



## ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference (ASEAN IIDC)

### Indonesian leadership in the movement for pluralist reawakening in South and Southeast Asia

*“We have launched the ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference in order to begin consolidating a vast constituency upon the basis of shared civilizational values, capable of fostering peace, tolerance, and harmony throughout ASEAN and, God willing, of inspiring a similar dynamic worldwide.”*

*~ KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf  
Chairman, Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board*

JAKARTA, Indonesia — On 7 August, 2023, senior religious and cultural figures from across South and Southeast Asia convened with the leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Government of Indonesia to chart a course for the region’s re-emergence as a cohesive, vital, and proactive civilizational sphere.

Hosted by Nahdlatul Ulama with the full support of the Government of Indonesia and the ASEAN Secretariat, the two-day ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference (IIDC) offered a striking demonstration of broad institutional, popular, and governmental backing for a regional strategy pioneered by NU leaders and the [Center for Shared Civilizational Values](#) (CSCV), known as the “[Ashoka Approach](#).”

*“I am convinced that ASEAN is capable of becoming a catalyst for peace, a ‘caring and sharing community,’ not merely an epicentrum of growth, but an epicentrum of harmony that maintains regional stability and fosters peace worldwide. In keeping with this vision, I warmly welcome the constructive role being played by religious and cultural leaders throughout ASEAN who are participating in the ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference 2023 — a strategic initiative of Nahdlatul Ulama and the Republic of Indonesia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.”*

*~ H.E. Joko Widodo  
President of the Republic of Indonesia*

The ASEAN IIDC is the brainchild of NU Chairman KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf, founder of the [Humanitarian Islam movement](#) and the [G20 Religion Forum \(R20\)](#). Following the success of the R20 International Summit of Religious Leaders in Bali, Indonesia, Mr. Staquf proposed establishing a regional intercultural and interreligious dialogue mechanism to President Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”), as a means of reviving the ancient civilizational heritage of Southeast Asia and thereby contributing to international peace and security.

President Jokowi pledged his government’s full support to the ASEAN IIDC initiative, which leverages a burgeoning synergy between the world’s largest Muslim organization and the

government of ASEAN's largest nation and economy, in service to a visionary agenda: i.e., the re-emergence of Southeast Asia as a coherent civilizational sphere and powerful, independent pillar of support for a rules-based international order. If achieved, this consolidation has the potential to impact geopolitical dynamics worldwide.

Mr. Staquf outlined Nahdlatul Ulama and Indonesia's ambitious strategy in a keynote address delivered during the ASEAN IIDC opening plenary. Mr. Staquf's speech may be read below, as may the contributions of His Excellency President Joko Widodo; ASEAN Secretary General Dr. Kao Kim Hourn; and Indonesia's Minister of Foreign Affairs H.E. Retno Marsudi.

**Remarks by KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf,  
Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board**

[In Arabic] May the peace, mercy, and blessings of God be upon you.

Welcome to Jakarta, and welcome to the inaugural ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference. Last November — with the blessing of President Joko Widodo and the Government of the Republic of Indonesia — the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board launched the G20 Religion Forum (R20), a global interreligious forum hosted within the framework of the G20.

The R20 convenes religious leaders from throughout G20 Member States and beyond who, together, seek to imbue the world's political and economic power structures with moral and spiritual values.

These leaders have realized that — if religion is to play a constructive role in world affairs — credibility must first be restored to religion itself. Religious leaders may achieve this by addressing the problems that exist among themselves, in the form of intra- and inter-religious conflict.

In particular, religious teachings that are incompatible with the existence of other faiths — or even trigger sectarian conflict — must be overcome if religious communities are to live side-by-side in an earnest and sincere atmosphere of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect.

This year, it is our great fortune that the Republic of Indonesia holds the rotating chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. It is our view that the societies of the Indo-Pacific in general, and those of ASEAN in particular, [stand heir to a shared civilizational heritage and values that can be traced back to the third century BCE](#). This “civilizational capital” is of immense value, for it means that the societies of ASEAN and the wider Indo-Pacific share a common heritage characterized by tolerance and harmony.

In light of this marvelous serendipity, Nahdlatul Ulama has taken the initiative of launching the ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference (IIDC) with the full support, blessing, and guidance of President Joko Widodo and the Ministries of Foreign and Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia.

