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Prospects and Weaknesses of the R20 Forum on Religion Launched at the G20 Summit in Bali

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Secretary General of Muslim World League Muhammad bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa (C) stands with participants during a group photo session at the G20 Religion Forum (R20) Summit of Religious Leaders in Nusa Dua on the Indonesian resort island of Bali on 2 November 2022. Photo: SONNY TUMBELAKA/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- R20 (G20's Religion Forum) was proposed by the General Chairman of NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) as an occasion for religious leaders from around the world to discuss how religion could help resolve global problems.
- This was an ambiguous proposal, considering that religion remains both a negative and positive factor where peace and conflict in the world are concerned.
- The proposal could also be interpreted as an attempt at raising the relevance of religion in world affairs, as has been promoted by Muslim organisations such *Ikhwanul Muslimin* and *Hizbut Tahrir* who position Islam as the solution (*al-islam huwa al-hall*) to world issues.
- Whichever the case, it is expected that R20 will have some impact on Indonesian Islam. However, it may not be extensive as the R20 was only proposed by NU and not from all elements of Indonesian Islam. The absence of other players in the initiation of R20 created an image that R20 was also an event exclusively run by NU.
- The support of Saudi Arabia through the Muslim World League is one of NU's organisational breakthroughs. NU has been hoping to establish a new relationship with Saudi Arabia, but has been hampered by the fact that anti-Wahhabism prevails among its ulama and grassroots.

INTRODUCTION

R20 or *Religion of Twenty* was a specific forum held on the sidelines of the G20 to get religious leaders from around the world to talk about the role of religion in world affairs. It was an initiative proposed by Yahya Staquf (General Chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama [NU]) in anticipation of Indonesia's G20 presidency from 30-31 October 2021 to end of December 2022. Staquf was able to convince President Jokowi Widodo, the holder of G20's presidency, that Indonesia should be the home ground for world religious leaders to gather and discuss the future role of religion.¹ With NU being the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, Staquf naturally assumed that NU would take the lead in this initiative. Apart from that, R20 was supported by both the government of Indonesia and the Muslim World League in Saudi Arabia.² With the presence of religious leaders as speakers from more than 40 countries, R20 was held successfully at both Bali and Yogyakarta in early November 2022.³ Some points of communique were also successfully established.⁴ However, while the R20 speaks about how religion can play the role as a panacea to global issues, the meeting held in Indonesia tended to swing to the role of Islam. This was not unexpected since the host is a dominantly Muslim country and the largest in the world.

This article highlights the R20 event and its relevance to the global development of Islam. It also investigates how religion can have an impact in world affairs. It also covers the impact of R20 on Indonesian Islam (NU). In view of the huge financial sponsorship received from Saudi Arabia for R20, this paper also looks at how R20 affects the relationship between NU and Saudi Arabia.

R20 AS GLOBAL MOVEMENT AND ITS CHALLENGES

R20 did gather world religious leaders in an open dialogue on problems and crises facing the world,⁵ and participants had the opportunity to develop their vision on how religion could contribute in facing global challenges.⁶

The R20 theme was "*Revealing and Nurturing Religion as a Source of Global Solutions: Global Movement for Shared Moral and Spiritual Values*".⁷ With conflicts between the Muslim minority and the Hindu majority in India, tensions between Sunni and Shia in Yemen, and ISIS's terrorism giving religion a bad name,⁸ the participating religious leaders were thus expected to share and discuss both the weaknesses and strengths of their religions. However, most of those who presented at the Forum only focused on the good things in their religion.⁹ This was not in line with the purpose of R20, which was set up as an alternative forum to the unsuccessful G20 Interfaith Forum¹⁰ held annually as a side event of G20. In fact, R20 was designed to be an open platform for world religious leaders to discuss and deal with real world issues.

R20 agreed on the Communique of R20, however, which consists of important points about how religions can address issues such as identity-based conflicts, domestic and international security, the environment, and other matters.¹¹ Designed to be a global promise, R20 should

have covered a range of challenges seen from the perspective of both mainstream religious groups and non-mainstream religious groups. For example, one criticism of R20 in Bali was that it did not focus on crucial issues such as religious minority rights and gender rights and injustices.¹²

Parking R20 under G20 was also problematic, in that it drew attention to the fact many challenges and threats involving religion had been created by members of G20.¹³ Similarly, Saudi Arabia, the main sponsor of R20, is believed to have instigated the Sunni-Shia conflict in Yemen.

CAN RELIGION BE A GLOBAL SOLUTION?

