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What Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation really wants

by James Massola | August 19, 2019

Jakarta: Indonesia must be more self-confident about its position in the Islamic world and stare down the threat posed by radical Islam, according to one of the most senior leaders of the country's largest Muslim organisation.

The secretary-general of Nahdlatul Ulama, Yahya Cholil Staquf, has even suggested that allowing the Indonesian province of Aceh to adopt sharia, or religious law, as state law following the end to the armed insurgency in 2005 was a "big mistake".



Yahya Cholil Staquf in 2017 with Muhaimin Iskandar, chairman of the NU-based political party, PKB.

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is the largest Muslim organisation in the world, with an estimated membership of up to 80 million people. Many of its leaders advocate for the practice of [Islam Nusantara](#), a moderate, tolerant form of Islam, while some advocate a stricter interpretation of Islam.

President Joko Widodo selected Maruf Amin, until recently NU's supreme leader, as his vice-presidential running mate in the recent 2019 election in a decision that dismayed some supporters of the president. They feared the selection meant Joko would not address growing intolerance towards the country's sizeable Christian and Hindu minorities, or the trend towards more conservative Islamic practice among some Indonesians.

But Yahya said the election of Maruf as vice-president (he will be sworn in on October 21) meant the cleric could "lend his theological authority ... as a scholar, to put the red line [through] radicalism, and then to develop a decisive policy based upon that with real theological authority.

We know what we want, which is to contain the threat of radicalism.

Muslim leader Yahya Cholil Staquf

"Then people cannot accuse the government of moving against Islam, because it is [in] the government.

"Secondly, with Kyai [scholar] Maruf, I would hope that Indonesia can engage in a more decisive international effort to find solutions for the problems of Islam with more confidence - not just following in the steps of those Middle Eastern forces but more confidently speaking out about our own position, about what we think is better.

"From NU's perspective we know what we want, which is to contain the threat of radicalism."

Indonesian police agencies are already working to tackle violent extremism, and they run deradicalisation programs and cooperate closely with countries like Australia.

But Yahya said more work needed to be done to tackle both violent and non-violent extremism in Indonesia.

"You can see this movement, non-violent extremism, tends to be growing bigger here in Indonesia. If you have more of this then you have more fertile ground for violent extremism."

The decision to allow Aceh to introduce sharia as state law was a "great mistake", he said, because it meant the province had begun introducing local laws that conflicted with national laws.

"It is wrong to let them have their own laws against [that conflict with] national laws. This is constitutionally wrong," he said.

Aceh is the only Indonesian province with sharia as state law. In the past year it has debated the introduction of laws that would allow a man to have up to four wives. A district in the province has banned men and women from dining together unless a relative of the woman is present, and it regularly flogs people for a range of crimes - **including being gay** - even though homosexuality is not illegal in Indonesia.

Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim democracy and the [state's guiding philosophy](#), *Pancasila* (five principles) enshrines religion, civilised humanity, social justice, democracy and national unity in the preamble to the constitution.

Human Rights Watch Indonesia researcher Andreas Harsono said Yahya and Maruf were at "opposite ends" of NU and it was reasonable to characterise Maruf as a proponent of more conservative Islamic practice. But both men would agree on the need to tackle extremism.

Harsono said that "sadly" Maruf's was a "doer" and that meant the cleric would involve himself in choosing ministers, appointing chief executives of state-owned companies and more.

"A good politician has to be able to combine perspectives - human rights, the economy, politics, diplomacy - to balance concerns. Maruf is someone whose knowledge is strictly limited to the Islamic interpretation of the world."

In recent years, conservative Islamic groups have played a more assertive role in the country's politics, strongly backing defeated presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto in 2019. The groups also led huge protests against the Christian, ethnically Chinese former governor of Jakarta Basuki "Ahok" Purnama, who was [jailed for two years](#) in 2017 for insulting Islam.

Maruf, in his role as a cleric, testified against Ahok at his trial - something he later expressed regret for. In 2012, Maruf suggested Muslims should not wish people "Merry Christmas". But on the campaign trail in 2018, video of him wishing people "Merry Christmas" emerged.

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