

PERSPECTIVE

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Nahdlatul Ulama's 33rd Congress: Ma'ruf Amin's Rise and its Impact on Indonesia's Traditionalist Islam

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY²

- The 33rd NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) Congress, held on 1-5 August 2015, was arguably the most controversial in the organisation's 89-year history. Scuffles broke out during the meeting when participants debated the procedure for electing the organisation's two top posts: the *Rais 'Aam* ("Spiritual Guide") and the General Chairman.
- Participants were divided over whether a decision by nine senior council members (*Ahlul Halli Wal Aqdi* or "AHWA") should replace the current direct elections process. Some NU members argued that the AHWA system could prevent money politics and vote-buying.
- The meeting also presented an identity dilemma for NU members, particularly the extent to which the organisation should remain apolitical. Since 1984, under the chairmanship of the late Abdurrahman Wahid (or "Gus Dur"), NU had adopted the "Return to *Khittah*" idea, which means making NU a social/religious organisation and not a political party.



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² The author wishes to thank Ahmad Muhajir, Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Political and Social Change, Australian National University (ANU), and Gwenael Njoto-Feillard, Visiting Fellow at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, for their comments on the draft of this paper.

- The 33rd Congress saw some interesting developments, especially the resignation of Kyai Mustofa Bisri (“Gus Mus”) as the *Rais ‘Aam* and the election of Kyai Ma’ruf Amin to replace him; and the incumbent General Chairman, Kyai Said Aqil Siradj, retaining his position.
- This article argues that the election of Ma’ruf Amin, a conservative, and Said Aqil Siradj, a liberal and progressive, as the two supreme leaders of NU forebodes a rocky situation within the organisation in the years to come.

INTRODUCTION

In August 2015, Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation, NU (Nahdlatul Ulama or "Revival of Religious Scholars"), held its 33rd Congress (*Muktamar*). Formed in 1926, NU represents Traditionalist Islam, a school of thought more accommodative of local traditions, culture, and mysticism than the modernists.³ Almost nine decades after its founding, the call for an "Archipelagic Islam" (*Islam Nusantara*) remains central to NU's struggle. In fact, the theme for this year's congress was "To Strengthen Islam in the Indonesian Archipelago" (*Meneguhkan Islam Nusantara*). The choice of *Islam Nusantara* as this year's theme is apt; NU is reminding Indonesian Muslims of its role in safeguarding Indonesia's local Islamic traditions as the country confronts ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and other Middle Eastern influences.⁴

This year's NU Congress opened with grand fanfare and was significant in several ways. First, the Congress was to elect the organisation's General Chairman (*Ketua Umum*) as well as its Spiritual Guide (*Rais 'Aam*). NU's incumbent Chairman, Said Aqil Siradj, was being challenged by equally strong members of the religious elite: Kyai Salahudin Wahid, the brother of former NU Chairman and Indonesia's 4th President, Abdurrahman Wahid; Kyai Muhammad Idrus Ramli; Muhammad Adnan; and Kyai As'ad Said Ali.

At the same time, Kyai Hasyim Muzadi, former General Chairman; Kyai Maemun Zubair; Kyai Ma'ruf Amin (former politician and Vice-Chairman of the Ulama Council of Indonesia, MUI); and Kyai Tolchah Hasan were challenging Kyai Mustofa Bisri (Gus Mus) for the position of *Rais 'Aam*. This is the first election of the *Rais 'Aam* after the death of Kyai Sahal Mahfudz in 2014.⁵

Second, this is also the first Congress to be held under the Joko Widodo (Jokowi) presidency.⁶ The President, along with Megawati Sukarnoputri (ruling PDI-P Chairperson), and several cabinet ministers, attended the congress opening. Jokowi was keen to see Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation support his administration's plural, secular and democratic values, and envisages NU as Indonesia's first line of defence against ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) and other Middle Eastern influences. Interestingly, Jokowi opened the Congress wearing a black suit and a red *sarong* (loosely tied cloth around the waist). The *sarong* is commonly worn by Indonesian *kyai* (religious scholars), and his move manifested an Indonesian identity rather than an Arabic one (Arab scholars don the *thawb*, a one piece, white, ankle-length garment).

