a common framework together with Indian Muslim organisations, to agree upon issues ranging from historical enmity to political and economic inequality.

Some Indian intellectuals have called for a new consensus that would transform the conflict-ridden relationship between Muslims and Hindus.

As one of India's most prominent civil society organisations, Rashtriya felt responsible for formulating a response to this rising tension.

There are two reasons why it is important for the Rashtriya to fix relations with the Indian Muslim communities.

First, India will host next year's G20 Presidency. Thus, it should maintain its political, social and economic stability to ensure that the G20 agenda can run smoothly.

Second, India is gearing up to prepare for its status as a US\$5 trillion economy by 2028 if it can maintain consistent growth of at least 9% per year for the next five years.

To be able to maintain its economic growth, India needs to maintain its multicultural democracy and communal harmony, which are both needed to strengthen political and economic stability. Building a new consensus between Hindus and Muslims is one step India should consider to reach that economic goal.

Rashtriya should seriously consider the R20 forum and its engagement with religious organisations, including NU, as a way to heal the wounds still left from the communal conflict of the Partition in 1947.

The cohesiveness and mutual understanding between Hindus and Muslims in India is a precondition for India to become an emerging power and moral force in global politics. If not, India will have to sacrifice this opportunity for another phase of communal conflict.

Muhammad Maulidan from International Relation Studies of the Islamic University of Indonesia contributed to this article.

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