The Indonesian Journal of Leadership, Policy and World Affairs

STRATEGIC REVIEW

Humanitarian Islam: Renewing the Spirit of the Non-Aligned Movement for the 21st Century

H. Muhaimin Iskandar

Timothy S. Shah & Thomas Dinham

STRATEGIC REVIEW

The future of civilization: Indonesia's contribution

It's time to renew the spirit of the Non-Aligned Movement for the 21st century.

H. Muhaimin Iskandar

is Chairman of the National Awakening Party (PKB) and Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives (DPR), Republic of Indonesia (above, with Indonesian Vice President KH. Ma'ruf Amin)

When preparing for the establishment of Indonesia as an independent nation state, our founding fathers did not concern themselves merely with the fate of Indonesia, while ignoring the rest of the world. The profound religious, philosophical, ethical and political principles upon which they established our nation were not designed to promote the interests of Indonesia alone. Our founding fathers contemplated the future of the entire world—proffering a set of noble aspirations that others could embrace, while striving to create a more dignified and auspicious future for all human beings, and for civilization as a whole.

The first paragraph of the Preamble of Indonesia's 1945 Constitution, which constitutes the point of departure for the entire train of thought subsequently elaborated within the body of this foundational text, reads:

"Independence is the right of *every nation*, and for that reason, colonialism must be abolished throughout the earth, for it is inconsistent

with *humanitarianism and justice*" (emphasis added).

This statement is of profound significance, above and beyond the obvious fact that our founding fathers were concerned for the welfare of humanity and held high aspirations in regard to the future of global civilization. For the Preamble enshrines the establishment of a truly just and harmonious world order as central to the identity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, constituting a vital national interest to be actively pursued as the highest goal of Indonesian foreign policy.

We live in an anxious world. A world of fear and anger, which has borne the cumulative weight of injustice, enmity and violence for thousands of years and shows few signs of abating. Nor should we forget that our own communal struggle—to improve our nation's fate—is inextricably tied to geopolitical dynamics occurring far beyond our borders.

In our nation's history, we have been blessed with many remarkable leaders, including Ir. Soekarno, or Bung Karno, and Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, or Gus Dur, whom we so deeply love and revere. Soekarno and Gus Dur completely devoted their lives, and gave the very best they had, to this nation and its people. Of course, living at different times and facing very different challenges, there are also many differences between the ideas they articulated. Yet both great leaders agreed, and constantly emphasized, that our struggle for the future of this nation cannot be divorced from—and must be accompanied by—a struggle for the future of all humanity, and civilization as a whole.

Fear, anger and hatred are rapidly spreading and overshadowing the earth—"merely" destabilizing some nations while casting others, with tens of millions of inhabitants, into the utter abyss of darkness and ruin. It is clear that one factor contributing to this tragedy is a profound conflict of values triggered by globalization, combined with the rapid intermixing of cultures. We live in a time when geographic boundaries no longer prevent the people of one nation from encountering many others; nor one ethnic or religious group from interacting with countless others; nor any given individual from observing and communicating with others throughout the world.

On the one hand, this offers an historically unique opportunity for the diverse peoples and cultures of the world to come to know and respect one another. Yet it also harbors the seeds of unparalleled global disaster. For if humanity does not establish a common ground for managing its differences through peaceful dialogue, the eruption of violent conflict will be inevitable, as we already witness occurring throughout the world today. Everywhere we turn our gaze, we see religions, including Islam, being weaponized to serve all-too-worldly goals and agendas. This poses an extraordinary threat to humanity, and to civilization as a whole.

When religions are deliberately placed upon a collision course, it becomes extremely difficult to prevent universal conflict, for every religion claims to espouse a universal mission. When various religious groups live side by side, closely intermixed—as they do in our modern world—religious conflict will inevitably provoke social unrest and violence, which in turn will lead to widespread enmity or even the expulsion of minorities unable to defend themselves, something that we can clearly see happening in various regions of the world today.