Third, the assembly took place in a town that has historical significance for NU. Jombang in Surabaya (East Java) is where NU was founded.⁷ Returning to Jombang signalled a re-orientation that a majority of its grassroots members had been calling for: the need for NU to

³ The modernists are represented by the Muhammadiyah, which was formed by Kyai Ahmad Dahlan in 1912.

⁴ See ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute *Perspective* by Gwenaël Njoto-Feillard, "Ripples from the Middle East: The Ideological Battle for Indonesian Islam's Identity," 13 August 2015.

⁵ NU Website, "Inilah 5 Calon Terkuat Kandidat Ketua Umum PBNU," <http://www.nugarislurus.com/2015/08/inilah-5-calon-terkuat-kandidat-ketua-umum-pbnu.html#axzz3hiLtBWme> (Date Accessed: 3 August 2015)

⁶ Joko Widodo was elected as Indonesia's President in 2014.

⁷ See Martin van Bruinessen, *NU: Tradisi, Relasi-relasi kuasa, pencarian wacana baru*, (Yogyakarta: LKIS, 1994); Greg Barton and Greg Fealy (Ed), *Nahdlatul Ulama, Traditional Islam and modernity in Indonesia* (Australia: Monash Asia Institute, 1996).

return to the principles manifested at its founding as a socio-religious organisation, namely Traditionalist Islam, *dakwah* (the call to spread the message of Islam), and education (through the Islamic boarding school system or “*pesantren*”).

The congress concluded with a shocking outcome: the resignation of the progressive Gus Mus as *Rais ‘Aam*, and the election of Kyai Ma’ruf Amin, a conservative who is also the newly appointed Chairman of the Ulama Council of Indonesia (MUI) for 2015-2020, to replace him.⁸ This paper discusses the impact of these recent leadership changes and also highlights NU’s recent history in politics from the Suharto years to the *Reformasi* period (1998-2014), and the post-Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono period (2014 onwards). Since 1984, the year NU formally withdrew from party politics, the progressives have been in-charge of the organisation. These place Islamic traditions in contemporary times, and exhibit sensitivity to Indonesian local cultures. Significantly, Ma’ruf Amin’s elevation in the 33rd Congress may shift the course of the organisation towards more conservatism.

NU UNDER THE NEW ORDER (1966-1998)

Although NU started off as a religious organisation, there were periods in its history when it was a political party. For instance, in the 1971 elections, NU secured 18.7 per cent of votes for the DPR. The figure is similar to the 18.4 per cent it obtained in the 1955 elections.⁹ Realising the threat NU posed to the New Order regime, Suharto merged all Islamic parties into the PPP (United Development Party), a coalition of Islamic parties in 1973. He then allowed only three political parties to participate in elections: these were GOLKAR (Functional Groups Party, a emanation of the New Order regime); PDI (Democratic Party of Indonesia); and PPP. Suharto also expected all political parties and Islamic organisations to uphold Pancasila as their ideology, and not *shariah* (Islamic law). The principles of Pancasila are: Belief in the one and only Almighty God; just and civilised humanity; national unity; democracy; and social justice. Pancasila restricts groups from advancing their interests on religious grounds. In 1977, NU ran under the PPP ticket with three other Islamic parties.

Throughout his time in power, Suharto sought to limit NU’s political role and devised ways to weaken its leadership. His power was so overwhelming that he could determine the leadership of opposition parties as well as NGOs. Suharto allowed only NU leaders sympathetic to his rule to become PPP leaders. For example, in 1973, NU member Idham Chalid, who was uncritical of Suharto, was made PPP President. Other leadership positions in PPP branches were dominated by people from parties smaller than NU. Still, within PPP, NU was not supportive of proposals on marriage laws and making Javanese mystical beliefs (*aliran kebatinan*) a recognised religious belief.

In 1984, NU Chairman Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) wanted to stop the state from manipulating the organisation, and pulled it out of electoral politics. This shift, referred to as the “Return to the *Khittah* 1926” (*Kembali ke Khittah*), was decided during NU’s 27th Congress. It was to re-orientate NU back towards its original objectives as a social organisation. However,

⁸ Ma’ruf’s election in MUI came after the NU Congress.