We have launched the ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference in order to begin consolidating a vast constituency upon the basis of shared civilizational values, capable of fostering peace, tolerance, and harmony within ASEAN and, God willing, of inspiring a similar dynamic worldwide.

Indonesia — as Chair of this year’s high-level ASEAN Summit — has chosen the theme “ASEAN Matters: Epicentrum of Growth.” Nahdlatul Ulama hopes that the ASEAN IIDC will support this agenda by initiating a concerted effort to transform ASEAN into an epicentrum of peace, tolerance, and harmony.

For nearly a decade, the visionary leadership of President Joko Widodo has been a source of inspiration to Indonesians, and especially Nahdlatul Ulama: inspiring us to redouble our efforts, both domestically and internationally, in service to God and humanity.

Nahdlatul Ulama — leaders and lay-followers alike — pray that President Joko Widodo’s two terms in office [2014 – 2024] will prove to have blazed a trail that provides immense, long-term benefits to our people and nation. Amen.

Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me once more to express my thanks to you for your attendance and participation, and to President Joko Widodo, to the Government of the Republic of Indonesia, and to the Secretary General of ASEAN.

We hope that this initiative will meaningfully impact the lives of people throughout ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific, and contribute to the global struggle to create a better, more noble future for humanity and civilization as a whole.

[In Arabic] May God guide us upon the straight path, and may the peace, blessings, and mercy of God be upon you.

**Remarks by His Excellency Joko Widodo,  
President of the Republic of Indonesia**

May the peace, mercy, and blessings of God be upon you (*Assalamu’alaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh*).

Good morning.

Heartfelt greetings to all of us here today (*Salam sejahtera bagi kita semuanya*).

May all of you be blessed (*Om swastiastu*).

Praise be to all enlightened beings (*Namo buddhaya*).

Greetings of virtue (*Salam kebajikan*).

[The above are traditional Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian greetings, frequently offered in the context of Indonesia’s multi-religious and pluralistic society].

We know that, at present, all is not well in the world. According to the Global Peace Index for 2023, conflict is on the rise across the globe. In 2008, 51 nations were

involved in some form of external armed conflict, a figure that has since risen to 91. The number of yearly conflict-related deaths totals some 238,000 souls. The economic impact of conflict is enormous, with year-on-year losses rising 17 percent to reach 17.5 trillion dollars in 2022, which amounts to a staggering 13 percent of global GDP.

At the same time, societies across the world are becoming increasingly irreligious. The Ipsos Global Religion Survey for 2023 — which interviewed 19,731 people across 26 nations — found that 29 percent of respondents were either agnostic or atheist. [Editor’s note: 18 of the 26 countries surveyed by Ipsos are, in fact, Western nations — thereby skewing the survey’s results and, perhaps inadvertently, highlighting a significant divergence between the West, which is increasingly agnostic and/or atheist, and the rest of the world].

According to data collected by Pew Research Center, physical violence in the name of religion is increasing.

I am certain, ladies and gentlemen, that in light of these sobering facts you all share my commitment to transforming ASEAN into a model of unity, tolerance, and harmony. ASEAN must become the anchor for global stability and peace.

Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am certain that religious enthusiasm and piety across ASEAN are in fact on the rise. Indonesian society, for example, has the highest rate of religious belief in the world. According to Pew Research Center, 96 percent of respondents in Indonesia believe that good morals are determined by belief in God. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations has collated evidence proving that Member States — among them Indonesia — have successfully maintained strong traditions of tolerance. Amidst tremendous religious and cultural diversity, Indonesia has succeeded in preserving harmony and managing ethnic, tribal, cultural, religious, and confessional differences.

Therefore, I am convinced that ASEAN is capable of becoming a catalyst for peace, a “caring and sharing community,” not merely an epicentrum of growth, but an epicentrum of harmony that maintains regional stability and promotes peace worldwide. In keeping with this vision, I warmly welcome the constructive role being played by religious and cultural leaders throughout ASEAN who are participating in the ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference 2023 — a strategic initiative of Nahdlatul Ulama and the Republic of Indonesia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

I hope that this forum will contribute to the broadening and deepening of mutual understanding and will become a solid foundation upon which ASEAN can rise as a global epicentrum of harmony and growth.

Thank you, and may the peace, mercy, and blessings of God be upon you.