There is no logical end to this cycle of mutual

On January 23, 2020, the Executive Committee of CDI unanimously adopted PKB's *Resolution on promoting a rules-based international order founded upon universal ethics and humanitarian values* (above).

enmity and violence, once it spirals out of control, other than the collapse of the prevailing socio-economic-political system wherever such chaos occurs. As Gus Dur warned in a 2005 article published in the *Wall Street Journal*:

> The entire edifice of modern civilization is built on economic and technological foundations that terrorists hope to collapse like so many fishing huts in the wake of a tsunami. Just two small, well-placed bombs devastated Bali's tourist economy in 2002 and sent much of its population back to the rice fields and out to sea, to fill their empty bellies. What would be the effect of a global economic crisis in the wake of attacks far more devastating than those of Bali and 9/11?
>
> It is time for people of goodwill from every faith and nation to recognize that a terrible danger threatens humanity. We cannot afford to continue 'business as usual' in the face of this existential threat. Rather, we must set aside our international and partisan bickering, and join together to confront the danger that lies before us.[1]

Our founding fathers developed, and offered to the world, a set of universal principles that can illuminate the path out of darkness and avert the cataclysm that would inevitably accompany a global clash of civilizations. These principles are:

First, to treat others justly and as equals—without regard to ethnicity or religion; without enmity or hatred; and without seeking to marginalize or eliminate others.

Second, to accept and respect the sovereign nation state as a political system that binds the people of each and every nation, without propagating or pursuing a supremacist agenda vis-à-vis other nations.

Third, to accept and respect a nation's laws as binding upon all its inhabitants, which provides no space for anyone to cite religion as justification for inciting violence and/or participating in armed rebellion against the

PKB Chairman H. Muhaimin Iskandar, Andrés Pastrana Arango and other CDI Executive Committee members welcomed by students of Pondok Pesantren Pandanaran Islamic boarding school in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on January 24, 2020

duly constituted authority of the nation state. As the 2019 National Conference of Nahdlatul Ulama Religious Scholars decreed, in a ruling that also abolished the legal category of infidel (*kafir*) within the modern nation state: "If it is concluded that any element of positive (i.e., statutory and/or regulatory) law contravenes the highest principles and purposes of religion, this should be—and may only be—corrected by constitutional means. The existence of such laws and regulations may not be employed as a justification for defying a legitimate government."

Fourth, to preserve and strengthen a rules-based international order founded upon justice, freedom and enduring peace.[2]

What we need now is a genuine, sincere and concrete effort to offer these principles to the world, and invite people of every faith and nation to accept these principles as the cornerstone of a truly global civilization that fosters cooperation, mutual respect and the blossoming of human creativity throughout the world.

Allow me to take this opportunity to say that the National Awakening Party is determined to ensure that Indonesia plays its full part in this effort, and that PKB will carry the banner of Indonesia's contribution, for the future of humanity and global civilization.

This article is adapted from a speech delivered to the Executive Committee of Centrist Democrat International (CDI) and other assembled dignitaries at the CDI Eurasia Forum held on January 24 , 2020, in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Cover art: *A 2006 painting by Dutch artist John van der Sterren depicts Indonesia's founding father, Soekarno, cradling a barefoot independence martyr slain by Dutch colonial forces in late-1940s central Java. A cross dangles from the young man's neck. Sri Ayati's Legacy hangs in the Jakarta headquarters of Nahdlatul Ulama's young adults organization, GP Ansor, and has become a potent symbol of the Humanitarian Islam movement.*

Three of the photographs that appear in this essay were not in the original version, published by Strategic Review.

Endnotes:

1 Abdurrahman Wahid, "Right Islam vs. Wrong Islam," *Wall Street Journal,* December 30, 2005, https://www.libforall.org/lfa/media/2005/WSJ_Right-Islam-vs-Wrong-Islam_12-30-05.pdf.

2 Nahdlatul Ulama, *Decree of Bahtsul Masa'il ad-Diniyyah al-Maudluiyyah*, see esp. Section 1.4 "The Islamic perspective on legislation and government policies created through modern political processes," *Hasil-Hasil Musyawarah Nasional 'Alim Ulama Nahdlatul Ulama 2019* (*Findings of the 2019 National Conference of Nahdlatul Ulama Religious Scholars*), Jakarta: Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board.

STRATEGIC REVIEW

Humanitarian Islam: Fostering shared civilizational values to revitalize a rules-based international order

A movement is underway to change the face of Islam, whose base is shifting from the Middle East to Asia.

Timothy Shah

is Director of the Religious Freedom Institute's South and Southeast Asia Action Team and RFI's Vice President for Strategy and International Research.

