



## **Historic Nahdlatul Ulama Congress a Battleground Between Opposing Forces:**

### **Wide Range of Human Nature, and “Religious Impulse,” on Display**

*“In Indonesia, the congress was a major event. It opened with a speech by the country’s president; each day it was the lead item on TV news and in national newspapers. But apart from the presence of diplomats at the opening and reporting by specialized academics, it mostly passed unnoticed in the West.*

*“This is tragic, since a few days spent at the congress of the world’s largest Muslim organization would reshape most Westerners’ perception of Islam. While groups such as ISIS demand a many-sided, including military, response, long-term antidotes to growing Islamic extremism can only be found in organizations such as NU.*

*“Historically, NU, like Indonesia, has rarely sought a bigger place on the Islamic or world stage. But now, with the nation’s economy the largest in the Muslim world, and after eight successful democratic elections, both are reaching out, sponsoring reconciliation and educational programs in Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. There are even NU branches in the United States.*

*“As we continue to struggle with bloody chaos in much of the Middle East, Indonesia, and especially Indonesian Islam, needs our careful attention.”*

~ Paul Marshall, *The Weekly Standard*, [“Among the Believers: A century-old mass organization cultivates an adaptable Islam”](#)

## ***Background***

The Nahdlatul Ulama held its 33<sup>rd</sup> national congress (*muktamar*) from 1 – 5 August 2015 in Jombang, East Java, to select its national leadership and establish an agenda for the next five years (2015 – 2020).



The theme of the event was *Meneguhkan Islam Nusantara untuk Peradaban Indonesia dan Dunia* (“Strengthening East Indies Islam for the Benefit of Indonesian and World Civilization”).

The term *Islam Nusantara* refers to the profoundly spiritual variant of Islam traditionally dominant throughout the Malay Archipelago, which cultivates noble character and virtue (*akhlakul karima*) among its adherents; respects and proactively defends cultural and religious diversity as a natural expression of God’s will; teaches that universal love and compassion are integral to religion; and that the primary message and purpose of Islam is to serve as a blessing for all creation. Given these characteristics, *Islam Nusantara* is inherently antithetical to the authoritarian/monolithic interpretation of religion propagated by Islamist extremists, who hate and fear the term.

Within Indonesia, both political opportunists and radicals are deliberately targeting the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—the world’s largest Muslim organization, with over 50 million followers and 14,000 madrasahs. Exit polls conducted during Indonesia’s 2014 national elections suggest that, in fact, as many as 80 million Indonesians may self-identify with the NU and its traditional understanding of Islam.

The NU has played a decisive role in every phase of Indonesian history, ever since the organization was founded in 1926, in direct response to the Saudi/Wahhabi conquest of Mecca and Medina. This role includes having mobilized traditional Sunni clerics to resist Wahhabi inroads; waging a successful war for independence against the Dutch; enshrining religious pluralism and tolerance as key pillars of the newly established state, in the form of Pancasila (“Five Principles”) and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (“Unity Amid Diversity”); mobilizing civil society to peacefully overthrow the Suharto dictatorship, and replace it with a democratic system

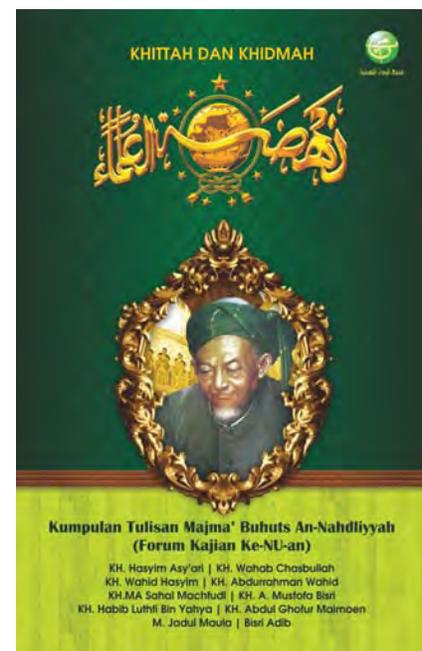
founded upon respect for ethnic and religious minorities, human rights and freedom of the press; and steadfastly opposing extremist efforts to transform Indonesia into a so-called “Islamic” state.