Dr. Kao Kim Hourn of Cambodia — the 15<sup>th</sup> Secretary General of ASEAN since its establishment in 1976 — also delivered remarks to the ASEAN IIDC’s opening plenary session, during which he said:

Allow me to take this opportunity to sincerely congratulate and highly commend Nahdlatul Ulama and the Government of the Republic of Indonesia for organizing the ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference 2023.

In more than one way, Indonesia has undoubtedly been playing an important leadership role, and actively promoting ASEAN centrality and unity. This effort has been amply underscored by the chairman theme this year: “ASEAN Matters: Epicentrum of Growth.” Likewise, the core theme of this dialogue today — “ASEAN Shared Civilizational Values: Building an Epicentrum of Harmony to Foster Peace, Security, and Economic Prosperity” — speaks to the timely importance and relevance of sustaining concerted efforts to promote peace, harmony, and stability in our region and beyond....

I hope that today’s conference will discuss and direct greater attention and priority to our common understanding, values, and shared vision, for nurturing greater tolerance and harmony and for enhancing the strength of our unity in diversity. I am confident that your discussions today shall greatly contribute to our ASEAN community-building efforts, to truly make the ASEAN region an epicentrum of peace, dialogue, harmony, tolerance, and cooperation. Thank you very much.

[Read Dr. Kao Kim Hourn’s full speech](#)

**Remarks by H.E. Retno Marsudi  
Minister of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Indonesia**

Excellencies,

Distinguished participants,

I attended the Opening Ceremony this morning together with my President, so — once again — congratulations for the convening of ASEAN IIDC 2023. I like very much the theme of “Making ASEAN the Epicentrum of Harmony.”

I planned to attend this session in person. However, I’m so sorry for not being able to be with you, since I have to accompany my President to receive dignitaries from many countries today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

One of the purposes of ASEAN is to ensure our peoples live in peace in a just, democratic, and, once again, harmonious environment.

In a region as diverse as Southeast Asia, dialogue is very important to bridge mutual understanding and promote mutual respect.

Indeed, the peace and stability that we enjoy in the region is the result of ASEAN's years of hard work in promoting a culture of dialogue.

In today's world — where geopolitical rivalry is pervasive, and a trust deficit prevents countries from cooperating — dialogue among nations is more important than ever.

This is why our foreign policy works hard to foster the habit of dialogue, building on Indonesia's status as a country with the world's largest Muslim population.

The objectives are three-fold. First, creating harmony among civilizations.

If not managed well, diversity only breeds suspicion and hatred. With a growing trend of Islamophobia globally, we may be heading towards a clash of civilizations.

There is a popular saying in Indonesia "*tak kenal maka tak sayang*" that means "you cannot love what you do not know".

Indonesia includes interfaith dialogue as a permanent tool of its peace diplomacy to bridge a better understanding about Islam. We have interfaith dialogue with 34 countries worldwide from India to Ethiopia and the Holy See.

We also seek to show the world how diversity can be used to strengthen social cohesion. A few years back, we built schools, hospitals, and public markets in Rakhine State, Myanmar, to provide a space for coexistence between the country's different ethnic and religious groups.

Second, projecting the image of Islam as *rahmatan lil' alamin*.

Indonesia is a living example where Islam can be compatible with modernity and where Islam and tolerance reinforce each other. The key is moderation, and we are committed to inspiring other Muslim countries to also take a strong stance against radicalism. Islam must be a source of peace.

Our experience has enabled us to play a peacemaking role in the Southern Philippines and Southern Thailand, including through the involvement of our *ulama*.

Third, promoting women's rights to education.

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, Indonesia is always promoting education for all, including women and girls. I'll give you one example. Indonesia and Qatar hosted an International Conference last December in Bali to bolster international support for women's education in Afghanistan.

We committed ourselves to providing scholarships for Afghan women and girls and exploring alternative education methods. We also invited Afghan *ulama* to visit Indonesia and see firsthand how we organize inclusive education in our Islamic schools.

Colleagues, peace is not a given, and it must never be taken for granted. All of us must actively maintain it by being agents of peace in our respective communities. Together, we can create a peaceful Southeast Asia, an epicentrum of tolerance and harmony.

I thank you very much.

***“Oh God, reconcile our hearts, Oh God, reconcile our hearts, Oh God, reconcile our hearts! Reconcile us, guide us to the paths of peace, and deliver us from darkness to light.”***

***~ KH. Achmad Said Asrori  
General Secretary, Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council***