



2024_01_29_Nahdlatul Ulama's Civilizational Strategy

NU National Congress highlights Nahdlatul Ulama's civilizational strategy

“At a time when many secular-minded people in the West subscribe to a new cultural relativism that denies the reality and importance of shared civilizational values, it is NU and Indonesia who call upon all nations of the world to affirm a shared moral purpose....”

“There are few spiritual messages more profound than this, and none more relevant for the troubled times in which humanity today lives.”

~ Robert Hefner

*Professor of Anthropology and International Relations at Boston University
and President of the American Institute for Indonesian Studies*

YOGYAKARTA, Indonesia — On 29 January 2024, hundreds of Islamic scholars joined political leaders and experts in the fields of geopolitics, religious studies, and international peace and security to celebrate the 101st anniversary of Nahdlatul Ulama's founding according to the Islamic *hijri* calendar. Held in conjunction with Nahdlatul Ulama's National Congress (KONBES), which sets policy for the 100-million-member organization, the event opened with a discussion of Nahdlatul Ulama's strategy to bring the world's geopolitical and economic power structures into alignment with the highest moral and spiritual values.

The KONBES was held at the prestigious al-Munawwir Krapyak *madrasah* in Yogyakarta, one of Indonesia's most storied and influential Islamic seminaries. Once run by the venerated scholar and Chairman of the NU Supreme Council, Kyai Haji Ali Maksum (1915 – 1989), many of Indonesia's most prominent modern figures were educated within its halls, including its first democratically elected head of state, H.E. KH. Abdurrahman Wahid (“[Gus Dur](#),” 1940 – 2009), the widely revered religious scholar, public intellectual, painter, and poet, KH. A. Mustofa Bisri (“[Gus Mus](#),” 1944 – present), and current Nahdlatul Ulama General Chairman [KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf](#).

Celebrations began with a “National [Halaqah](#)” (study circle) titled “Nahdlatul Ulama's Civilizational Strategy,” which was heavily covered by Indonesian print, broadcast, and online media. As reported by national newspaper and broadcaster *Kompas*, KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf opened the *halaqah* by explaining how “NU performs the role of harmonizing disparate religious interpretations, before bringing together all the strength of its massive following to support a single coherent viewpoint and joint strategy.”

Mr. Staquf explained that “building a religious authority independent of political authority is something new [in Islamic law]. Previously, religious and political authority were almost always united in the personage of the ruler — who held ultimate jurisdiction over matters both sacred and profane. Now, however, our *ulama* are consolidating and taking the extraordinary step of creating a religious authority independent of political authority.”

In an unprecedented move to enact this strategy, the KONBES decreed that Nahdlatul Ulama may issue definitive rulings on its position regarding Islamic theology, consolidating a single, authoritative orthodoxy within its ranks. This step, Mr. Staquf explained, is part of Nahdlatul Ulama's mission to establish an authoritative Islamic jurisprudence for a global civilization (*fiqh al-hadarah*) and thereby help religion to contribute to the development of modern civilization while marginalizing those who would exploit religious teachings to harm others.

The National *Halaqah* (~~study circle~~) also featured C. Holland Taylor ([H. Muhammad Kholil](#)), Special Advisor for International Affairs to the NU General Chairman as well as Deputy Chairman & CEO of the Center for Shared Civilizational Values; Robert Hefner, Professor of Anthropology and International Relations at Boston University; and KH. Dr. Afifuddin Muhajir, Deputy Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council, and one of the key authorities on Islamic jurisprudence for a global civilization. The discussion was moderated by NYU Professor Ismail Fajrie Alatas, an academic expert on Indonesian Islam.

Selected excerpts of their panel discussion on “Nahdlatul Ulama’s Civilizational Strategy,” may be read below.

**Remarks by C. Holland Taylor
(translated into English from Indonesian)**

For over a century Nahdlatul Ulama has served as a lodestar — helping to guide the inhabitants of Nusantara (the East Indies) through the turbulent waters and treacherous currents of history, that we may find safe harbor in the eternal truths of religion, contextualized in such a way as to meet the actual needs of the Muslim *ummah* (community) today.