Ironically, the very freedom and democracy established in Indonesia in 1998, with Nahdlatul Ulama support, has been systematically exploited by transnational Islamist movements and opportunistic political parties. Extremists have seized the chance to undermine Indonesia’s traditions of religious pluralism and tolerance, while political parties compete to mobilize the Nahdlatul Ulama’s enormous “vote bank,” consisting of NU followers heavily influenced by the NU’s local, regional and national leadership. The resulting infiltration and corruption of the NU’s organizational structure has seriously undermined the NU’s ability to maintain social and religious harmony within Indonesia, and vigorously counter the extremist ideology, and political opportunism, that threaten both the NU and Indonesia at large.

***Ahlul Halli wal Aqdi***  
***“Those who have a right to appoint and deny”***

In response to this threat, the spiritual wing of the Nahdlatul Ulama—led by senior LibForAll/IIQS advisor [Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri](#)—has been systematically implementing a long-term strategy to strengthen the traditional values of the NU, so that it may continue to serve as an unshakable pillar of support for religious pluralism and diversity in Indonesia, while propagating these values throughout the Muslim world and helping to shape the future course of Western foreign policy in this critical arena. The promotion of *Islam Nusantara* is a key component of this strategic effort, as are calls for the NU to return to its founding principles and aspirations.

[\*Khittah dan Khidmah Nahdlatul Ulama\*](#) (*The Nahdlatul Ulama’s Founding Principles and Aspirations*), published by Majma’ Buhuts an-Nahdliyyah (the Forum for NU Teachings), which was established in 2004 by top NU spiritual figures including H.E. KH. Abdurrahman Wahid; KH. Sahal Mafudz; KH. A. Mustofa Bisri; KH. Dimiyati Rois; KH. Mafudz Ridwan; and KH. Muadz Thohir.



As an integral part of this strategy, senior NU clerics recommended adoption of a mechanism designed to “short-circuit” opportunistic/extremist intervention in selection of the organization’s leadership at its national congress (*muktamar*), held every five years. Ever since the fall of Suharto, an accelerating trend has emerged, in which politically- and economically-motivated individuals—who often have little knowledge of the NU’s traditional teachings, and little to no affiliation with its network of *pesantren* (madrasahs)—have gained control of local NU chapters and leveraged this control for personal advantage. Simultaneously, many NU executive boards (*tanfidziyah*)—at a national, provincial and regional level—began acting independently of, and frequently in conflict with, their corresponding supreme councils (*syuriah*), which are meant to direct and control executive boards at each respective level of the NU.

Rather than direct election of the Chairman of the NU Supreme Council (*Rais Aam Syuriah PBNU*) by regional chapters vulnerable to the exercise of “money politics,” senior *ulama* (religious scholars) advised that the 33<sup>rd</sup> NU Congress employ a system devised by Umar bin Khattab, a companion to the Prophet Muhammad, to select his successor.

Known as *ahlul halli wal aqdi* (or AHWA), a consultative council of nine senior *ulama*—respected for their knowledge of Islamic law, humility and renunciation of self-interest—would be selected by *muktamar* delegates. These nine *ulama* would, in turn, deliberate among themselves and appoint a new Chairman of the NU Supreme Council.

This *ahlul halli wal aqdi* (AHWA) mechanism was used once before—at the 27<sup>th</sup> national congress held in 1984 in Situbondo, East Java—in order to prevent the Suharto regime from acquiring control of the NU via systematic vote buying and the intimidation of *muktamar* delegates. In fact, it was this historic *muktamar* that appointed LibForAll/IIQS co-founder [H.E. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid](#) as General Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Executive Board, from which strategic position he orchestrated the peaceful overthrow of Suharto’s regime (in 1998) and Indonesia’s transition to a pluralistic democracy.

### ***Islam Nusantara***

On June 15, approximately 40,000 NU followers gathered at Indonesia’s national mosque in Jakarta to attend an *istighotsah* ceremony, heralding the arrival of Ramadan (the fasting month within the Islamic calendar).