Religion as a source of solutions for global problems was the core message of R20.¹⁴ This ambition, however, compels religion to be placed at the centre of many world issues. Sociologists often debate whether religion should be given a maximum role in the public sphere or whether it should be placed only in the private sphere.^{15, 16}

Since the early days of Indonesia, Islam had been proposed to play a central role in the country's political system. The founding fathers, however, only agreed to have religion as a belief system in society, and not as the foundation for the country's political system. Pancasila was eventually formulated as the state's ideology, with the intention of accommodating all religions. This positioning of religion does not envisage it to play the role of a problem solver, especially not of world affairs.

Globally, religion's role as a keeper of the peace, has been enigmatic, given that it is both inclusive and exclusive in essence. It has brought people together, as a cohesive factor, in many places of the world, but it is also non-cohesive factor; many conflicts and wars have been directly and indirectly instigated by it.

Wanting religion to be the solution to global problems is, in fact, not new. One could say that that ambition is often the reason for its popularity. In the context of Islam, seeing religion as the solution was common among those who championed political Islam, such as Ikhwanul Muslimin and Hizbut Tahrir. To be sure, their slogan is *sal-islam huwa al-hall* (Islam is the solution). Some groups like Jama'ah Islamiyah, Anshar al-Tawhid, NII (Negara Islam Indonesia) and many others, insist on applying the sharia system of law.

Indonesian moderate Muslim figures such as Abdurrahman Wahid, Nurcholish Madjid and Syafi'i Ma'arif were against any attempt to propagate this idea of Islam being the solution. They fought against religion having a central role in the legal and public sphere. However, this did not equate to their lack of belief in their religion. To them, looking to religion to solve global challenges is just a means to formalise religion in the political and public spheres.

INDONESIAN ISLAM

The domestic impact of R20, especially on Islam in Indonesia, is of great interest to scholars of the subject. It does seem that NU will reap the greatest benefits, mainly because there was zero involvement in R20 from Muhammadiyah and other Muslim organisations such as MUI, Persatuan Islam, and others. Vice President Ma'ruf Amin, a symbolic figure of MUI, was not present in the Forum at all, and R20 was very much viewed as NU's programme, and as being legitimised by Jokowi's government. Claiming R20 as the initiative of Indonesian Islam is therefore inaccurate, since it did not receive open support from most other major elements in Indonesian Islam.

At the national level, R20 was expected to seek a reduction in identity politics. The Communique of R20 does state that there should be a reduction in identity politics. However, in the last two decades, identity politics has become an inseparable part of Indonesian Islam, evident in its politics, its economic thought and even in the lifestyles practised within the NU community. A nationwide survey conducted by the Indonesia Studies Programme at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak showed that 37 % and 14 % agreed or strongly agreed respectively that Islam's interests should be prioritised. Indonesian Muslims also want their ulama to have more influence in politics. This was evident in the score results from this survey where 10 % and 27 % either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed to Islamic leaders having more influence in the political sphere. This score was slightly higher than those who strongly disagreed (19 %) and somewhat disagreed (14 %) to this same question.

Saudi's Support and NU's New Approach to Wahhabism

As the biggest Muslim grouping in Indonesia, NU has long depicted Wahhabism and Salafism as its prominent and permanent foes. Rachel Rinaldo, for example, states that Fatayat NU (women's wing of NU) is also against Wahhabism.¹⁷ This only means that anti-Wahhabism has become a dominant idea among men and women in NU. Since its establishment in 1926, NU has been the only Muslim organisation critical of Wahhabism. Wahhabism is an ideological product of Saudi Arabia which refers to the thought of Mohammad bin Abdul Wahhab in the post-Ottoman era.¹⁸ Since that era, Saudi Arabia has strictly adopted Wahhabism as its state-school of Islam. During the Ottoman empire, although the Hanafi Islamic law was the official school in Saudi, the other schools of Islam were allowed to be located there.¹⁹ Because the main teaching of Wahhabism is Islamic purification, the kingdom of Saudi prohibited any sign indicating practice of polytheism among Muslims.²⁰ The Saudi government, at the time, destroyed many sacred shrines like the tombs of Prophet's companions and Islamic saints, and many other places. NU has always protested against this advocacy of Wahhabism. Internationally speaking, this was what led to the establishment of NU in 1926.