Thomas Dinham

is the UK-based Director of Strategic Outreach for Bayt ar-Rahmah, a hub for the worldwide expansion of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) operations, and special advisor to NU's young adults movement, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor.

The post-World War II rules-based international order is under severe stress, challenged by the emergence of "authoritarian, civilizationist states that do not accept [this] order, whether in terms of human rights, rule of law, democracy or respect for international borders and the sovereignty of other nations."[1] What also distinguishes "civilizationist" states—including Communist China and Putin's Russia—is the weaponization of ethnic, religious and/or cultural identities, including their history and symbols, in order to consolidate and wield power vis-à-vis both internal and external enemies.

"Civilizationism" is part of a global resurgence of identity-based, supremacist politics unfolding in tandem with profound shifts in economic and geopolitical power in the 21st century. Simultaneously, socio-cultural and political developments in recent decades have precipitated a crisis of confidence in Europe and North America regarding

the traditional values and legitimacy of Western civilization. These developments have profoundly undermined the philosophical, spiritual and moral foundation upon which the post-war international order was built.

Many of the most powerful and respected institutions in the West—which reflect the views of dominant cultural, intellectual, political and economic elites—have embraced a new, constantly evolving "orthodoxy" that seeks to compel the universal adoption of a hypertrophied human rights agenda that differs dramatically from that which accompanied the birth of the post-war international order. Ironically, these elites are themselves heirs to the Christian "civilizing mission" of 19th century European imperialists, and to a centuries-old system of Western hegemony. This de facto neo-colonial project—in effect, a contemporary manifestation of Western civilizationism—is deeply offensive to a majority of the world's population and is thus accelerating the breakdown of a rules-based international order, whose key principles were widely ratified in the 20th century, but only superficially implemented by most nations.

In recent decades, Western human rights discourse has increasingly deviated from the clear, concise and rigorously defined principles articulated in the thirty articles of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), which were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10th, 1948, as a concrete means to promote "universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion" (*United Nations Charter*, Article 55). Having emerged in the aftermath of WWII and all its horrors, UDHR

Indonesia is emerging as a major force within the geopolitical arena for the first time since the 1950s, as the Humanitarian Islam movement forges religious, socio-cultural and political alliances globally

embodied the values of mid-20th-century Western humanism and Christian democracy. Although these values "may be regarded as universal, and have found expression in other religious traditions,"[2] the human rights framework established by UDHR has never been fully embraced by the world's other great civilizations and religious faiths.

Humanity thus stands at a crossroads. On the one hand, cumulative and rapidly accelerating scientific, technological and economic progress have created an historically unparalleled opportunity for the collective flourishing of humanity, particularly when accompanied by a rules-based international order that safeguards national sovereignty and policies founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being. On the other hand, civilizationist leaders—who instrumentalize and mobilize tribal identity, political and economic power, and technology to tyrannize others—pose an immense threat to the future of humanity.

Recognizing and responding to this threat, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor—the 5-million-member young adults movement of the world's largest Muslim organization, Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—assembled a coalition of international religious and political figures at the Second Global Unity Forum held in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in October of 2018 and promulgated the *Nusantara Manifesto*. This 40-page *Manifesto* is part of a systematic and institutional campaign by NU spiritual leaders who seek to address "obsolete and problematic (i.e., historically-contingent, or *mutaghayyirāt*) elements within Islamic orthodoxy that lend themselves to tyranny, while positioning these efforts within a much broader initiative to reject any and all forms of tyranny, and foster the emergence of a global civilization endowed with nobility of character."[3] The *Manifesto* states:

> The *Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam*[4] discussed, at length, the threat to modern civilization posed by "obsolete tenets of classical Islamic law, which are premised upon perpetual conflict with those who do not embrace or submit to Islam" (point 42). Yet these problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy do not constitute the sole—and perhaps not even the primary—threat to the future of humanity. For dogmatism, which naturally lends itself to tyranny, may readily manifest under various ideological guises, both religious and secular.
>
> Nevertheless, the ease with which Islamists have been able to exploit problematic elements of Islamic orthodoxy to clothe their political agenda in religious authenticity has had the far-reaching and catastrophic result of strengthening dogmatic forces worldwide. The full ramifications of this process are still unfolding and threaten to produce an enduring radicalization of politics on a global level. This is a particularly alarming development, as it comes at a time when the diverse peoples, cultures and civilizations of the world are increasingly interconnected, interdependent and interfused.
>
> In the Islamic world and those regions with localized Muslim majorities, Islamist groups have used the

clarion call of establishing an Islamic state to launch civil wars, insurgencies and campaigns of terrorism that have left cities in ruin, countless dead and millions displaced over a vast arc of territory stretching from the Western Sahel to the southern Philippines. Many of these conflicts have lasted for decades and, in spite of their terrible toll, show no sign of abating in the decades to come.