Entitled “Nurturing Spiritual Traditions; Safeguarding National Unity,” the ceremony was designed to launch a 2-day National Conference of NU religious scholars who gathered to make final preparations for the upcoming NU Congress to be held in August. *Rais Aam Syuriah PWNNU* (Chairmen of the Supreme Council) for NU Provincial Chapters in 29 of the nation’s 34 provinces agreed to use the principle of *ahlul halli wal aqdi*, or AHWA, to select the Chairman of the NU Supreme Council at the Jombang *muktamar*.

The East Java and Central Java chapters of the NU—which represent the organization’s traditional heartland, where a majority of its followers reside—took the lead in embracing the concept of AHWA, and recommending its use at the 2015 *muktamar*, “in order to minimize the influence of external parties that wish to destroy the NU via ‘money politics’ (conducted by self-interested businessmen and political parties) and a [‘black campaign’](#) (conducted by Muslim extremists) against NU figures.”

Indonesian president Joko Widodo delivered the keynote address at the *istighotsah* ceremony, which was also attended by KH. Said Aqil Siradj (Chairman of the NU Executive Board); KH. Lukman Hakim Saifuddin (a prominent NU theologian who serves as Minister of Religion); Nusron Wahid (Chairman of Ansor, the NU’s Young Adults organization); Ibu Sinta Nuriyah Wahid (widow of former president and NU chairman H.E. KH. Abdurrahman Wahid); and KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf (Secretary for Political & International Affairs to the NU Supreme Council and Secretary to the *muktamar* planning committee).

“The NU has the primary responsibility for preserving and promoting *Islam Nusantara*,” said KH. Said Aqil Siradj during his introductory address. “*Islam Nusantara* was proselytized (by Muslim saints) who embraced local culture, strengthened and preserved local culture, respected

local culture. They did not seek to destroy local culture (unlike Muslim extremists),” he told [BBC Indonesia](#).

President Jokowi’s speech quickly went viral, garnering massive public attention via print, broadcast and internet/social media. “I am profoundly concerned by the political upheavals and bloodshed in the Muslim Middle East. Syria and Iraq are shaking violently (like buildings in an earthquake). Praise be to God, our Islam is *Islam Nusantara* (East Indies Islam),” proclaimed President Jokowi, as hundreds of media outlets reported the next day. “Islam that is gentle and polite. Islam that is civilized. *That is Islam Nusantara: Islam full of tolerance.*”

### *Extremist Media: 33<sup>rd</sup> NU Congress is a Contest Between the “Correct” and “Liberal” Wings of the NU*

A tight-knit alliance of opportunists and extremists, who had spent years laying the groundwork to acquire control of the NU Central Board, did not give up easily. As widely reported in Indonesia’s media, the first three days of the *muktamar* were acrimonious and chaotic. Opponents accused AHWA supporters of distributing cash-filled envelopes to buy the election; of subverting the NU’s bylaws; of perverting the teachings of Islam, through respect for and promotion of “*Islam Nusantara*”; and of intervention by the PKB (President Wahid’s political party), whose leadership consists of numerous senior NU figures. Rendering these accusations all the more trenchant was the fact that the de facto spokesman of those who opposed AHWA was Salahuddin Wahid (“Gus Sholah”), younger brother of H.E. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid and current head of Pondok Pesantren (Madrasah) Tebuireng in Jombang, East Java, where President Wahid, his father (KH. Wahid Hasyim) and his grandfather (NU co-founder KH. Hasyim Asy’ari) are buried.

A majority of those within the “inner circle” of the NU realized that Gus Sholah was closely allied to, and speaking for, Hasyim Muzadi, chairman of the NU executive board from 1999 – 2010, during whose term in office money politics became institutionalized within the NU. At the 2010 *muktamar* Hasyim Muzadi had sought, and failed, to attain the office of *Rais Aam*.

As in 2010, the Hasyim Muzadi/Gus Sholah alliance sought to transform the office of *Rais Aam* and *Syuriah PBNU* (the NU Supreme Council) from a body of senior spiritual *ulama* to one composed of professional managers, who need not be experts in the form, and substance, of Islamic teachings. This may be attributed, in part or in whole, to the fact that neither Hasyim Muzadi nor Gus Sholah are generally regarded within the NU as spiritual *ulama* (i.e., experts in the field of Islamic law who possess a high degree of spiritual attainment).

