

# ThePrint

## You know G20 — now there's R20, a 'push for moderate Islam' with links to RSS's Ram Madhav

*Organised by an Indonesian Islamic think tank, G20 Religion Forum (R20) aims to 'prevent political weaponisation of identity'. It will be held in Bali 2 weeks before G20 summit.*

by **MADHUPARNA DAS** | August 26, 2022



*Credit: Prajna Ghosh, ThePrint team*

**New Delhi:** In a first-of-its-kind event, Indonesia, a Muslim-majority country, will host a global summit of religious leaders modelled on the Group of Twenty (G20) intergovernmental forum.

Called the ‘G20 Religion Forum’, or R20 for short, it will be a parallel event to the annual G20 summit that Indonesia will host this year, and is being seen by scholars as an attempt to “quell the ideas of radical Islam and extremism and promote moderatism”.

Organised and hosted by one of Indonesia’s most influential Islamic think tanks, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the two-day R20 summit will take place on 2 and 3 November in Bali, around two weeks before the G20 summit is scheduled to be held there on 15 and 16 November.

In an exclusive email interview with ThePrint, Muhammad Najib Azca, vice-secretary general of Nahdlatul Ulama and spokesperson of the R20, said that the religious summit would leverage the G20 “to help ensure that religion in the 21st century functions as a genuine and dynamic source of solutions, rather than problems”.

“The R20 will seek to accomplish this by creating a global platform through which religious leaders of every faith and nation may express their concerns and give voice to shared moral and spiritual values,” said Azca.

ThePrint has learnt that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) not only supports the idea, but also Ram Madhav, a central committee member of the organisation, is among the event’s prime movers from India.

Earlier this year, Madhav had met the office-bearers of NU in Jakarta to firm up the concept of hosting a summit like this, and to make it a permanent global platform for religious and spiritual leadership. He will be one of the main speakers at the event.

Speaking to The Print, Madhav said, “The entire global narrative and agenda is currently controlled by political leadership, big corporations, some economic think tanks or some extremist and terrorist groups. We need to bring a balance.”

“The idea of hosting such an event was mooted by Nahdlatul Ulama. We from India join hands with them to address the challenge of radicalism, terrorism, war, and violence. Right now, there is no role of spiritual or civilisational leadership. R20 is aimed at developing a global platform of cultural, religious, and civilisational leadership that can pro-actively help countries in tackling some of the 21st-century challenges,” he added.

The event is also being supported by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, which has recognised NU as the coordinator of the event in 2022.

“The G20 Religion Forum constitutes a natural outcome of NU’s efforts over the past decade to prevent the political weaponisation of identity, curtail the spread of communal hatred, and promote solidarity and respect among the diverse peoples, cultures and nations of the world,” said Azca.

The R20 this year will focus on four major topics — historical grievances, truth-telling, reconciliation and forgiveness; identifying and embracing values shared by the world’s

major religions and civilisations; recontextualisation of obsolete and problematic teachings of religion; and the values we need to develop to ensure peaceful co-existence.

According to Hadza Min Fadhli R., an Indonesia-based academic and Islamic scholar, Indonesia is trying to “promote the idea of moderate Islam” through the R20. Muslims constitute [around](#) 88 per cent of the country’s population.

“It is very significant for the global community to watch that a Muslim-majority country is hosting a summit like this to promote moderate Islam. One of the primary agendas is to quell the ideas of radical Islam and extremism. We were told that the Ministry of Religious Affairs is supporting this summit. The broad ideas of the summit include democracy, development and moderatism,” said Hadza Min Fadhli R. to ThePrint.

## **A ‘unique’ summit**

A delegation from India, which will include Hindu monks and spiritual leaders, will join the summit.

“NU is coordinating with both the Government of India and civil society organisations in planning and executing this year’s G20 Religion Forum,” said Azca.

“We are inviting major figures from India including Ram Madhav Varanasi, Archbishop Felix Machado, Swapan Dasgupta, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, a prominent representative of the Shankaracharya tradition and leaders from India’s Muslim community as well,” he added, and said that major religious figures and scholars from all G20 member states and beyond would be invited as well.

According to him, Sheikh Mohammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa, secretary general of the Mecca-based Muslim World League, will co-chair the R20 summit with Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama central board; and Pope Francis will be sending Cardinal Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, as his formal representative.

A high-level source in NU told ThePrint: “Indonesia will host the first R20, and the next one will be hosted by India since it will be the hosting country for the G20 2023 summit too. The third will be organised in Brazil, when it is due to host G20 2024. So, from a Muslim-majority nation to a Hindu-majority country and then to a Catholic nation — this is a unique summit that will integrate all religions.”

Joko Widodo, President of Indonesia, will be addressing the “opening plenary” of the R20, said Azca. Several cabinet ministers will also participate in the summit, including Yaqut Cholil Qoumas — Indonesia’s minister of religious affairs and a prominent NU leader — and the minister of foreign affairs, Retno Marsudi.

## **‘Outcome of NU’s efforts’**

The R20 summit, said Azca, is the culmination of NU’s many strategic efforts over the years.

In 2016, NU had convened the International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) in Jakarta, Indonesia, which issued the ISOMIL Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration.

In this declaration, the think tank, among other things, called upon people “of every faith and nation to join in building a global consensus not to politicise Islam, and to marginalise those who would exploit Islam in such a way as to harm others,” said Azca.

In 2017, he said, 7 million young adult members of the NU promulgated the ‘Gerakan Pemuda Anshor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam’, a 21-page document that included a roadmap outlining “the basic elements of a coordinated, long-term effort to address a rapidly metastasising crisis within the Islamic world, as reflected in the violence committed by terrorist groups such as ISIS, al-Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Taiba, and civil wars in Yemen, Libya, Syria and elsewhere.”

Such efforts, said Azca, have allowed NU to leverage Indonesia’s presidency of the G20 this year.

(Edited by Zinnia Ray Chaudhuri)

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