All Indonesians, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, have benefitted from Nahdlatul Ulama’s selfless and profoundly stabilizing role in the history of this great nation.

In the depths of my heart, I believe it is Nahdlatul Ulama’s destiny to also serve as a lodestar for humanity as a whole, both in the years that lie immediately before us and throughout the coming century.

Insha’Allah, Nahdlatul Ulama’s rise to global prominence will bring Islam *rahmatan li al-‘alamin* [Islam as a source of universal love and compassion] to the forefront of human awareness, by offering a path out of the countless difficulties, and crises, that confront our modern civilization....

Religious believers in other nations — including those from other faith traditions — are particularly inspired when they learn about Nahdlatul Ulama’s mission, as expressed in the motto: “*Merawat Jagad Membangun Peradaban*” (“Nurturing All of Creation, Building Civilization”).

Men and women who embody the exemplary values of Islam, and of Nusantara civilization, constitute Indonesia’s most geopolitically significant — and certainly its

most unique — strategic asset. The key to Nahdlatul Ulama’s ability to influence the world lies in its choice of inspirational leaders.

Spiritual kyais such as Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri, and Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf have a remarkable ability to transform Western perceptions regarding Islam and Muslims....

It is in this context that we should view Nahdlatul Ulama’s effort to develop an Islamic jurisprudence for a global civilization and its call for people of goodwill of every faith and nation to preserve and strengthen a rules-based international order founded upon the UN Charter, in order to provide peace and security to the people of every nation.

At a time when the forces of chaos and destruction threaten this fragile rules-based order, Nahdlatul Ulama has stepped into the breach and is striving to illuminate a path out of darkness, inspired by the Qur’anic verse: “And unto everyone who is conscious of God, He [always] grants a way out [of difficulties]” (*Surah at-Talaq: 2*).

May Nahdlatul Ulama’s efforts, may all of our efforts, be pleasing to God, and prove beneficial in this world and the next.

wallahu yuafiquna fima yuhibuhu wayardahu

[May God aid us in the performance of actions that are dear to Him, and that attract His infinite blessings.]

Assalaamu ‘alaykum warahmat allahi wabarakatuhu

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

[Read C. Holland Taylor’s address in full.](#)

**Remarks by Kyai Haji Dr. Afifuddin Muhajir
(translated into English from Indonesian)**

Ladies and gentlemen, now that Nahdlatul Ulama is more than 100 years old, it is time to perform *tajdid* (renewal). Perhaps the *tajdid al-fiqhin* (renewal by Muslim jurists) referred to by the Prophet applies to Nahdlatul Ulama. For Muhammad (saw.) said: “At the start of every century, God sends forth to this nation someone who will renew its religion.”

In my opinion, this Hadith does not only apply to Islam, but also to Nahdlatul Ulama as an organization. Perhaps the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board’s concern with Islamic jurisprudence for a global civilization (*fiqh al-hadarah*) is a form of *tajdid*, that is, restoring Nahdlatul Ulama to the vigor it had when it was first born. Elements that are no longer powerful need to be turned on and revived, this is a restoration....

In terms of ethical reasoning, thank God, we are extremely capable. By applying the principles of *fiqh* with a moderate character, our country is safe, prosperous, and peaceful. Is the nation state valid according to *shariah*? Well, what are the arguments that it is not valid? Instead of the onus being upon Muslims to prove the legitimacy of the nation state in Islamic terms, its opponents should prove its illegitimacy. For the basic principles regarding *muamalat* (transactions) are clear: if it is not expressly prohibited, then it is permissible. We do not find Qur’anic verses or Hadith opposing the nation state [and thus it is permissible].

