Islam Needs Tenets that Reflect Contemporary Reality

Interview with KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Secretary, Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council

By Inoue Ayumi, Jakarta | March 22, 2019

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, with over 50 million followers—has dispatched its former leader, Ma'ruf Amin, to be Indonesian President Joko Widodo’s vice presidential running mate in April’s hotly-contested elections. Current NU General Secretary, Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, explained to Shimbun Akahata why Nahdlatul Ulama, a moderate organization that has traditionally kept its distance from politics, has decided to return to the political scene, and the deep concerns the NU has about the severe crises facing the Muslim world.

What follows are Mr. Staquf’s remarks to Shimbun Akahata:

When Indonesia gained independence, it was established not as an Islamic state or a theocracy, but as a multi-religious and pluralistic nation state (NKRI) on the basis of “Pancasila” (“the Five [Foundational] Principles”), Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (“Oneness Amid Diversity”) and its 1945 Constitution. Nevertheless, at the time of independence the future status of the nation and its constitution were the subject of intense debate. Many Muslims aspired for Indonesia to become either an Islamic state, or one in which Islam was granted preeminent status.

Islamism—an aspiration among Muslim extremists to attain political domination, so that a fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic texts can be imposed on society through the state—conflicts with our socio-cultural reality and has been a constant source of tension in Indonesia. When Islam came to Indonesia, it was accepted freely and adapted to local circumstances in a way that fostered social harmony and did not conflict with pre-existing Nusantara (East Indies) civilization. We Indonesians have been fighting against Muslim extremists for centuries, and we have always won.
Challenges to Pluralism

Islamism has begun to rise again in recent years and spread to Indonesian society in new ways, posing a threat to NKRI. We will always stand against Islamism, and this election is not just about choosing a president, but preserving pluralism and Pancasila.

The Islamist aspiration for political dominance is an intrinsic part of Islamic orthodoxy, an array of theological doctrines accepted by the majority of Muslims as the most authoritative religious reference standard. There are many problematic tenets within the orthodoxy relating to, for example, the status of women. However, our main concern is global peace and security, and regarding this we have identified four problematic tenets that are of particular concern:

First, the “norm of enmity,” which encourages Muslims to segregate themselves from non-Muslims, treat them with suspicion and consider them enemies.

Second, that the establishment of a single, universal Islamic state, or Caliphate, should be the ultimate political goal and aspiration of all Muslims.

Third, that laws derived from modern political processes are “man-made” and therefore illegitimate and should be replaced with classical Islamic law, commonly referred to as shari’ah.

Fourth, that it is obligatory for all Muslims to participate in any armed conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Fundamental Change is Needed

When Islamists attempt to implement these problematic tenets, it naturally leads to conflict with the current reality of world civilization, which is based on modern, secular nation states with equal rights for all citizens. The Islamist political project can only bring disaster, not only for Muslims, but humanity as a whole. Now, because these problematic tenets do in fact exist within Islamic orthodoxy, Islamist radicals and terrorists can always find fertile ground among Muslim communities throughout the world.

The spiritual leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama believes that if these problematic tenets retain theological authority and thus remain integral to Islamic orthodoxy, then it will be impossible to permanently resolve the Islamist threat, which is why we cannot address these problems by confining ourselves to isolated, domestic efforts. In recent years, we have issued a number of declarations addressing these issues and have stated that:

“Preserving Indonesia’s unique civilizational heritage—which gave birth to NKRI as a multi-religious and pluralistic nation state—requires the successful implementation of a global strategy to develop a new Islamic orthodoxy that reflects the actual
circumstances of the modern world in which Muslims must live and practice their faith.” [Nusantara Manifesto, point 38]

A majority of contemporary Muslims remain trapped within a mental framework, informed by Islamic orthodoxy, that views Islam as inherently political [i.e., supremacist]. If we are to see the emergence of a global civilization in which people of every faith and nation—including Muslims—live, learn, love and work side by side, then we must change direction and address these issues.