



A Transformative Moment in World Affairs: Nahdlatul Ulama and the R20 International Summit of Religious Leaders

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The launching of the book containing the proceedings of the R20 International Summit of Religious Leaders is nothing less than a transformative moment in contemporary world affairs. The book provides a breathtaking overview of the ideas and exchanges animating the most comprehensive meeting of religious leaders from around the world ever organized. The book offers this panoramic service in two different but programmatically related ways. The first way, amply discussed in parts 1, 2, and 5 of *Proceedings*, is through policy-relevant analyses of the social resources for peaceful co-existence and global citizenship that the world's major religious traditions bring to our blessed but oft-troubled world. The second way the book highlights the R20 meeting's achievement is by inviting scholars and leaders associated with the world's major religious traditions to address the values and social programs that each among the assembled faith communities "need to relinquish to ensure that religion functions as a genuine and dynamic source of solutions, rather than problems" (p. xii).

In addressing these issues, both the R20 Summit and the now-published *Proceedings* push aside the once-fashionable biases of what used to be known as secularization theory. Once dominant not just in academia but in policy circles around the world, that theory claimed that our modern age has ushered in an irreversible privatization and decline of religion in public affairs. According to this now anachronistic theory, the modern world might still make room for some religious believers, but their convictions and institutions would have to remain quarantined from governance and the public sphere.

The R20 Summit represented a new, and in the view of many of us, welcome moment in our global awareness: one that recognizes that history has proved secularization forecasts wrong. As my late colleague, Peter L. Berger put it some thirty years ago, the world's populations are arguably as religious as ever. But the R20 Conference and *Proceedings* went beyond my dear colleague's sage observation. The Summit and *Proceedings* remind us that for the great promise of public religion for peace and citizenship to be fulfilled, scholars and religious leaders from all faith traditions have

to acknowledge, not only the social goods their faith communities promote, but their shortcomings and insufficiencies as well. It is this twin dynamic, a dialectic of both religious empowerment and courageous self-critique, that makes the R20 event and its published *Proceedings* timely and unique.

Inasmuch as these twin aims animated the R20 conference in Bali, it was both fortunate and appropriate that Indonesia played the leading role in the conference organization. It was no less fortunate and appropriate that Nahdlatul Ulama, under the executive directorship of Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, provided the intellectual vision and social organization at the heart of the Religion Forum (R20) conference. Naturally there was of a measure of serendipity to Indonesia and Nahdlatul Ulama's role. In 2022, Indonesia had assumed the Presidency of the G20. That role brings with it the opportunity to give the G20 proceedings a measure of local color, which is to say concerns that in some small measure reflect the host country's self-perception and global priorities. When Indonesia assumed the G20 role, then, most observers assumed there would be some measure of thematic coloring, like batik curtains on an otherwise familiar G20 window. Under the joint direction of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, however, Indonesia's hosting of the G20 did more than play this window-dressing role. Aware of the role played by the Centrist Democrat International (formerly Christian Democrat International) in the original establishment of the G20 forum, Indonesia convinced the full G20 leadership to incorporate an annual summit of religious leaders, which is to say, the R20, into the G20 proceedings. This achievement itself was no less than a world-transforming event.

For those of us familiar with Indonesian political and religious history, we understand that what I have referred to as historical serendipity was in fact richly contingent and culturally embedded. The contingency and embedding had to do with the fact that Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim-majority country. No less decisively, Indonesia is also a country in which the majority of Muslims — once again with NU scholars and leaders in the vanguard — have demonstrated an unwavering spirit of generosity and inclusivity by opting to position religiosity or “*ketuhanan*” — God-mindedness — rather than Islam alone at the top of the country five core political principles, the *Pancasila*. Both the promise and the practice of Indonesian nationhood, in other words, are religion-affirming but theistically inclusive. Abstracted from the specificity of Indonesian culture and history, it is a similarly pluralistic and inclusive spirit — the spirit of Indonesia and NU — that underlay the R20 summit.

Plurality and inclusivity are of course topics much in the air these days, including in my own United States of America. In my homeland the terms are most commonly applied to the task of diminishing the ethnic and racial exclusivities that have long blemished American society. In my opinion, the lessons Indonesia has to offer on plurality and inclusivity offer a formula for global peace and civility even more generalizable than those provided by its North American counterpart. The lessons are greater because the Summit's injunction for religious actors and ideals to serve as a solution-builders rather than problem-makers addresses, not just the circumstances and challenges of one country, but those of the great majority of societies around the world. After all, it is not just in Indonesia, but all across the world that religious actors figure prominently in politics and society as a result of the global resurgence of religion. The lessons are also greater, however, because Nahdlatul Ulama's long history of involvement in Indonesia's effort to build a multi-

religious and multi-ethnic nation offers guides for how to undertake a similar revitalization and reform in other faith traditions.

From the first years after its founding in 1926, Nahdlatul Ulama scholars and activists dedicated themselves to the twin causes of Islamic piety and nation-making. Indonesia was then and is still today a multi-streamed society, with non-Muslim and secular nationalist as well as *ketuhanan*-minded currents. But what's so remarkable about Indonesia and NU is that the core vision to which the NU leadership dedicated themselves was a *Pancasila* variety of multi-ethnic and multi-religious citizenship. The nation-making project in which Nahdlatul Ulama became a major player was not always easy. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Indonesian economy ground-down to a level of grim underperformance comparable to that of the poorest countries in Africa. In those difficult years, political rivalries among what were described as the country's major "streams" or *aliran* escalated to such a degree that after the attempted leftist coup of September 30, 1965, it appeared as if the entire project of Indonesian nationhood was about to collapse. The received wisdom in Western policy circles in the late 1960s and early 1970s was that Indonesia was among the Asian and Muslim-majority societies *least* likely to ever make a successful transition to democracy and dynamic economic growth.