**Moral leadership at a critical juncture:
Nahdlatul Ulama’s Civilizational *Fiqh* —
for equal rights and *against* identity politics’ weaponization of religion**

**Robert W. Hefner
Boston University**

(Remarks delivered in Bahasa Indonesia)

NU officials have made extraordinary progress toward the crafting of an Islamic jurisprudence for a global civilization, which is to say *fiqh al-hadarah*.... Among its core declarations, the *Nusantara Manifesto* called for NU and Muslims around the world to revise “obsolete and problematic... elements within Islamic orthodoxy that lend themselves to tyranny,” so as to “foster the emergence of a global civilization endowed with nobility of character.” On January 3, 2019, the Ansor Youth movement convened a meeting of seventy Muslim scholars that again appealed for a global reformulation of Islamic jurisprudence in line with what the declaration’s formulators described as an “Islamic jurisprudence for a single, interfused global civilization” (*fiqh al-hadarah al-alamiyah al-mutasahirah*). At the NU Congress (Muktamar) that I attended in Surabaya in February 2023, Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf and his colleagues brought together several hundred specialists of Islamic law from across the Muslim world, in yet another effort to internationalize the campaign for reforms to Islamic jurisprudence.

The earlier, 16,000 word *Nusantara Manifesto* of October 25, 2018, provides one of the most definitive summaries of the moral and legal achievements of what the NU leadership calls its collective *ijtihad*. The *Manifesto* makes clear that one of the movement’s primary objectives is to revise those “tenets of classical Islamic law... which are premised upon perpetual conflict with those who do not embrace or submit to Islam.” As an example of such enmity the *Manifesto* cites the 2016-2017 campaign against the Chinese Christian governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjajaha Purnama (“Ahok”), as well as his subsequent conviction on blasphemy charges.

The *Manifesto* decries such campaigns as examples of “the weaponization of religion and its abuse for political purposes.” It also underscores that such efforts are exploited by “extremist groups that reject the existence of Indonesia as a multi-religious and pluralistic nation state” and that claim “to have a monopoly on the correct interpretation and practice of Islam.” It is clear that in referring to those who weaponize religion Nahdlatul Ulama officials had in mind groups like Hizbut Tahrir and the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam) — anti-democratic Islamists that do indeed stand

opposed to Nahdlatul Ulama's commitment to democracy and inclusive citizenship, as well as to NU's conviction that Islam is to be a blessing for all humanity.

In the face of such efforts to weaponize religion for the purpose of identity politics, the *Manifesto* states, all Indonesians must work "to re-enliven the pluralistic and tolerant values that lie at the heart of Indonesia's national consensus" and "to revitalize the understanding and practice of religion as *rahmah* (universal love and compassion)." Several pages later the document declares that a key to this revitalization is the deepening of commitment to "Nusantara civilization." A "key element" of the latter is "the ability not only to grasp but also *prioritize* [emphasis in original]... the spiritual essence of religion, rather than purely formal and dogmatic elements that readily lend themselves to weaponization and... foster conflict rather than social unity." The document goes on to explain that Nusantara society's

"impulse to position spiritual wisdom, rather than dogma, as the central pillar of socio-cultural, religious and political life... enables Nusantara civilization to embrace the essence of newly arrived religions; neutralize their potentially divisive effects; and transform religious pluralism into a source of social unity and strength.... By fostering social harmony and peaceful co-existence among and between those of widely varying ethnicities, cultures and faiths, religion served Nusantara inhabitants as a path to attain spiritual nobility, rather than a pragmatic means to claim privilege and/or supremacy vis-à-vis others."

Anticipating the theme at the heart of NU's February 2023 Congress in Surabaya, the *Manifesto* then makes a direct appeal to the national and international community of Islamic scholars: "changed circumstances necessitate new *ijtihad* to ensure the well-being of humanity" in accordance with the higher aims (*maqasid*) of the *shariah*. To fulfill this promise, "it is essential... that Muslim scholars (*ulama*), political elites, intellectuals, educators and other opinion leaders summon the courage necessary to explicitly state that changing circumstances require the revision of certain historically determined and now obsolete elements of Islamic law."

To repeat, these declarations are not the empty words of ivory-tower academics. They were formulated by scholars from the largest Muslim organization in the world, and they were promoted in the face of efforts to weaponize Islam by Islamist groups like Hizbut Tahrir and the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam) in Indonesia and ISIS and al-Qaeda in the Middle East. All of these latter movements are sectarian rather than *rahmat*-affirming in their core values and tactics. They invoke Islamic law in support of their claim that there is an irremediable clash between Muslims and non-Muslims, and that this clash makes both Pancasila and any other variety of multi-religious citizenship impossible.