For three or four decades, NU had not worked closely with Saudi's government due to Wahhabism. When Gus Dur was general leader of this Muslim organisation, he did not consider Saudi his ally, and was working with European and international non-government organisations to promote human rights and democracy. However, the successor to Gus Dur, Hasyim Muzadi, through his forum ICIS (International Conference of Islamic Scholars) collaborated with all Muslim countries, including Iran and also Saudi Arabia.²¹ When Said

Aqil Siradj was the general chairman of NU, things were different again; he was very critical of Wahhabism. He, however, stated that he was not against Saudi Arabia as a country, but would continue to oppose Wahhabism,²² despite it being the official Islamic school for Saudi. These three NU leaders were basically following in the footsteps of their predecessors.

Therefore, when the current leadership of NU accepted generous funding from Saudi for organising R20, the positioning of NU became ambiguous. Some have viewed this support as an indication of a new alliance with Saudi, and that NU was softening its established view on Wahhabism. This shift may be a breakthrough, but there may be unhappy consequences. Any criticism raised within NU on Saudi Arabia and even Wahhabism could be clamped down. This was evident from the cancellation of LDNU (Lembaga Dakwah Nahdlatul Ulama) which had recommended the abolition of Wahhabism; NU headquarters did not wish for LDNU to threaten Saudi's support for R20.²³ This group consists mainly of NU's grassroots and their kyais at the village level, and opposing Wahhabism and Salafism had been for them the reason for their being part of NU. They fear that the apparent change in attitude towards Saudi Arabia will weaken the traditional view of NU being against Wahhabism and Salafism.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Religion as offering a global solution, promoted through the establishment of R20's Communique in Bali, can be interpreted as an attempt to deepen the use of religion in the public sphere. This has stimulated both negative and positive responses. Seeing religion as a global solution can be understood simply as a religionisation of world affairs. In the context of Islamic revivalism of Indonesia, it can become an argument for the Islamisation and shariatisation of the country, albeit that a progressive orientation is highly expected to result from R20.

Whether R20 will continue to be held at G20 gatherings remains a big question. Much depends on the capacity of NU as the main initiator of this event to convince all stakeholders of G20 and the world religious leaders of its importance. R20 was only successfully held in Indonesia due to the strong support of the Indonesian government and the Muslim World League of Saudi Arabia. R20 might continue as a global activity, but there is no guarantee that it will remain as an engagement platform at G20 in the long run, especially given the fact that most country members of G20 believe that religion should remain in the private sphere. However, it is rather safe to conclude that expecting the R20 initiative to survive beyond Indonesia's chairmanship of the G20, especially if it passes on to a non-Muslim country is something not realistic to think of.

Last but not least, the impact of R20 and its aspirations on Indonesian Islam also relies on the capacity of NU, as R20 initiator, to convince Muslim organisations and groups in Indonesia to adopt its recommendations.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ <https://bali.antaranews.com/berita/297421/r20-dari-bali-hadirkan-nilai-tambah-g20>, viewed on 15 December 2022.
- ² Regarding the Muslim World League, see <https://themwl.org/en>, viewed on 16 December 2022.
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- ⁴ <https://www.nu.or.id/nasional/forum-r20-hadirkan-belasan-tokoh-agama-jadi-pembicara-udeQv>, viewed on 16 December 2022.
- ⁵ <https://rri.co.id/bengkulu/nasional/76567/pbnu:-forum-r20-peran-penting-agama-dalam-global>, viewed on 15 December 2022.
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- ⁹ <https://www.nu.or.id/nasional/forum-r20-hadirkan-belasan-tokoh-agama-jadi-pembicara-udeQv>, viewed on 16 December 2022.
- ¹⁰ About the G20 Interfaith Forum, please see <https://www.g20interfaith.org>, viewed on 24 February 2023.
- ¹¹ https://r20-indonesia.org/en/news_media/press_release/detail/35.html, viewed on 16 December 2022.
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- ¹⁴ On the recommendations of R20, see https://r20-indonesia.org/en/news_media/press_release/detail/35.html, viewed on 16 December 2022.
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- ¹⁸ Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2007).
- ¹⁹ Snouck Christian Hurgronje, *Mekka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).
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- ²¹ <https://jatim.antaranews.com/berita/171620/hasyim-muzadi-icis-tak-berpihak-ke-paham-syiah>, viewed on 17 December 2022.
- ²² <https://www.republika.co.id/berita/omeede361/said-aqil-nu-waspadai-wahabisme-bukan-arab-saudi>, viewed on 17 December 2022. The criticism of Said Aqil Siradj to Wahhabism is very famous and gets wide coverage in media.
- ²³ <https://voi.id/berita/223473/anulir-rilis-ldnu-soal-wahabi-sekjen-pbnu-tidak-ada-persetujuan-rais-aam-dan-ketum>, viewed on 15 December 2022.

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