Islamist groups have used the clarion call of establishing an Islamic state to launch civil wars, insurgencies and campaigns of terrorism.

The widespread perception of Muslims and Islam as a threat to non-Muslim societies is a direct and intentional result of Islamist groups' actions, and their astute use of propaganda, which transmits powerfully symbolic images of the dystopian reality they seek to create. Horrors of the past such as slavery, crucifixion and the public execution of alleged homosexuals, adulterers, infidels, apostates and magicians are resurrected, re-instituted as valid components of an Islamic social order and broadcast to a disgusted global audience.

Islamist terrorism has strengthened politically opportunistic elements in non-Muslim societies, as those seeking to maintain or acquire power exploit such violence to buttress their own political agendas.

The Communist Party of China's determination to build a hi-tech totalitarian surveillance state threatens not only the inhabitants of China, but potentially all who dwell within its sphere of influence, as the native populations of Tibet and Xinjiang can testify. Indeed, the CPC has exploited global concern about Islamist terrorism to shield this project from international criticism, and millions of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang have seen their homeland converted into a testing ground for radically new methods of totalitarian oppression, which could be exported worldwide. (See Ansor Decree Number 04/KONBES-XXI/IV/2017, *Gerakan Pemuda Ansor's View Regarding the Republic of Indonesia's Strategic Interests and National Security Agenda within the Cauldron of Current Geopolitical Dynamics*.)

In South and South-East Asia, the perceived threat of Islam has been exploited to confer legitimacy on local brands of exclusivist and authoritarian religious and political ideologies. Buddhist supremacism threatens Muslim minorities in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, while [supremacist ideologies and movements] aim to subordinate Muslims, Christians and others in South Asia.

In the Western world, Islamist terrorism—and, in the case of Europe, the influx of refugees and migrants from the broader Middle East and Africa—have significantly contributed to a

Indonesian President Joko Widodo displays the Nusantara Statement at a November 2018 gathering of 100,000 members of Gerakan Pemuda Ansor in Pekalongan, Central Java

profound polarization that threatens the integrity of those societies' democratic systems. On both the political left and right, attitudes towards Islam have become a proxy battleground in a wider struggle for power that politicizes Islam and renders Muslims highly vulnerable to any breakdown in political order.

Efforts by corporations, ideological movements and governments in the West to harness technology, including artificial intelligence, to manipulate public opinion and restrict freedom of expression pose a different but no less alarming threat of tyranny, particularly when wedded to social-cultural, economic, legislative and administrative efforts to accomplish the same agenda.

Although superficially distinct, these threats share a number of traits in common. Each is inextricably linked to the innate human tendency to dominate, or seek to dominate, others. And each illustrates the danger posed by welding dogma—whether secular or religious—to a political agenda backed by powerful economic interests and the use of technology to impose conformity (in effect, a "tribal identity") upon others, and crush the spirit of anyone who opposes this agenda.[5]

Alarmed by the threat that a resurgent Islamist current poses to the unity of Indonesia and its people—and to the future of humanity as a whole—the spiritual leadership of NU has launched a long-term, systematic and institutional campaign to reform what they describe as "obsolete and problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy" that lend themselves to political weaponization and enjoin religious

hatred, supremacy and violence.[6] This global "Humanitarian Islam" movement grew out of the 2014 *Islam Nusantara* campaign, which was the brainchild of NU spiritual leaders Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri—then Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council—and his nephew, NU General Secretary Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf. This wildly successful drive popularized the term "*Islam Nusantara*," deployed it as a powerful cultural motif for re-enlivening Indonesians' appreciation of their distinct civilizational heritage, and rallied Muslims across Indonesia's vast archipelago against Islamist extremism at a time when the Islamic State, or ISIS, was wreaking havoc across the Middle East.[7]

Building upon the *Islam Nusantara* campaign's success, Mustofa Bisri and Yahya Staquf founded *Bayt ar-Rahmah li ad-Da'wa al-Islamiyah Rahmatan li al-'Alamin* (Home of Divine Grace for Revealing and Nurturing Islam as a Blessing for All Creation) with American businessman and LibForAll/International Institute of Qur'anic Studies (IIQS) co-founder C. Holland Taylor, whose organization helped facilitate the *Islam Nusantara* campaign. *Bayt ar-Rahmah* serves as a hub for the worldwide expansion of NU operations and leads the global Humanitarian Islam movement, which seeks to restore *rahmah* (universal love and compassion) to its rightful place as the primary message of Islam, by addressing obsolete and problematic elements within Islamic orthodoxy that lend themselves to tyranny.