In the aftermath of these appeals, the NU leadership accelerated its *maqasid*-based initiatives both nationally and internationally. Beginning in August 2022, the NU leadership organized no fewer than 231 *halaqoh* study circles to review and popularize the aspirations and ethical details of a civilizational *fiqh* (*fiqh al-hadarah*). The *halaqoh* series was carried out under the supervision of NU's Institute for Study and Human Resource Development, under the direction of the Chair of Lakpesdam, KH. Ulil Abshar Abdalla. No less remarkable, the NU effort to promote Humanitarian Islam and *fiqh al-hadarah* has not just been pursued domestically. Under the forward-looking leadership of Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, and with the support of the North-American-based

and NU-linked Bayt ar-Rahmah, NU has also introduced its proposals for a Humanitarian Islam and a reformed Civilizational Jurisprudence at major international conferences. The most prominent of these events include the R20 meeting at the G20 in Bali in November 2022, the NU national Congress in Surabaya in February 2023, and the conference on inter-religious dialogue and peacebuilding held in Yogyakarta in August 2023.

In the months following the Religion Forum (R20) at the G20 meetings, which I attended, NU under KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf's leadership moved quickly to socialize its reform campaign by publishing the proceedings of the R20 presentations. It did so with the express aim of facilitating "the emergence of a global movement, in which people of goodwill and every faith and nation will help bring the world's geopolitical and economic power structures into alignment with the highest moral and spiritual values, for the sake of all humanity" (quote from the book's frontal matter). In all these regards, NU has proved itself the moral leader of a movement to uphold the values of democracy and Pancasila nationalism, and demonstrate that Islam's core message of *rahmat* love and compassion is deeply relevant to the task of creating a rules-based global order.

After Two Decades of Achievement, What Remains to be Done?

By way of conclusion, let me simply note that I speak as a scholar of Islam, religion, and comparative politics, and as someone who has had the great honor and privilege of working in Indonesia and with Indonesian Muslims, including my dear friend and teacher, KH. Abdurrahman Wahid. I shared many fine days with Gus Dur; he was a man who changed my life both intellectually and spiritually. That said, and standing back from my comments today on *fiqh al-hadarah* and Humanitarian Islam, what conclusions might we draw, and, for NU's leadership, what work remains to be done?

I would emphasize four points.

First, in both word and in deed, NU officials have demonstrated that they understand that we live in an age when, contrary to the forecasts of an earlier secularization theory, religious values and organizations have not declined or been pushed from the public sphere, but play an ever-more important role in public affairs. Western Europe is a partial exception to this trend, but Indonesia's example of religious vitality and renewal lies closer to the reality of most of the rest of the world. For the greater part of humanity, there can be no global peace and no individual or shared human dignity without the formulation of compelling religious rationales for human dignity and a rules-based international order.

Second, beginning with KH. Abdurrahman Wahid and KH. Achmad Shiddiq, and continuing under the far-sighted leadership of KH. Mustofa Bisri and KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf, NU leaders have communicated to the world a second critical truth in an age of religious resurgence: namely, at a time when religion figures so prominently in public life, the question that must come to the fore is *just **which variety** of religion is to play the central public role – and is it a variety consistent with the socially plural and rights-regarding societies in which most citizens of the world today wish to live?* In the Indonesian context, NU's answer to questions like these is loud and clear, and expressed with brilliance and moral conviction. To quote an NU statement on *fiqh* for a global civilization once again: "Regardless of background, every human being is equal to every other in dignity and rights" (Bayt ar-Rahmah 2023).

Third, the NU initiative for civilizational *fiqh* is of global importance because, in emphasizing the dignity and equal rights of all people, the project also makes clear that these values can only become the basis of a binding global consensus inasmuch as Muslims and others in like-minded faith traditions commit themselves to the serious ethical and intellectual work required to bring religious values into alignment with the “interfused” realities of our age. For Muslims, NU makes clear, the effort “to address obsolete and problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy” cannot occur on the basis of a non-theistic secular liberalism, as some secular Westerners assume is the case. For people of Islamic faith, the effort must take place (and here I quote the 2023 document again) “from within the system of *fiqh* itself.”

