



The R20 Forum in Bali: Signs of an Intriguing Partnership

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The Religion 20 (R20) Forum that took place in Bali last November deserves attention, if only for the fact that it was initiated and hosted by two significant Islamic actors, commonly perceived until recently as bitter ideological rivals.

Co-hosting the R20 event were the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—Indonesia’s largest religious movement and a key civil society partner of the current Indonesian government—and the

Muslim World League (MWL)—a Mecca-based Islamic organization considered until few years ago to be Saudi's main engagement vehicle to globally promote an exclusive Wahhabi/Salafi agenda. Perhaps this new partnership is more than symbolic, and further cooperation could represent an important step in the formation of a new theological and ideological path for the Islamic world.

In large part, this new step toward cooperation has been facilitated by Saudi Arabia's intriguing shift towards espousing more moderate interpretations of Islam in the past few years. The involvement of Indonesia, a non-Arab Muslim country that has long been at the forefront of fighting religious extremism and encouraging interfaith understanding, is likewise an important development that stands apart from other global trends towards friction, partisanship, and identity conflict.

If this cooperation continues, it is likely to reinforce the emerging coalition of Arab and Muslim stakeholders who are advocating a peaceful, moderate, and tolerant view of Islam and its promotion throughout the Middle East and the Arab world. Although interfaith meetings rarely get media attention in the context of influencing world events, the R20 Summit was meant to be different and likely intended as a sign of hope for cooperation to come. Its significance comes from its position as the first official engagement group on religion in the G20, the prestigious global economic forum of world's major economies of which both co-hosts are member states. As host, Indonesia inaugurated the R20 about two weeks ahead of the G20 Summit, also held in Bali, to leverage the G20 Summit, by helping to ["ensure that religion in the 21st century functions as a genuine and dynamic source of solutions, rather than problems."](#)

The NU and the MWL: From Ideological Antagonism to Partnership

With an estimated 50 to 90 million followers, the NU is currently the largest Islamic organization in the world. Led by Chairman Yahya Cholil Staquf, the organization has long been an ally of the Indonesian government. For years, the NU has emphasized its strong commitment to religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue, and has along with that commitment expressed specific concerns about Saudi Arabia and the MWL building ultra-conservative religious and cultural institutions in Indonesia along with its strong opposition to any Wahhabi/Salafi influence in the country.

Indeed, for decades both the NU and others saw the Saudi religious agenda as antagonistic to the moderate, inclusive nature of Indonesia's Islam. One of the core messages of the NU's Islam Nusantara (Islam of the Archipelago) campaign a few years ago—an initiative supported by the Indonesian government—was that growing religious intolerance and extremism, originating mainly in the Middle East, needed to stay away from the shores of Indonesia. The campaign [accused](#) "certain" governments in the Middle East of deliberately nurturing religious extremism by ["weaponizing"](#) sectarian differences and deriving political legitimacy from "problematic interpretations" of Islam. It was also argued that the ["Saudi strategy of propagating Wahhabism and Salafism that has turned the world into a powder keg."](#) By way of response, the campaign emphasized a continuation of orthodox Indonesian Islam that calls for harmonious coexistence with pre-existing cultures, alongside with Indonesia's secular-oriented state ideology, Pancasila ("The Five Principles"), which is often described as religiously neutral. As recently as

2020, the NU did not hesitate to [recall](#) that its foundation in 1926 was [meant to protect the “spiritual traditions of Sunni Islam by blocking the spread of Wahhabi extremism.”](#) Such comments emerged in the aftermath of the Secretary General of the MWL’s first visit the NU’s headquarters, highlighting just how unlikely such a future partnership appeared just a few years ago.

Nevertheless, both Saudi Arabia itself and the MWL have pursued a number of religious reforms in recent years, with the latter especially abandoning in its public messaging a strict, ultra-Orthodox Wahhabi agenda and espousing more moderate and tolerant religious attitudes. Such a dramatic shift appears to have struck a note with the NU and has created some sense of common ground between the two organizations. The resulting spirit of collaboration in a global framework was evident in the R20 Summit’s theme: [“Revealing and Nurturing Religion as a Source of Global Solutions: An International Movement for Shared Moral and Spiritual Values.”](#) The mere presence of the [logos](#) of the NU and the MWL together on the Summit’s website is itself unprecedented, let alone the fact that these two organizations initiated and hosted the Summit as co-hosts.