Drafted by Nahdlatul Ulama spiritual leaders who govern Bayt ar-Rahmah, the Humanitarian Islam movement's foundational texts were promulgated between 2016 and 2018 by Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, then formally adopted and expanded upon by Nahdlatul Ulama through a series of rulings issued at a mass gathering of

NU spiritual leaders Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri (center, front) and KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf (center, back) co-founded and lead the Humanitarian Islam movement.

nearly 20,000 Islamic scholars in February of 2019. In a book published by the NU Central Board, which contains the *Findings of the 2019 National Conference of Nahdlatul Ulama Religious Scholars*, NU theologians: (a) analyzed the manner in which state and non-state actors around the world weaponize orthodox Islamic teachings; (b) outlined "a serious, long-term socio-cultural, political, religious and educational campaign to transform Muslims' understanding of their religious obligations, and the very nature of Islamic orthodoxy"; (c) formally endorsed the concept of a modern nation state rather than caliphate; (d) recognized all citizens, irrespective of their ethnicity or religion, as having equal rights and obligations within a modern nation state; (e) decreed that Muslims must obey the laws of any nation in which they dwell; (f) stated that Muslims have a religious obligation to foster peace rather than automatically wage war on behalf of their co-religionists, whenever conflict erupts between Muslim and non-Muslim populations anywhere in the world; and (g) abolished the legal category of infidel (*kāfir*) within Islamic law (*fiqh*), so that non-Muslims may enjoy full equality as fellow citizens in their own right, rather than rely on protection at the sufferance of a Muslim ruler.[8]

Addressing the Islamist threat to Indonesia, Mr. Staquf states:

> *There can be little doubt that the outcome of this struggle, within Indonesia, will be impacted by the forces of globalization, which bring people and ideas from the far corners of the earth into daily contact with Indonesian Muslims, for both good and ill. So long as obsolete, medieval tenets within Islamic orthodoxy remain the dominant source of religious authority throughout the Muslim world, Indonesian Islamists will continue to draw power and sustenance from developments in the world at large.*[9]

Bayt ar-Rahmah and Gerakan Pemuda Ansor have also developed—and begun to operationalize—a global strategy to reconcile Islamic teachings with the reality of contemporary civilization, whose context and conditions differ significantly from those in which classical Islamic law emerged.

This strategy is built upon nine foundational documents: the *International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration* (2016); the *First Global Unity Forum Declaration* (2016); the *Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam* (2017); the *Nusantara Statement* and *Nusantara Manifesto* (2018); the *Findings of the 2019 National Conference of Nahdlatul Ulama Religious Scholars*; a *Resolution on acknowledging that universal human fraternity is essential to the emergence of a global civilization founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being* (2019); a *Resolution on the consolidation of a global consensus regarding key ethics and values that should guide the exercise of power so that the geopolitical landscape of the 21st century may be characterized by a truly just and harmonious world order* (2019); and a *Resolution on promoting a rules-based international order founded upon universal ethics and humanitarian values* (2020), adopted by Centrist Democrat International.

As a result of these pioneering efforts, a large body of Sunni Muslim authorities are now engaged in a wide-ranging, concerted and explicit project of theological

reform for the first time since the late Middle Ages.[10] These efforts have been extensively cited by sponsors of an international campaign to award the Nobel Peace Prize to Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. Bayt ar-Rahmah also has access to the world's largest political network—Centrist Democrat International/European People's Party (CDI/EPP)—via Indonesia's largest Islamic political party, the National Awakening Party, or PKB, which is rooted within the spiritual wing of Nahdlatul Ulama and was founded by NU leaders including President Abdurrahman Wahid and Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri.