In other words, NU shows, only by working from within the very heart of Islamic tradition can Muslim scholars neutralize the challenge posed by “ISIS, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah... the Taliban” and others. The latter groups draw “upon key elements of classical Islamic law (*fiqh*)” but in a way that reinforces an exclusive and supremacist rather than compassionate and *rahmat*-infused understanding of Islam. In these and other regards, NU has shown the way for people in other faith-based and civilizational traditions to engage the plural challenges of our age, with compassion and human fraternity rather than exclusivist supremacism.

Fourth and last, NU has made clear that this effort to reformulate a shared public ethics in a manner consistent with the global realities of our age requires a highly specific process of jurisprudential reform: “Integrating the rules of the current international system within *fiqh* — that is, recognizing the legitimacy of the Charter of the United Nations and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.”

Note the remarkable cross-cultural irony here: at a time when many secular-minded people in the West subscribe to a new cultural relativism that denies the reality and importance of shared civilizational values, it is NU and Indonesia who call on all nations of the world to affirm a shared moral purpose. This moral purpose is grounded in a religiously-motivated commitment to human equality and dignity. In so doing, this NU-led effort rejects all efforts to weaponize religion. It urges people of all faiths to recognize that we live in an age threatened by sectarianism and exclusivist identity-politics. In this regard NU and Indonesia have returned to and strengthened the noble ideals of KH. Abdurrahman Wahid and KH. Achmad Shiddiq.

I end by quoting an NU statement on *fiqh* for a global civilization: “With Indonesia in the vanguard, Muslims worldwide would provide much-needed support to an international system built upon universal ethics and values, so that human relations occur within a framework that gives due weight to ethical considerations” (NU 2023). As this quote makes clear, NU’s aims are all the more timely and globally significant in that they address a core reality of our age: namely, that we live in a time when many “contemporary Muslims... live in regions of the world dominated by non-Muslims, and/or in the midst of a single, interfused... global civilization.”

The moral vision at the heart of this NU project is thus both Islam-specific and universally relevant for people of all faiths. The vision aspires to a *shariah* that aims to “foster the welfare of *all* human beings, Muslim and non-Muslim alike,” thereby fulfilling the most foundational of moral messages conveyed by God to all his Prophets. However, in leading the way in its own reformulation of ethical tradition, NU also

provides an example for people in other civilizational traditions: they too must revitalize their values on the basis of human equality and dignity. In my view, there are few spiritual messages more profound than this one, and none more relevant for the troubled times in which humanity today lives.

I end my remarks by bearing witness to the nobility of NU's commitment to "*rahmah*, or universal love and compassion," and by celebrating the NU leadership's effort "to join al-Azhar and the Vatican in a joint effort to realize" the noble vision of the "Document on Human Fraternity." In its global outreach, Nahdlatul Ulama consistently invites "people of good will of every faith and nation to join" NU and the Indonesian people in this courageous effort. Through its moral leadership and clarity of vision, Nahdlatul Ulama has reminded us that these *rahmat*-infused qualities are needed now more than ever. In all these regards, Nahdlatul Ulama has demonstrated that religion can indeed be a blessing for all humanity.

[Read Professor Robert W. Hefner's address in full.](#)

During the celebrations, NU *ulama* stood for a rendition of *Hubbul Wathon Minal Iman* (*Love of Nation is Integral to Faith*), composed nearly a century ago by NU co-founder KH. Wahab Chasbullah.

[*Love of Nation is Integral to Faith*](#)

Oh, fellow citizens!
 Love of nation is integral to faith
 And it's not forbidden [in Islam] to defend one's country
 Oh, fellow citizens! Awake and realize (your duty to God and country)
 Indonesia is my nation and my homeland
 My sacred inheritance and source of pride
 Whoever comes to threaten you shall certainly perish beneath your thorns