Historically, NU tradition has dictated that the office of *Rais Aam Syuriah PBNU* be occupied by the organization’s most senior and respected religious scholar. Effectively divorced from that tradition and seeking to subvert it, Hasyim Muzadi conducted a multi-year “political campaign”

for the office of *Rais Aam*, while his ally (Gus Sholah) sought the position of *Ketua Umum Tanfidziyah PBNU* (Chairman of the NU Executive Board).

Unaware of these circumstances, much of the national media and public at large were confused by Gus Sholah's caustic attacks upon those who advocated the adoption of AHWA—conflating Gus Sholah's views with those of Abdurrahman Wahid, when in fact President Wahid belonged to the spiritual wing of the NU and was emphatically opposed to opportunist/extremist attempts to infiltrate and subvert the NU's founding principles and aspirations.

***“Gus Mus Descends from the Mountaintop”***  
***and Brings Calm to NU Congress***



As reported by the nation's leading news magazine (*Tempo*), after three days of dramatic conflict “Kyai Mustofa Bisri, or ‘Gus Mus,’ profoundly moved the hearts of NU *muktamar* participants with a speech. As he took the stage, the tumult of the crowd—which had been trembling on the brink of violence between competing factions—immediately fell silent. Gus Mus, who serves as Chairman of the NU Supreme Council, began to speak in a hoarse voice, with tears trickling down his cheeks. The head of Pondok Pesantren (Madrasah) Raudlatuh Tholibin in Rembang, Central Java, asked those in attendance to recollect and embody the sublime character and virtues displayed by [NU co-founder] Kyai Haji Hasyim Asy'ari and their other noble predecessors.

“What follows is the full text of Gus Mus's speech at the NU Congress in Jombang delivered on Monday, 3 August 2015:

As I've followed the plenary sessions held over the past few days, I often found myself in tears, because the NU—which for so many generations has maintained its image as a religious organization, a living example of noble character and virtue, which often criticizes the ignoble practices of others—has been painted in the mass media as itself being rotten and corrupt. I am deeply ashamed before Almighty God; ashamed before Kyai Haji Hasyim Asy'ari, Kyai Haji Wahab Hasbullah, Kyai Haji Bisri Syansuri and all of the great (spiritual) masters who came before us. This feeling of shame sickened me even further when I saw a newspaper headline that read, “NU Congress in Turmoil; Muhammadiyah Congress Tranquil.”

I ask that we once again read *Surah al-Fatihah* (the opening chapter of the Qur'an) in a state of sincere devotion (to God), asking for his (the Prophet Muhammad's) intercession.

The *Rais Aam* who placed me in this role, Kyai Haji Sahal Mafudhz... Why did he die, imposing this enormous burden upon me? Lend me your ears and pray for me, for this is the last time I will occupy this [exalted] position, for which I am so unsuited.

Listen to me, as your supreme leader.

Please listen to me. With all respect, I would eagerly bow down and kiss the feet of each and every one of you, that together we may embrace and embody the sublime character and virtues exhibited by Kyai Haji Hasyim Asy'ari and those who came before us.

Earlier today I gathered the NU's most senior *kyais* (religious scholars, or *ulama*), and their hearts are full of anguish. In this hallowed land [Jombang], which holds the earthly remains of our *kyais*, where the NU was founded... Do we wish to destroy and bury the NU here as well? Let us seek shelter in God!!! With a humble heart, I beg that you abandon all worldly considerations and reflect upon God, and upon those (saintly men) who established the Nahdlatul Ulama.

After having deliberated the situation, the senior *kyais* who gathered this afternoon agreed upon several points that should guide our subsequent discussions (within the *muktamar*).

There is one minor change from the decision reached in Jakarta [in June of 2015, when a preparatory conference of *ulama* agreed to employ AHWA to select a *Rais Aam*], which we agreed would provide a solution [to this conflict.]

If those attending this *muktamar* cannot agree to select a *Rais Aam* via a consultative council [AHWA], then the *Rais Aam Syuriah PBNU* (Chairman of the NU Supreme Council) will be elected through direct vote by all regional *Rais Aam*.