In fact, PKB's membership in Centrist Democrat International was the direct result of a senior CDI/EPP figure's participation in the 2018 Second Global Unity Forum, which gave birth to the *Nusantara Statement* and *Nusantara Manifesto*. PKB is systematically advancing the Humanitarian Islam agenda through its membership in CDI and its fraternal relationship with member parties worldwide. In January of 2020, CDI adopted a resolution submitted by PKB, which concludes:

The CDI states the following:

- *As the world's economic center of gravity shifts towards Eurasia—and geopolitical competition threatens to undermine peace and security throughout this vast landmass—widespread acknowledgment of, and adherence to, universal ethics and humanitarian values may help ensure that this transition can be navigated more peacefully;*
- *CDI and its member parties are in a unique position to facilitate this process, for they embrace a common set of humane*

and universal values, rooted in their respective religious and cultural traditions;

- *These traditions—which include but are not limited to Western humanism, Christian democracy and Humanitarian Islam—may serve as the foundation for a 21st century alliance to promote a rules-based international order founded upon universal ethics and humanitarian values;*
- *Centrist Democrat International invites people of good will of every faith and nation, as well as political parties and governments worldwide, to join in this alliance to safeguard human dignity and foster the emergence of a truly just and harmonious world order, founded upon the equal rights and dignity of every human being.*

This resolution—unanimously adopted by the CDI Executive Committee at a meeting held on January 23, 2020 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia—established a concrete mechanism for cooperation between the Humanitarian Islam movement, CDI and its member parties worldwide, including those that govern many European nations and EU institutions, such as Germany and the Presidency of the European Commission.

In order to strengthen the existing rules-based international order and facilitate its acceptance by Muslims worldwide, NU spiritual leaders have established a theological framework for the emergence of what they describe as "Islamic jurisprudence for a global civilization, whose constituent elements retain their distinctive characteristics" (*fiqh al-hadārah al-'ālamīyah al-mutasahirah*). These spiritual leaders seek to "address the need for social harmony at a global level and in each of the world's regions where Muslims actually live and work, through a process of recontextualizing and "indigenizing" Islam, as historically occurred in *Nusantara* (the Malay Archipelago)."[11]

They are also working to consolidate South and Southeast Asia as an alternate pillar of support for a rules-based international order through a strategy called the "Ashoka Approach," which seeks to reawaken the ancient spiritual heritage of the Indianized cultural sphere ("Indosphere") to foster humility, compassion and respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being.

Roughly co-extensive with South and Southeast Asia, the Indosphere is a vast geographic and cultural zone stretching from Pakistan to Indonesia, which was formatively and permanently shaped by the great spiritual traditions—particularly Hinduism and Buddhism—that originated in the Indian subcontinent.

Throughout the Indosphere and the world at large, state and non-state actors are increasingly weaponizing ethnic, religious and cultural identities to maintain or acquire political power. Their actions pose a significant threat to the post-World War II international order, which is built upon a philosophical and moral framework that regards every human being as "born free and equal in dignity and rights" (Preamble, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*). This global authoritarian resurgence threatens to recreate in the 21st century the horrors of the past. For amidst an increasingly multi-polar world, Western power and Western culture alone are insufficient to sustain, much less strengthen and enhance, a rules-based international order dedicated to safeguarding national sovereignty and fundamental human rights.

Throughout the Indosphere and the world at large, state and nonstate actors are increasingly weaponizing ethnic, religious and cultural identities to maintain or acquire political power.

In response to this crisis, leaders of the Humanitarian Islam movement have developed—and begun to implement—a strategy to foster, among regional actors, an awareness of their shared civilizational heritage and their common interest in shaping the future of humanity. This entails examining the nature of the historic engagement between Indian civilization and indigenous cultures throughout the region. It also requires building a de facto alliance among the peoples and nations of the Indosphere, enabling them to cope more effectively with a wide range of challenges to their sovereignty, and their respective cultures, in the 21st century.

To stimulate this awareness of the region's common interests, NU leaders are posing a simple question to key interlocutors from government and civil society institutions throughout the Indosphere: "Should we simply 'yield' and accept cultural, ideological, economic and political domination of our individual nations by self-interested global actors, including China, Western nations and the Gulf states? Or shall we stand together to voice our perspectives and defend our interests from a position of dignity, as independent cultures and nations acting upon the world stage?"