⁹ Hindley, D. (1972). Indonesia 1971: Pantjasila Democracy and the Second Parliamentary Elections. *Asian Survey*, 12(1), 56-68, p. 58.

NU members remained free to contest in elections under different parties; therefore, some joined GOLKAR, while others remained in PPP. As noted by Greg Fealy,

Over the next five months (after the [*Kembali ke Khittah*] resolution was passed), NU ulama and politicians would form four new parties, the largest and most important of which was PKB (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa; National Awakening Party). All four parties had symbols which were based on NU's symbol of a globe encircled by nine stars and a tied rope and all appealed to *nahdliyin* [NU members and sympathizers] for support.¹⁰

After the fall of the New Order, Gus Dur formed the PKB (National Awakening Party) which became the vehicle for him to contest in the 1999 elections. This demonstrated that there was nothing apolitical about being an NU member.

FROM THE REFORMASI TO THE SBY YEARS

In the post-New Order period, progressives and moderates were the ones who occupied the *Rais 'Aam* position. In the 1999 Congress, Kyai Sahal Mahfuz, a moderate who occupied the *Rais 'Aam* position, steered the organisation while Kyai Hasyim Muzadi, a conservative, was the Chairman. Hasyim held on to the position for two terms until 2010, while Sahal stayed on. In 2000, Sahal had also become the General Chairman of MUI, and held the top posts of NU and MUI until his death in 2014.¹¹

In 2010, another moderate and progressive ulama, Kyai Said Aqil Siraj, was elected as NU's General Chairman. Although he received his tertiary religious education from Saudi Arabia, Said is one of Indonesia's finest progressive scholars. While the country was overwhelmed by controversies such as the banning of Ahmadiyah and the call to ban Shias, Said remained more receptive towards Shia influences in Southeast Asia. He pointed out that culturally, Shiism is embedded in Indonesian Islam: "In our rituals [eg *berzanji*], we have praises to God and the Prophet, but we do not praise Abu Bakr, and Umar as much. At the same time, the rituals do not condemn them either." The silencing of Abu Bakr and Umar reflected Shia's influence. Shias do not consider Abu Bakr and Umar the legal successors of Prophet Muhammad, and the prophet's successor should be his cousin Ali.

Said also pointed out that Indonesian Muslims revere the descendent of the prophet more than necessary, and this practice has its origins in Shiism. He added that "We in NU respect the descendants of the Prophet, we visit their graves and seek their blessings. Also, we borrow many words from the Persian language...we are Sunnis, but culturally, our religious life is influenced by Shiism."¹² Unsurprisingly, because he was receptive of the Shias, there were numerous times in which Said was accused of being a Shia himself, which he has denied.

¹⁰ Greg Fealy, "The political contingency of reform-mindedness in Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama: Interest politics and the Khittah," in (ed.) Anthony Reid and Michael Gilson, *Islamic Legitimacy in a Plural Asia*, 54-166 (London and New York: Routledge, 2007); p.161.

¹¹ NU members whom I had conversations with pointed out that Sahal prevented many conservative fatwas that marginalised religious minorities from being passed in MUI.

¹² Interview with Said Agil Siroj, March 2013.

Similarly, Said was more receptive of alternative interpretations of the religious texts compared to the ulama from MUI. In 2005, MUI famously issued a fatwa declaring secularism, pluralism and liberalism—described by the acronym SIPILIS—as deviant. However, Said posited that as long as a person refers to the Qur’an, he is not a liberal. Acknowledging that there are alternative interpretations of the Qur’an, he pointed out that “Indonesians are generally not liberal Muslims; they only have different methods of interpreting the religious texts. If someone continues to follow the views of the ulama, he is not a liberal.”¹³

During his closing remarks at the 33rd NU Congress, Said reiterated his struggle for a moderate and tolerant country. He also called on NU members to remain committed to the *Ahlu Sunnah wal jamaah* doctrine (Sunni), and wanted the organisation to focus on education, health and the members’ economy, and reiterated that he had no political agenda.

