



Prominent Muslim leader says global effort needed to promote 'compassionate Islam'

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Sheikh Yahya Cholil Staquf with Archbishop Agustinus Agus of Pontianak.
Credit: Courtney Grogan/CNA

CNA Staff, Jul 17, 2020 / 04:42 pm MT ([CNA](#)).- The leader of the largest independent Muslim organization in the world says that a resurgence of fundamentalist Islam threatens not only non-Muslim minorities, but feeds a cycle of retaliatory violence against Muslims.

Sheikh Yahya Cholil Staquf warned of a “political weaponization of fundamentalist Islam,” in an essay published in *The Public Discourse* on July 11. He said that religious minorities around the world “from sub-Saharan Africa to South and Southeast Asia” are discriminated against and attacked for their beliefs.

At issue, he said, is “a supremacist, ultraconservative interpretation of Islam” pushed even by U.S. allies including Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

This resurgence of theocracies and sectarian violence around the world, he said, most notably manifested by the rise of the terror group ISIS in 2014, is actually the historical norm.

ISIS’ efforts to establish a caliphate based on an ultraconservative seventh-century interpretation of Islam “is not a historical aberration in the Middle East,” he wrote. “Rather, it is the historical norm,” as the Middle East up until the end of the Ottoman Empire “has been dominated by caliphs and/or those who ruled in their name, and governed according to the provisions of classical Islamic law.”

At the heart of the matter, he wrote, is the question of whether Muslims will choose to “remain silent and ignore the suffering of others,” or rather “pursue the truth and obey the dictates of conscience, whatever the consequences may be?”

Staquf is the general secretary of Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama, the world’s largest Muslim organization with more than 90 million followers. He has also co-founded a global movement promoting a “humanitarian Islam” that shuns the ideas of a caliphate, Sharia law, and “kafir,” or infidels.

These efforts need to become a global pursuit to truly bear fruit, Staquf wrote on July 11.

Widespread discrimination and violence against non-Muslim minorities simply feed a “cycle of retaliatory bloodshed,” he warned, citing attacks on Muslims at Christchurch, New Zealand, and attempts to displace or subdue whole groups of Muslims such as Xinjiang, China, or the Rohingya Muslims in Burma.

In 2019, the NU published fiqh rulings - or interpretations of Islamic law - from nearly 20,000 Muslim scholars, and Staquf presented the recommendations to Pope Francis when he met with him at the Vatican.

Among the recommendations were abolishing the legal category of “infidel” in Islamic law, pushing for equal treatment under the law for Christians and other religious minorities, and asking Muslims to be law-abiding citizens who work for peace. The document also affirmed the nation-state over a Muslim caliphate.

Earlier in 2019, Pope Francis had signed a document on religious pluralism together with the Grand Imam of al-Azhar Ahmed el-Tayeb, the declaration on "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together."

Staquf told CNA that he was "thrilled and excited" at the signing, which he said promoted the "compassionate Islam" that he has been advocating for.

"We cannot just pretend that there are no problems in Islamic views. There are problems there. You need to acknowledge that so that we can work for the solution. If you do not acknowledge the problem, you cannot resolve it," Staquf told CNA.

"My hope is that these documents will be examined seriously by the Vatican so that the Vatican can make decisions to engage with us and work together with this," Staquf said.

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