Our most senior *kyais* and I offer you this solution, for when you next meet in plenary session: if you can decide to do so, use the consultative process [AHWA] to select a *Rais Aam*. If not, use a direct voting process. That is what our organizational bylaws dictate. This concerns the selection of a *Rais Aam* (Supreme Leader); thus, *kyais* should choose who will lead their fellow *kyais*.

Whichever of these two methods you choose should immediately be employed [to select a new *Rais Aam*]. If you refuse to accept this solution, then I will accept [responsibility for enforcing it], even though I am merely Mustofa Bisri, the [insignificant] human being struck down by the misfortune of becoming Kyai Sahal's successor. If you do not wish [to accept my ruling, or *fatwa*], then release me from this burden here and now.

Please pray that the burden of *Rais Aam* will pass from my hands, after this brief time [following Kyai Sahal's death].

I haven't slept for days, because I've been thinking constantly of you. I apologize and beg for your forgiveness, especially those who have travelled far and those who are elderly. Please forgive the members of the *muktamar* committee for how they've managed any technical details that may have disappointed you, and please forgive me. The fault is mine, and I hope you will forgive me."

*CNN Indonesia:*

["Gus Mus's Profoundly Moving Speech Restores NU Congress to Normal"](#)

*Antara* (Indonesia's national wire service):

["Fatwa from Chairman of NU Supreme Council Resolves Mukhtamar Deadlock"](#)

As widely reported in Indonesia's print and broadcast media—with major networks transmitting the speech in full, to a spellbound national audience—Mustofa Bisri's address dissolved the atmosphere of anger and recrimination that had dominated previous sessions of the *muktamar*. As one reporter noted:

Gus Mus's words, delivered in a soft and trembling voice, hypnotized the thousands of *muktamar* attendees who filled the plenary hall. Not a single tense expression could be seen upon anyone's face, unlike the previous night. In fact, nearly everyone appeared to be swept away by profound and heartfelt emotion...

After conveying his advice, Gus Mus left the stage and vanished from the meeting hall. Slamet Effendy Yusuf, chairman of the session, immediately seized the reins and asked the assembled delegates, "Is our revered elder's (i.e., Gus Mus's) proposal to alter paragraph 19 acceptable to you?"

"Yes!" the delegates exclaimed in unison.

The Vice Chairman of the NU Central Board, who had presided over the past three days' chaotic meetings, cried "*Allahu Akbar!*" His voice on the verge of breaking as he struggled to restrain his tears, Slamet Effendy pronounced *shalawat* (praise and blessings) upon the Prophet Muhammad (saw.). At the same time, many of the delegates also broke into tears and stood to embrace one another while crying profusely.

The following day, the assembled *Rais Aam Syuriah PWNU* (Chairmen of the Supreme Council) for NU Provincial Chapters voted 252 to 239 to alter the NU bylaws and adopt *ahlul halli wal aqdi* (AHWA) as the mechanism for selection of *Rais Aam Syuriah PBNU* (Chairman of the NU Supreme Council) at the current and future *muktamars*.

The assembly also voted to extend this leadership selection mechanism (AHWA) throughout the formal structure of the NU—i.e., for senior *ulama* to appoint future members of the supreme council (*syuriah*) and executive board (*tanfidziyah*) at the national, provincial, regency, sub-regency and village levels—in order to restore the traditional synergy between the *syuriah* (whose members should be among the most senior and respected *ulama* within any given geographic area) and *tanfidziyah* (whose members should be skilled executors possessed of moral integrity, who act at the behest of senior *ulama*).

By implementing these changes, the spiritual wing of the Nahdlatul Ulama hopes to insulate the organization from money politics and the de facto corruption that have plagued its leadership structure since the advent of democracy in 1999. In other words, the adoption of *ahlul halli wal*

*aqdi* is intended to restore the NU's foundational principles (*khittah*) and aspirations for the betterment of humanity (*khidmah*); prevent (or at least hinder) its exploitation by opportunists as a vehicle for the attainment of wealth and power; and enable the NU to once again serve as a voice of moral authority—acting as an effective check on the abuse of government power and the spread of Islamist extremism.