NU’S 33RD CONGRESS AND MA’RUF AMIN’S RISE

To quote Greg Fealy, who attended the Congress, the 2015 NU Congress was marked with “administrative disorder, heated verbal and sometimes physical clashes between delegates, swirling rumours of political interference and manipulation.”¹⁴ The core of disagreements was the mode for electing the *Rais ‘Aam* and Chairman, whether it should be through direct elections or through a decision from a council of nine senior clerics, *Ahlu Halli Wal Aqdi* (AHWA). Gus Mus also decided to step down as the *Rais ‘Aam*, and the plenary meeting approved the AHWA method and elected Ma’ruf Amin in his place, with Said Aqil as Chairman. Before his resignation however, Gus Mus was instrumental in calming the proceedings by delivering an emotional speech requesting congregants to be respectful of others.

There were accusations that politicians were trying to interfere with the Congress’ proceedings. Hasyim Muzadi, former NU Chairman, felt that he and his supporters had been denied the opportunity to convey their arguments against the AHWA at the Congress.¹⁵ As mentioned, Hasyim was also a contender to become NU’s *Rais ‘Aam*. Political parties were also trying to influence the elections: PKB for instance, wanted to prevent Hasyim Muzadi from becoming Chairman for fear that he would deny NU’s support for the party. In turn, Hasyim received support from NasDem (Nationalist Democratic Party), PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle) and PPP, because he could draw NU members away from PKB.¹⁶ Over the years, PKB had had claims to being the only party that had NU members’ backing.

One of the biggest surprises of the 33rd Congress was the election of Ma’ruf Amin as *Rais ‘Aam*. In the vote count, he had come second to Gus Mus, but when the latter withdrew, Ma’ruf Amin became the head of NU. Significantly, Said Aqil’s pluralist views put him in contrast to the newly elected *Rais ‘Aam*. The following paragraphs highlight the political and religious differences between Ma’ruf Amin and Said Aqil.

¹³ Interview with Said Aqil Siraj, March 2013, Jakarta.

¹⁴ Greg Fealy, “Politics and principle at the NU Congress,” *The Jakarta Post*, 8 August 2015.

¹⁵ Ahmad Jumadi, “NU could split after Gus Mus named ‘Rais Aam’”, *Jakarta Post*, 6 August 2015.

¹⁶ Greg Fealy, “Politics and principle at the NU Congress,” *The Jakarta Post*, 8 August 2015.

Ma'ruf Amin has been a long-time member of NU, and was also a politician. He was a legislative assembly member (DPR) for three parties: NU, PPP and PKB. In 1971, at the age of 28, he was elected as NU's DPRD (Regional Legislative Assembly, Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah) member for Jakarta.¹⁷ He did not run for the 1982 elections and left PPP because he believed that NU had been side-lined within the party.¹⁸ Later, he joined PKB and was in fact one of the key leaders who helped establish PKB (founded on 23 July 1998), following his disappointment that NU members had been side-lined in B.J. Habibie's cabinet after the fall of Suharto.¹⁹ During the Abdurrahman Wahid presidency, Ma'ruf Amin fell out with the NU and the PKB leadership. The alleged reason was that Abdurrahman Wahid had denied Ma'ruf Amin a senior PKB position. He also clashed with Abdurrahman Wahid's pluralist values,²⁰ threatening to leave NU if the organization did not declare Ahmadiyah deviant. After this fallout, he sought to re-establish ties with MUI (Ulama Council of Indonesia).

When the progressives were in charge of NU, particularly after the fall of Suharto, Ma'ruf Amin went on a religious and political trajectory that was quite separate from NU's. Since 2000, he headed the MUI Fatwa Commission (Komisi Fatwa), which gives religious opinions on Islamic matters for the whole of Indonesia. He then headed the Dewan Syariah Nasional (DSN), an institution within MUI responsible for issuing Islamic banking and finance guidelines.²¹ He also sat in several boards of the Syariah Supervisory Council (DPS) which oversees the Islamic financial institutions registered under MUI, ensuring all business transactions are in line with Islamic tenets. During the SBY administration, Ma'ruf was appointed a member of the Wantimpres (Dewan Pertimbangan Presiden or Presidential Advisory Council) for two terms. The Wantimpres has significant influence on policy-making process.

CONCLUSION: ROCKY ROAD FOR ISLAM NUSANTARA?

