KUALA LUMPUR: Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), has warned that politicians who use Islam to win votes inevitably end up discriminating against minorities and provoking intolerance that can lead to religious conflict.

“There are political actors who have used Islam as a weapon and have succeeded (in winning elections). Using religion in a heterogeneous society (ends up) discriminating against people of other faiths,” Yahya Staquf, secretary-general of NU, told *Channel NewsAsia.*
“This has the potential to trigger conflict with other faiths that can easily be turned into violent conflicts. We cannot afford any more religious conflicts,” said Staquf.

In making these comments, NU is adding its voice to others, including Muslim leaders and human rights groups, who have highlighted how some politicians in Indonesia and Malaysia are using religion to win votes.

NU claims 50 million followers and is known as the face of moderate Islam in the world’s largest Muslim country.

Staquf was in Kuala Lumpur as a keynote speaker in the Istanbul Network 5th International Conference on Democratic Transitions in the Muslim World which ended on Nov 28.

“I speak about Islam because I am Muslim. I know what is happening in the Muslim world. But that doesn’t mean other religions don’t have problems,” Staquf added.

“This is not a problem of Malaysia and Indonesia. This is a problem of our civilisation. We need to give attention to the security of our entire civilisation. Do we want to have peace or do we want the world to end quickly?” asked Staquf.

“We need a global consolidation to deal with this problem. The key is to build awareness…don’t allow Islam to be used to trigger conflict,” said Staquf.
Indonesia was rocked by massive demonstrations led by Islamist groups to protest against Jakarta’s former ethnic Chinese Christian governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, popularly known by his nickname Ahok, in the run-up to May 2017 gubernatorial elections which he eventually lost.

Islamist parties and hardline Islamic groups told Muslims it was forbidden to vote for Ahok as he does not follow that faith. The anti-Ahok Islamist groups came to be known as Movement 212.

On Friday (Dec 1), the Jakarta-based Setara Institute said the anti-Ahok movement was a political movement that will continue to exist with the aim of controlling public space.

“Controlling public space is the target of the 212 elites to raise their political bargaining power with those seeking political power or with political groups who are currently in power,” said Setara in a statement.

“Religious populism leads to a loss of rationale amongst believers. People should be aware that such movements are a danger to social cohesion in a multi-ethnic nation,” said Setara.

Malaysia’s Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS) says that exploiting religious sentiments to win votes has become part of the political strategy of politicians.

According to IDEAS chief executive Wan Saiful Wan Jan, this pattern could be observed all around the world, but it was most prevalent in developing countries where good governance and public policies are not part of mainstream discussions.

“Identity politics works especially in countries where public policy, good governance are not the mainstream discussion that’s taking place,” Wan Saiful told the Istanbul Network 5th International Conference last week.

“There are irresponsible people who are failing to provide leadership and exploiting the weaknesses of human beings by exploiting those emotional issues,” Wan Saiful added.

“I have been going round the country asking people what they are most concerned about...and people are most concerned over “what will happen to Islam, what will happen to our ethnic group,” said Wan Saiful.

He said politicians who wanted to win votes are exploiting voter sentiments and in Malaysia, people are most sentimental about religion.

“It is brilliant to abuse (exploit) religion (to win votes). If I were advising a politician on how to win votes and I wanted to be crude, that’s exactly what I’d tell him to do,” said Wan Saiful.
Exploiting religion for political votes is a factor that leads to intolerance, he said.

“As soon as you become emotional about anything, intolerance comes into play and religion is a very emotional issue. It is not just about intolerance but it is about political strategy as well.”