Acting in accordance with its decision to adopt AHWA, the assembly elected nine of the NU's most senior and respected *ulama* to form a consultative council, whose members swiftly and unanimously agreed to appoint KH. A. Mustofa Bisri as Chairman of the NU Supreme Council.

The disappointed alliance of opportunists and extremists—seeing their opportunity to control the NU slip away—stormed out of the official assembly and gathered at the famous nearby *pesantren* (madrasah) Tebuireng, where they accused KH. A. Mustofa Bisri of having manipulated congress attendees the previous night with his “crocodile tears” and “insincere speech,” and condemned the *muktamar* committee for allegedly violating NU bylaws.

These [widely reported developments](#) were soon followed by the news that Mustofa Bisri had refused to accept his appointment as chairman of the NU Supreme Council. As reported by [Metro TV](#) and hundreds of other media outlets, KH. Mustofa Bisri sent the consultative council a letter composed in *pegon* (Arabic script used to write Javanese and Malay), which read as follows:

As we know, our congress has been and continues to be somewhat chaotic. This is due to the existence of competing factions, both of which want their “champion” to become *Rais Aam*. One seeks to influence *muktamar* attendees to elect person A, the other to choose person B. And the members of one group regard the *ahlul halli wal aqdi* system as a (purely pragmatic) instrument employed by the other faction (to secure victory).

Because of these circumstances, and in order to ensure the well-being of the Nahdlatul Ulama—as well as to nurture and safeguard both groups—it would be best for the consultative council of senior *ulama* (*ahlul halli wal aqdi*) not to select either of the two persons (A or B) championed by these respective factions. Let the position of *Rais Aam* be given to a member of the consultative council who most closely approximates the (exalted) criteria (required of a *Rais Aam Syuriah PBNU*).

As for the General Chairman of the Executive Board: let the chosen *Rais Aam* give his blessing to all candidates for this position (i.e., permit them to run), so

that *muktamar* participants can have the satisfaction of voting for their chosen candidate, whoever that might be.

Mustofa Bisri's letter subtly but clearly suggested that the position of *Rais Aam* be given to the most senior figure on the consultative council, KH. Maemun Zubair (photo, below), who replied by insisting that KH. Mustofa Bisri himself should hold the position, being the most qualified to do so.



As neither Kyai Bisri nor Kyai Maemun were willing to assume a role within the formal structure of the NU that implied spiritual precedence and authority vis-à-vis the other—nor be seen to “benefit” from the highly distasteful process the nation had witnessed—the consultative council (*ahlul halli wal aqdi*) appointed a less senior figure to the position of *Rais Aam Syuriah PBNU* (Chairman of the NU Supreme Council). The new *Rais Aam*, KH. Ma’ruf Amin, was a founding member of the governing board of the PKB (President Wahid’s political party); influential figure at the Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI); and adviser on religious affairs to Indonesia’s 6<sup>th</sup> president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

***An “Imperfect Outcome”  
at a Congress “Guarded by Angels and Spirits”?***

Despite a natural human tendency to contrast the imperfections of reality with an idealized concept of how things should be, the actual choice that public figures often confront is between greater and lesser evils.

From the perspective of [Muslim extremists](#), the 33<sup>rd</sup> NU Congress held in Jombang, East Java, was a disaster. The opportunist/extremist alliance painstakingly assembled by Hasyim Muzadi over the past five years not only failed to secure control of the NU Central Board; its members were completely shut out of any positions of authority. Future selection of the NU's leadership will be in the hands of senior *ulama* who are (hopefully) insulated from money politics. The [new board](#) has embraced the concept of *Islam Nusantara* (East Indies Islam), and will seek to promote its values both domestically and internationally, as a living, breathing alternative to radical Islam.

Also of great significance were decisions made by the NU's Bahtsul Masa'il Commission, which deliberates major issues from the perspective of Islamic law. In an article entitled ["Gus Mus's Charisma and the Secret Behind the Greatness of the NU's 33rd National Congress,"](#) a participant describes how the Bahtsul Masa'il Commission overcame Wahhabi-tinged objections to reaffirm a crucial decision made during KH. Abdurrahman Wahid's term as NU Chairman: that is, to reopen the doors of *ijtihad* ("independent reasoning") and engage in *istinbath* ("digging into the source—i.e., the Qur'an and Sunnah—so that new interpretations of Islamic law may emerge").