NU leaders are uniquely positioned to ask such questions, as the Nahdlatul Ulama's cultural heartland lies within the heavily populated island of Java, which constitutes the geographic, political and economic center of Indonesia, and boasts ancient ties to both Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic civilizations. A majority of Javanese Muslims continue to cherish their pre-Islamic heritage as an intrinsic part of their identity, giving rise to the uniquely pluralistic and tolerant expression of Islamic teachings known as *Islam Nusantara* (East Indies Islam). A distinguishing feature of *Islam Nusantara* is its tendency to prioritize religion's spiritual essence over its purely formal and dogmatic elements, which "readily lend themselves to weaponization and, in the wrong hands, foster conflict rather than social unity" (*Nusantara Manifesto*, point 88). *Islam Nusantara* remains a vibrant, powerful, and—as demonstrated in the 2014 and 2019 national elections—politically decisive force within Indonesia.

Bayt ar-Rahmah leaders—including NU General Secretary KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf and C. Holland Taylor, who serves as GP Ansor's Emissary to the UN, Americas and Europe—maintain that in order to engage in political, economic and civilizational dialogue on the basis of equality, the nations of the Indosphere must rediscover their shared civilizational legacy, whose cultural and spiritual heritage is equal to that of the Sinosphere, Europe and the Middle East. By re-enlivening the region's own spiritually informed and benevolent narratives regarding the nature of religious and cultural identity—as enshrined in Ashoka's Major Rock Edicts and the teachings of *Islam Nusantara*—the Ashoka Approach[12] is intended to strengthen the Indosphere and enable it to resist both internal and external disruptive influences, including those originating from China, the Middle East and elsewhere.

President Wahid's grave in Jombang, East Java is a major pilgrimage site.
His headstone reads, "Here Rests a Humanist"

Building on their transformative work in support of religious pluralism in Indonesia and the global Humanitarian Islam movement, NU spiritual leaders are seeking to mobilize like-minded religious and political figures throughout South and Southeast Asia to foster a renewed appreciation for the spirituality and respect for pluralism that were once defining features of the Indianized cultural sphere, and forge concrete avenues of cooperation between profoundly spiritual and humanitarian expressions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Their explicit goal is for South and Southeast Asia to re-emerge as a cohesive, vital and proactive civilizational sphere, which functions as a powerful, independent pillar of support for a rules-based international order founded upon shared civilizational values.

Leaders of the Humanitarian Islam movement are acutely aware of the last time Indonesia played a prominent role upon the world stage: viz., when President Soekarno joined India's Jawaharlal Nehru, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and Yugoslavia's Josip Broz Tito in establishing the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1950s. However, the NU leaders' agenda is expressly spiritual, and seeks to unite all of humanity rather than simply steer a neutral course between the world's great powers. The global Humanitarian Islam movement represents one aspect of the transformational legacy of Indonesia's first democratically elected president and long-time NU Chairman H.E. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid (1940 – 2009). In fact, the Humanitarian Islam movement was directly inspired by President Wahid and its leadership consists of close friends and disciples of a man widely revered by Indonesian Catholics, Hindus and Buddhists, and regarded as a saint by many of the NU's 90 million followers.

This global movement to establish a rules-based international order founded upon shared civilizational values seeks to "abolish the primordial cycle of hatred, tyranny and violence that has plagued humanity since time immemorial";[13] derail the juggernaut of "tribal" politics, whether rooted in ethnic, religious or secular/ideological identities; shift the focal point of authority in the Islamic world from the Middle East to South and Southeast Asia, where a majority of the world's Muslims reside; and re-enliven the profound civilizational values of the Indosphere, in order to buttress the rules-based post-WWII international order as the world's geopolitical center of gravity shifts from the North Atlantic axis into the heart of Eurasia.

As Bernard Adenay Risakotta writes in *Living in a Sacred Cosmos: Indonesia and the Future of Islam* (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 2019):

> *The center of Islam in the world today is neither Saudi Arabia nor the Middle East. Rather, it is Indonesia. Indonesia is the most important country in the world about which most people know practically nothing. Just as the center of Christianity is no longer in Europe or North America, but has shifted to the Southern Hemisphere (Jenkins, 2012), so the center of Islamicate civilization has shifted from the Middle East to Asia.*

Cover art: *A 2006 painting by Dutch artist John van der Sterren depicts Indonesia's founding father, Soekarno, cradling a barefoot independence martyr slain by Dutch colonial forces in late-1940s central Java. A cross dangles from the young man's neck. Sri Ayati's Legacy hangs in the Jakarta headquarters of Nahdlatul Ulama's young adults organization, GP Ansor, and has become a potent symbol of the Humanitarian Islam movement*

Five of the photographs that appear in this essay were not in the original version, published by Strategic Review.

