

NU groups claim success in ‘humanitarian Islam’ push

by Keith Loveard

Groups associated with Indonesia’s largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), are claiming to have made inroads into the European discourse on Islam and terrorism, influencing voters to abandon political parties that fail to acknowledge a causal relationship between Islamist terrorism and “problematic” elements of Islamic teaching and practice.

NU youth movement GP Ansor last May issued a declaration calling for the reform of these problematic tenets within Islamic orthodoxy “in order to bring about a world in which Islam, and Muslims, are truly beneficent and contribute to the well-being of all humanity.”

GP Ansor went on to develop a strategy to contest what it called “obsolete tenets of classical Islamic law, which are premised upon perpetual conflict with those who do not embrace or submit to Islam.”

It argues that Koranic instructions on issues such as the beheading of unbelievers and apostates have been fueling Islamist terrorism and need to be removed from the body of learning because they are no longer appropriate.

NU and its associated bodies, including Ansor and the LibForAll Foundation, are now claiming that a program of targeted messaging, topped by an interview with NU general secretary KH Yahya Cholil Staquf by German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, was influential in shaping public opinion in the midst of that country’s election campaign.

A statement issued by LibForAll on October 24 said extensive media coverage within Germany legitimized public discourse regarding the relationship between terrorism and Islam, accelerating European voters’ abandonment of political parties that refuse to acknowledge any causal relationship between Islamist terrorism and the problematic elements of orthodox Islamic teachings and practice.

The move by NU and its allies represents an unusual move to challenge the validity of elements of classical Islamic teaching on issues such as jihad and the rights of non-Muslims. Attempts in the past to alter perceptions on the relevance of conservative Islamic teachings have been regarded as *bid’ah*, or heretical innovation.

The interview with *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, LibForAll claims, “generated waves of policy discourse and viral media coverage throughout much of Europe and North America.”

The LibForAll statement adds that the pursuit of “humanitarian Islam” could have potential “to help reconcile policy differences and facilitate the emergence of a broad societal consensus in the West regarding Islam and Muslims.”

The call for a new look at Islamic prescription by Staquf set off extensive coverage and comment, winning a “strong, favorable response across the political spectrum and the continent, in regions as diverse as Spain, Belgium, Poland, Denmark and Finland,” the statement claimed. *Time* magazine then picked up the issue and carried the message further.

The statement said Viral News Chart — a subscription service that publishers and brand managers employ to track the dissemination of news stories — “identified the general secretary’s ... interview as one of the most widely-disseminated media stories published worldwide, in any language, during the month of August 2017.”

The statement concluded that GP Ansor’s strategy to promote “humanitarian Islam” was succeeding, not least by identifying and containing the threat of Islamist extremism.

(Nahdlatul Ulama/LibForAll/Concord)

Analysis: NU and its associated organizations are treading a brave but potentially risk-laden path in pushing for fundamental changes in Islamic orthodoxy by demanding the removal of what they argue are outdated passages of the Koran and other influential texts. The move is likely to attract a violent backlash from hard-line groups, not least the Saudi-based Wahhabi movement. Staquf and other NU figures are pushing a message that the Islamic world needs to acknowledge: that Koranic and other core texts of Islam are providing the rationale for violent jihadism, as exemplified by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The task is however essential if the allure of Islamist terrorism is to be weakened, by denying that violent activism has any relevant religious foundation and is entirely inappropriate in the modern context, just as sections of the Bible are now dismissed as irrelevant. Staquf in the past has admitted that the campaign for a more humanitarian Islam faces enormous obstacles if it is to succeed in removing the roots of any rationalization of violence, but it appears that his pessimism may have been misplaced. The success of the campaign the NU groups have been waging in Europe appears to be paying off well, with the major achievement of spreading the message that Islam itself has to accept responsibility for its current problems. By doing so, the campaign has the potential to blunt the other side of the equation of violence: Islamophobia that has the capacity to further isolate Muslim minority populations and foment further violence. Encouraging the awareness that Muslims themselves are questioning the basic assumptions about their faith and how it should affect their behavior could go a long way in reducing tensions and serve to discourage radical recruitment.