**The importance of this decision, in light of current world developments—including ISIS and al-Qaeda's use of Islamic law to justify their actions—should not be underestimated. With over 14,000 *pesantren* (madrasahs) and an enormous network of *ulama* trained in the classical traditions of Sunni Islam, both formal and spiritual, the NU represents the largest single body of religious scholars in the Muslim world positioned to address this vital issue.**

That said, the formal structure of the NU is plagued by managerial weakness characteristic of a rural-based organization, and key positions remain occupied by individuals more concerned with their personal or political agenda than with pressing issues that threaten the well-being of humanity as a whole.

Even more worrisome, from the perspective of spiritual *ulama*, was the highly politicized nature of the recent congress in Jombang, which they believe reflects a state of profound moral and spiritual decay within the NU itself. In their view, exemplary behavior arises spontaneously from nobility of character, and it is the primary responsibility of religious leaders to inculcate *akhlakul karima* (sublime character and virtue) in those who profess to embrace Islam.

The formal structure of the Nahdlatul Ulama is an institution, like any other. As such, it is distinct from the actual grass-roots membership that its institutional leaders often claim to represent. In fact, throughout its history NU members have exhibited far greater attachment and loyalty to those they regard as wielding spiritual authority, than institutional authority. Only when these two overlap—as in the case of NU founders KH. Hasyim Asy'ari (1926 – 1947) and

KH. Wahab Hasbullah (1947 – 1971), or KH. Abdurrahman Wahid during his term as chairman of the NU executive board (1984 – 1999)—does the NU community at large unite behind its institutional leadership.

This vivid distinction between institutional and spiritual authority has been repeatedly demonstrated in the results of Indonesian elections over the past 15 years. For example, Hasyim Muzadi failed to attract a significant number of NU followers when he ran for Vice President with Megawati Sukarnoputri in 2004, despite the fact that he was General Chairman of the NU Executive Board.



With his refusal to accept the position of *Rais Aam*, KH. A. Mustofa Bisri cemented his status as the foremost spiritual *‘alim* (religious scholar) in the Nahdlatul Ulama, and the natural successor to H. E. KH. Abdurrahman Wahid (1940 – 2009), whose grave in Jombang, East Java, has become one of the most heavily-visited pilgrimage sites in the world (photo, above).



After declining the position of *Rais Aam*, KH. A. Mustofa Bisri visited the graves of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, KH. Wahid Hasyim and KH. Abdurrahman Wahid at Pondok Pesantren Tebuireng in Jombang, East Java. As widely reported by the media, Mustofa Bisri sat upon the ground as a common pilgrim (photo, above) and wept as he asked forgiveness for his inability to rise to the stature of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari and KH. Wahab Hasbullah, whom he believes exemplified the qualities required in a *Rais Aam*.

Yet as the renowned Indonesian composer, musician and author/Sufi mystic Kyai Haji Emha Ainun Nadjib wrote in his book *Air Zamzam di Negeri Comberan (Water from the Sacred Well of Zamzam, in a Muddy Country)*: “Gus Mus is a true *mufti* [a master of Sunni Muslim scholarship and jurisprudence]. But he is too humble [to pride himself on this fact]. Yet *al-mufti* is indeed his quality, and his spiritual stature in life.”

## *Preserving and Promoting the Values of Islam Nusantara*



[Leadership of the Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council and Executive Board \(2015 – 2020\) at Indonesia’s presidential palace with President Joko Widodo on August 27, 2015.](#)

KH. Yahya Cholil Staqf—KH. Mustofa Bisri’s nephew and a former presidential spokesman for KH. Abdurrahman Wahid—was appointed General Secretary to the Supreme Council for the 2015 – 2020 period. In this position, he will serve as the primary interlocutor between the NU Supreme Council and its Executive Board, as well as coordinating with the NU’s advisory board, whose senior-most figures include KH. Maemun Zubair and KH. A. Mustofa Bisri.