Endnotes:

1 Cf. *Resolution on promoting a rules-based international order founded upon universal ethics and humanitarian values*, which was submitted by Indonesia's National Awakening Party (PKB) and unanimously adopted by Centrist Democrat International (CDI) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on January 23, 2020. Previously known as Christian Democrat International, CDI and its European affiliate, the European People's Party (EPP), is the world's largest network of political parties.

2 Cf. *Resolution on the consolidation of a global consensus regarding key ethics and values that should guide the exercise of power so that the geopolitical landscape of the 21st century may be characterized by a truly just and harmonious world order*, which was submitted by Indonesia's National Awakening Party (PKB) and unanimously adopted by Centrist Democrat International (CDI) in Rome, Italy, on October 11, 2019.

3 Gerakan Pemuda Ansor and Bayt ar-Rahmah, *The Nusantara Manifesto*, adopted through a Joint Resolution and Decree signed by both organizations on October 25, 2018 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Published in *Hasil-Hasil Musyawarah Nasional 'Alim Ulama Nahdlatul Ulama 2019* (*Findings of the 2019 National Conference of Nahdlatul Ulama Religious Scholars*), Jakarta: Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board.

4 Gerakan Pemuda Ansor and Bayt ar-Rahmah, *Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam*, promulgated on May 22, 2017 in Jombang, Indonesia. Published in *Hasil-Hasil Musyawarah Nasional 'Alim Ulama Nahdlatul Ulama 2019* (*Findings of the 2019 National Conference of Nahdlatul Ulama Religious Scholars*), Jakarta: Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board.

5 Gerakan Pemuda Ansor and Bayt ar-Rahmah, *The Nusantara Manifesto*, points 77 – 86.

6 Cf. Gerakan Pemuda Ansor and Bayt ar-Rahmah, *Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam* and *The Nusantara Manifesto*.

7 Bayt ar-Rahmah, https://baytarrahmah.org/2014_12_09_bayt-ar-rahmah/.

8 Bayt ar-Rahmah, "World First: Nahdlatul Ulama Abolishes the Legal Category of 'Infidel' within Islamic Law," October 16, 2019, https://baytarrahmah.org/2019_10_16_world-first-nahdlatul-ulama-abolishes-the-legal-category-of-infidel-within-islamic-law/.

9 Yahya Cholil Staquf, "Enduring threat, global ramifications," *Strategic Review: The Indonesian Journal of Leadership, Policy and World Affairs,* (July-September 2018): pp. 12–17.

10 The Ottoman Reform Edict of 1856 (*Hatt-i Humayan*), adopted under pressure from Great Britain, France and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, proclaimed equality between Muslims and non-Muslims. For example, the *jizyah* tax was abolished and non-Muslims permitted to enter military service. However, widespread Muslim rejection of these attempted reforms helped trigger the Armenian genocides of the 1890s (which were instigated by Sultan Abdul Hamid II) and the First World War (orchestrated by a Young Turks administration), and also contributed to the ethnic cleansing of Anotolia during the 1920s. Ultimately, the effect of these reforms was the virtual elimination of non-Muslims within the territory that became the modern Turkish nation state. Cf. Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

11 Cf. Part XI of the *Nusantara Manifesto* (points 99 – 173) and especially Section 11.5 (points 157 – 173).

12 Cf. Timothy S. Shah and C. Holland Taylor, *The Ashoka Approach,* Magelang, Indonesia and Bangalore, India, 2020: Bayt ar-Rahmah and Religious Freedom Institute. Conceived and written in collaboration

with Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Secretary of the Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council and Bayt ar-Rahmah Director of Religious Affairs.

13 Cf. *Resolution on the consolidation of a global consensus regarding key ethics and values that should guide the exercise of power so that the geopolitical landscape of the 21st century may be characterized by a truly just and harmonious world order*, presented by PKB to the Executive Committee of Centrist Democrat International. The *Resolution* was unanimously adopted by CDI on October 11, 2019 in Rome, Italy.