It took time, but history proved those nay-sayers on Indonesia and Indonesian Islam wrong. And a big part of the reason history proved these nay-sayers wrong had to do with Muslim society in general and Nahdlatul Ulama in particular. Starting out with field research in the upland countryside of Pasuruan and Malang in the late 1970s, and shifting then to Jakarta research for the two decades from 1990-2010 I had the honor to have front-row seat on these developments, not least with regards to Nahdlatul Ulama. Whereas in the late 1970s my Indonesianist colleagues in the U.S. and Australia had told me that the NU communities in which I was to do research in Pasuruan were backward-looking and anti-democratic, from the very beginning of my research I encountered *ulama* and villagers quite otherwise. I met men and women who committed themselves to Islamic piety and *ibadah* observance — but in a way that linked their piety to the project of national betterment and a *Pancasila* variety of citizen inclusivity. When in the decade of the 1990s I began making annual visits to NU's national headquarters on Jalan Mataram in Jakarta, my American and Australian colleagues again warned me that the activists and intellectuals I would encounter were the custodians of a backward-looking tradition. But in my Jakarta encounters this was not the Nahdlatul Ulama I came to know. What I instead encountered were leaders like Abdurrahman Wahid, Masdar Mas'udi, Ahmad Suaedy, and (in 1999) a young and upcoming advisor to Gus Dur named KH. Yahya Cholil Staqf. All were committed to a multiethnic and multireligious variety of *Pancasila* nationalism. All were insistent that, in our modern age, the values of democracy and inclusive citizenship are not only *acceptable* to Muslims, but resonant with the higher aims of Islam or *maqasid as-sharia*, as properly understood.

History proved that this NU-leveraged revitalization of national and religious ideals was deeply consequential. Over the course of the 1990s, Indonesia achieved something most foreign policy analysts thought impossible: it developed the largest movement for civil and democratic reform ever mobilized in the Muslim-majority world. The movement had several wings – including many courageous Muhammadiyah activists and intellectuals, as well as Muslim intellectuals of hybrid background, like my friend and teacher, the late great Nurcholish Madjid. Like Gus Dur but with a different style of *ijtihad* elaboration, Madjid's *pembaruan* ("renewal") philosophy combined an

appreciation of traditionalist scholarship with a modernist interest in the sciences of the world. But what made the Muslim intellectual and political scene in Indonesia truly remarkable and unlike its counterpart in many Muslim-majority societies is that it wasn't just an ivory tower enterprise of a few well-intending academics. The movement was powerful and unique in that it linked Muslim politicians and intellectuals of originality and brilliance to the largest grassroots Muslim civil association in the world. And it owed this extraordinary social embedding to one organization above all: Nahdlatul Ulama.

Although just one leader among many, Gus Dur embodied the cultural genius at the heart of this NU amalgam. Gus Dur's far-ranging intelligence allowed him to talk in multiple intellectual registers, thus speaking to disparate social communities. In one moment he would offer brilliant remarks on Islam and democracy, in another he would provide an astonishingly incisive critique of Sam Huntington's deeply mistaken thesis regarding the clash of civilizations, and in yet another moment he could speak on the prospects for democracy in Egypt or the social importance of *pesantran* boarding schools for Indonesian economic development. In other settings, as when speaking before crowds in a small town or village, he could translate complex political reflections into an accessible and humor-laden *ngoko* (colloquial Javanese). His combination of intellectual brilliance, irascible humor, and every-man simplicity was not just an individual personality characteristic: it was the embodiment in his persona of a cultural richness and intellectual creativity nurtured in Nahdlatul Ulama social circles generally.

May he rest in peace: we know that Gus Dur has passed. But his spirit and inspiration live on, both in the rich intelligence and personality of his children, including Yenny Wahid, and of course among the current NU leadership, now including KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf. I would not want to reduce the rich achievement captured on the pages of the *Proceedings of the R20 International Summit of Religious Leaders* to an NU vision alone. The plenary sessions represent voices and visions from across the globe, and from multiple faith traditions. However, in my view, the book's core achievement, its high-minded and inclusive spirit, and its courageous appeal for reformation of religious values obsolescent in our modern age — none of this would have been possible in national settings other than that of Indonesia, and other than that of an Indonesia reminded of its higher callings by the NU leadership. I would add here a brief footnote of recognition to the editors, Muhammad Najib Azca, Timothy Samuel Shah, and C. Holland Taylor. Their labors captured brilliantly the best ideals of the R20 meeting.

In conclusion, the publication of the *Proceedings of the R20 International Summit of Religious Leaders* is a joyous moment. It bears witness to a great nation — Indonesia — showing a new and well-deserved confidence in its role as an agent for a far-reaching rethinking of the role of religion in our global world. The *Proceedings* also bear witness to a great leadership, that of Nahdlatul Ulama under the executive direction of KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf, reaching out to Muslim leaders from other nations, including Shaykh Mohammad bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa of the Muslim World League, all to promote a like-minded movement for a religiously-informed and human-rights-based civilization within and beyond Indonesia. In all this the project and the proceedings provide stunning evidence of an Indonesia and a Nahdlatul Ulama making good on a divine command: that religion and religious actors be a blessing to the whole world. With the R20 Summit and the publication of the event's Proceedings, Indonesia and Nahdlatul Ulama have once again done just that.