In a joint political communique, the NU specifically noted their decision to choose the MWL as co-host for the Forum in the [“wake of dramatic changes in policy by Saudi Arabia and the MWL.”](#) The communique also cites MWL’s Secretary General, Shaykh Muhammad Al-Issa—often identified as the [face of projected Saudi religious moderation and tolerance](#)—saying that his organization seeks “to build bridges and facilitate inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue.” It is understood that the Crown Prince became the driving force behind these efforts in 2017. In an [interview he gave to al-Arabiya in 2021](#), the Crown Prince spoke explicitly about the concept of moderate Islam, the rejection of Wahhabism as the official school of thought in Saudi Arabia, the opening of Ijtihad, and the ability to reinterpret and build new schools of Islamic thinking in the country. Although the MWL’s participation in R20 is the first time that the organization has chosen to substantively engage with the NU to convey a message of religious tolerance, the pivot builds off of other major publicized events by the MWL to reshape its global image. In early 2020, for example, Mohammad al-Issa made a public visit to Auschwitz accompanied by imams and rabbis. The visit was meant to deliver a message of tolerance and solidarity and emphasize Islamic efforts to confront all forms of injustice.

NU’s Influence in the R20

Likewise, the language of the [vision for the R20 Forum](#) clearly draws from NU’s spirit and rhetoric. This vision emphasizes the prevention of the “weaponization of identity,” curtailing the spread of communal hatred, promoting solidarity among diverse peoples, cultures, and nations, and fostering a harmonious world order. Such themes are likewise featured in the NU’s global Islam Nusantara campaign, which has been supported by its “special branches” along with diverse institutions and intellectual networks in Islamic communities worldwide. Another key element in the NU’s campaign is theological reform through Ijtihad, or independent legal reasoning that would develop religious teachings suitable to the modern era through recontextualization. The NU likely found the Saudi Crown Prince’s discussion of Ijtihad in the 2021 interview appealing, and this framing was [listed](#) as among the main agendas of the R20 Forum.

One of the main challenges faced by the NU in promoting its religious reformist messages, in particular to the Middle East, is the fact that they seem to be widely seen as strongly anchored in a local Indonesian context. By collaborating with the MWL in the R20 Forum, the experience has generated the potential to facilitate more widespread publicity for and acceptance of the NU's core values in other parts of the Islamic world. This is especially the case in the Middle East if the MWL continues to collaborate with the NU's framework.

Where Does this Cooperation Lead?

Beyond communicating the NU's tolerant and moderate Islamic narrative to a wider audience, this development may support Indonesia's ambitious foreign policy of promoting moderation and tolerance through religious soft power plays. The R20 Forum may also serve to strengthen and legitimize Saudi Arabia's efforts to present itself as charting a more tolerant and moderate course for the Kingdom and beyond. Indeed, Saudi Arabia may seek to benefit from the tailwinds of the Forum to further collaborate with other moderate Muslim countries towards this goal.

Meanwhile, Indonesia President Joko Widodo has handed over the G20 presidency rotation to the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It already [appears](#) that leading Hindu and Muslim organizations in India are preparing to use this global platform in 2023, and more precisely the R20, to position themselves along the same narratives of religious pluralism and [harmony](#). India is likely to use the opportunity to position itself along the same lines as a protector of religious pluralism and harmony. As expressed, for example, by the Indian politician, social leader, and thinker Ram Madhav: "[Bali is a unique and perfect blend of religious harmony. There could not have been a better place to start this journey. And there couldn't have been a better country than India—a mosaic of religions and the mothership of spirituality—to take it forward next year.](#)" The great interest shown by the Indian media at the R20 Summit in Bali is already visible.

Most recently, the NU held an event intended to build off of the R20 and to celebrate the centennial of the NU on February 7, during which al-Issa gave a [video address](#) to the conference. But time will tell if the intriguing cooperation between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia as manifested in the R20 Summit in Bali will materialize along this path, and whether the G20 Forum will continue to serve as a leverage for Indonesia-Saudi Arabia cooperation. In other words, it is still too early to say whether the NU and MWL's cooperation at R20 was episodic or a real beginning of an important strategic move with global implications.