

Islam Nusantara: a local Islam with global ambitions?

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Over the past year, Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), has embarked on a project to promote its vision of inclusive and peaceful Islam to Indonesia and the world. Through Islam Nusantara, or "Islam of the Archipelago", Nahdlatul Ulama believes it can offer a counter-narrative to the rigid and violent ideology of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS).

Islam Nusantara was the theme of Nahdlatul Ulama's 33rd national conference, or *muktamar*, in August last year. But the *muktamar* failed to agree on what exactly was meant by Islam Nusantara, and it has remained a contentious concept among NU members. Outright rejection of the concept from some members and disagreements even among supporters led the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board (PBNU) to hold a discussion last week with its East Java branch to better articulate the concept.

Just as the discussion was wrapping up, I received a text message from Afifuddin Muhajir, an Islamic leader from Situbondo in East Java. "So-called Islam Nusantara cannot transcend shari'a," he said. "Not all Islamic teaching can be 'Indonesianised'." The fact that such a message came from *Kiai Afif*, who has a reputation for flexibility, demonstrated

that NU had serious unfinished business to address.

The dispute between supporters and opponents of Islam Nusantara really boils down to the classic debate about Islam and culture in Indonesia. Has Javanese culture been Islamised so that practices that conflicted with shari'a were modified to better reflect Islamic teaching? Or has Javanese culture infiltrated the rituals of Islam, so that the expression and practice of Islam in Java is different to the "pure" Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia?

Opponents contend that Islam Nusantara seeks to legitimise cultural practices that are at odds with the teachings of Islam, while supporters say that it is an inclusive Islam tolerant of local culture. For example, opponents view the Kejawen tradition (a syncretic Javanese tradition that incorporates elements of Islam, animism, Hinduism and Buddhism) as deviant, while supporters see it as an example of Indonesia's rich cultural practice and worthy of appreciation.

Islam Nusantara, opponents argue, enters the realm of belief (*akidah*) to which there can be no compromise. Supporters, meanwhile, believe that Islam Nusantara operates more in the realm of *fiqh*, or Islamic jurisprudence, which can be more flexible. So the two groups are deadlocked: opponents say Islam Nusantara as an understanding is flawed; supporters say opposition to Islam Nusantara is because of a failure to understand.

Islam Nusantara is actually a continuation of the concept of the indigenisation of Islam (*pribumisasi Islam*) advanced by former NU leader (and the fourth Indonesian president) Abdurrahman Wahid and continued by his successor, Hasyim Muzadi. *Pribumisasi Islam* was a form of resistance to transnational Islam, which was considered an imported product, poorly suited to Indonesian culture. These ideas were developed further by NU head Said Aqil Siradj as Islam Nusantara. Although the concept was elaborated relatively recently, Islam Nusantara has its theoretical roots in former Minister of Home Affairs Hazairin's notion of a national school of thought (*mazhab*), and Professor Hasbi As-Shiddieqy's concept of Indonesian *fiqh*, both of which were described decades earlier.

With many Indonesians concerned about the possibility of ISIS gaining a foothold in Indonesia, mainstream Muslim organisations like Nahdlatul Ulama have sought to reaffirm the form of Islam practiced in Indonesia: an Islam that is different to the violent extremism promoted by ISIS and has proven to be a source of peace in the archipelago over centuries.

In short, efforts to counter radicalisation must offer an alternative ideology. As such, the National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) has been strongly supportive of Islam Nusantara. Even President Joko Widodo has described Islam Nusantara as a "bull and bulwark" (*benteng dan banteng*) to protect the national ideology Pancasila, the national motto of Unity in Diversity, the 1945 Indonesian Constitution and the Unitary Indonesian State (NKRI).

Supporters of Islam Nusantara go one step further, suggesting that the concept should be exported to the wider Islamic world. But will Islam Nusantara gain any traction in the Middle East? If the emphasis is on promoting the product, not the method, then efforts to promote Islam Nusantara on the other side of the world will undoubtedly fail.

Forget about Islam Nusantara, Nahdlatul Ulama only has any real strength in Java. Nahdlatul Ulama has no international reach like Wahabbism, Ikhwanul Muslimin (the Muslim Brotherhood) or Hizbut Tahrir. The issues raised by these transnational movements are global concerns and, accordingly, have broader relevance for Muslims across the world. Nahdlatul Ulama, meanwhile, is focused primarily on cultural issues of interest to the Javanese. How then can Islam Nusantara ever hope to have any global influence?

Saudi Arabia is custodian of the two holy lands, Turkey claims that it represents the Islamic world because it was home to the last caliphate, while Egypt has long positioned itself as the centre for Islamic scholarship through Al-Azhar University. What can Islam Nusantara offer?

Promoting Islam Nusantara is often misunderstood as inserting Indonesian culture into the Arab world. This would be impossible, of course, as the history, politics and sociocultural context of the two regions are vastly different. Islam Nusantara can play a role, however, in promoting its method, or *manhaj*, of an Islam that accommodates local culture. Such an approach has little hope of penetrating the Arab world either, because it is almost impossible to separate Arabic culture from daily Islamic practices in the region.

The Islam Nusantara method has the most chance of making an impact in the west. It could be used to develop an Australian Islam, American Islam or European Islam – understandings of Islam that are accordant with the local culture where Muslims reside.

Conservatives in the west are concerned about the asylum seekers and refugees arriving from countries like Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan leading to social problems or changing the culture of Europe(link is external). Islam Nusantara can promote the need for a more supple or flexible understanding of Islamic jurisprudence for Muslims living in the west. It would operate much like the Indonesian idiom “wherever you stand on the earth, there you hold up the sky” (*di mana bumi dipijak, di situ langit dijunjung*), meaning that wherever you are, it is important to observe local customs.

Islam Nusantara should therefore not be about promoting a Javanese Islam, rather it should promote how local culture, wherever it may be, can interact positively with Islamic teachings. That is the real nature of Islam Nusantara: it is not about the Javanisation of Islam or the Islamisation of Java, or the Islamisation of the west or the westernisation of Islam, for that matter.

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