Among the significant developments that followed in the wake of the NU Congress was the selection of new leadership by the Indonesian Council of Religious Scholars (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, or MUI). MUI is a quasi-autonomous organization created by the Suharto government in 1982, in order to provide a mantle of religious legitimacy to its authoritarian regime, which never succeeded in controlling either of Indonesia’s largest Islamic organizations, the Nahdlatul Ulama or the Muhammadiyah.

After the fall of Suharto, MUI was heavily infiltrated by Muslim extremists who used the organization to propagate a harsh interpretation of Islam, including the demonization of religious minorities such as Shi’ites and Ahmadiyah.

At a national congress held on August 26 and 27 in Surabaya, East Java, the MUI elected the Nahdlatul Ulama’s new *Rais Aam*, KH. Ma’ruf Amin, as its Chairman for the 2015 – 2020

period. The MUI also appointed three figures, noted for their engagement with and protection of religious minorities, to its Policy Council (*Dewan Pertimbangan*). Religious extremists remarked, with horror, that a number of firm “defenders of Islam” have been cast out of MUI leadership positions and replaced by “defenders of heretics and infidels including Shi’ites, Ahmadiyah and even the author Anand Krishna... whose books—which are inimical to a clear understanding of Islam—are published by the Catholic media group Kompas/Gramedia.” Anand Krishna was unjustly imprisoned in 2012, much to the satisfaction of Muslim extremists, who feared his appeal to Muslim youth and his friendship with Islamic leaders such as President Abdurrahman Wahid and KH. Nasaruddin Umar (Deputy Minister of Religion and one of the newly-appointed members of the MUI Policy Council).

In stark contrast to the reaction of extremists, Indonesia’s mainstream press welcomed these developments within the MUI, which are consistent with the highly pluralistic traditions of *Islam Nusantara*. As [\*The Jakarta Post\*](#) noted in an article headlined “New MUI Chairman to embrace beleaguered minority groups”:

Ma’ruf said that he was determined to change the image of the MUI from a bulwark of conservatism to a moderate institution. He said that minority sects, especially Ahmadiyah and Shia Islam, which many Indonesian Muslims deem “deviant” from mainstream Islam, would be embraced by the MUI under his watch. “We will not tolerate any persecution [of minority religious groups in Indonesia]. The new MUI will try its best to prohibit and even to prevent [any form of persecution] from happening. The new MUI will campaign for religious harmony without any form of violence,” Ma’ruf told *The Jakarta Post* on Thursday night, just hours after his election.

This reflects a turnaround not only for the MUI, but also for KH. Mar’uf Amin himself, who has been closely involved with the MUI for years.

These developments—within the Nahdlatul Ulama and MUI—are strongly supported by the administration of Indonesian President Joko Widodo, whose electorate and ministerial appointments are, by and large, closely aligned with the traditions of *Islam Nusantara*.

These traditions include the *Ramayana* and *Bharatayuda* (or *Mahabharata*)—Hindu literary epics that have become deeply rooted within Javanese and Indonesian society as a whole. The central event within the *Bharatayuda* is a climactic battle between the opposing forces of *dharma* (“right action”) and *adharma* (“wrong action,” which gives rise to social chaos). These opposing forces are embodied in the Pandavas—five highly principled and remarkably united brothers, who are disciples of Krishna (an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu)—and their cousins the Kauravas—one hundred quarrelsome brothers who are driven by ego and naked self-interest.

Yet as President Wahid—a lifelong aficionado of *wayang kulit*, or Javanese shadow puppet theater—once remarked to his friend KH. Mustofa Bisri: “*Kurawa adalah orang-orang yang belum diPandawakan.*” That is, “The Kauravas are simply human beings who have not yet attained the spiritual realization of the Pandavas.”

From the perspective of *Islam Nusantara*, the same may be said of those whose religious enthusiasm outstrips their spiritual wisdom, or who seek to promote an exclusive ‘in-group’ by encouraging their fellow Muslims to demonize and ‘oppose’ others—rather than view Islam as harmonious with, and complementary to, other faiths.

*WaLlahu A’lam.* God alone knows the truth of all things.