What will Ma'ruf Amin's elevation in NU's leadership structure mean for the organisation, which claims to have adopted a liberal and progressive path, and is a strong advocate of *Islam Nusantara*? For the majority of NU members, Ma'ruf Amin was not the first choice to head the organisation. No doubt, NU conservatives hope that he will neutralise the progressives' influence in the organisation. I argue that Ma'ruf Amin's elevation may pit the conservatives against the progressives in the long run. He can now mobilise NU's members and sympathizers to support his group's Islamisation agenda, which he began when he was in MUI. To be sure, Ma'ruf Amin's period as leader of MUI did coincide with the institution's shift towards conservatism and anti-liberalism, and this could mean that NU may take a similar trajectory.

The following highlights Ma'ruf Amin's conservative stance while in MUI. In 2005, Ma'ruf signed a MUI fatwa which stated that, "the state must (*berkewajiban*) stop all attempts to spread

¹⁷ Asrori, S. K. (2013). *70 Tahun Dr KH Ma'ruf Amin: Pengabdian Tiada Henti Kepada Agama, Bangsa dan Negara* (Ciputat Timur: The Ibrahim Hosen Institute), p.26.

¹⁸ Ibid, .27.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.44-48.

²⁰ Preston, T. W. C. H. (2012). *The "State Islam" Nexus: Islam and the State in Indonesia and Malaysia, 1982-2008*. (PhD Thesis). University of Toronto, Toronto, p.170.

²¹ Asrori, S. K. (2013). *70 Tahun Dr KH Ma'ruf Amin: Pengabdian Tiada Henti Kepada Agama, Bangsa dan Negara* (Ciputat Timur: The Ibrahim Hosen Institute), p.50.

Ahmadiyah teachings in Indonesia, freeze all organisations associated with the sect, and close all the places where their activities are conducted”.²² That same year, MUI criticised model Artia Sari Devi for participating in the Miss Universe competition and compared wearing swimsuits during the competition to pornography. According to him, “This kind of pageant violates religious values, especially Islam, and Indonesia is known as a religious society, so one should not go into any activities that are not in line with religious values”.²³

Ma’ruf Amin has not shown much tolerance towards religious diversity and minorities. In 2013, along with other MUI leaders such as Ichwan Sam, Amirsyah and Yunahar Ilyas, he published *Mengenal dan Mewaspadaai Penyimpangan Syi’ah di Indonesia* (Identifying and being aware of Shia’s deviance in Indonesia). This was more conservative than MUI’s original fatwa delivered in 1984.²⁴ In 2014, Ma’ruf Amin accused the MUI Fatwa Commission of being infiltrated by Shias. He referred to the groups as “SUSP”—Sunnis sympathetic to Shiism.²⁵

Moreover, Ma’ruf was the architect of syariah economics in MUI and has been pushing the state to recognise MUI’s role in Islamic banking. In 2008, this push came to fruition when the state passed the Islamic banking law recognising MUI’s role in issuing fatwas on the subject. Ma’ruf’s rise in NU may see the organisation complementing MUI’s programmes rather than competing against them.

On 8 January 2013, during a celebration for the 24th anniversary of LPPOM-MUI (halal certification institution in MUI), Ma’ruf Amin delivered a keynote address highlighting MUI’s latest project: syariah tourism. It promotes “moral” tour packages free from pornography, porno-action, unlawful sex, drugs, gambling, and consumption of alcohol.²⁶ A document entitled *Kriteria dan Panduan Pariwisata Syariah* (Criteria and Guide for Sharia Tourism) was distributed to attendees of the event. This states that all companies and industries in sharia tourism should utilise MUI’s services, including having all syariah hotels certified by MUI. Syariah hotels must be equipped with facilities for ablution, prayers, halal food, and cleanliness.²⁷ There are several guidelines for syariah hotels: couples who check into syariah-compliant hotels must show marriage certificates; and spa, sauna, and massage parlours located in such hotels must provide proper prayer facilities. Ma’ruf Amin has indeed been a key driver of syariah tourism and halal certification.²⁸

Ma’ruf Amin’s rise may signal the direction in which NU will be heading in the next five years, but being a theologian and pragmatic politician, his next move is difficult to read. For instance, during the closing of the Congress, he reminded NU members that their priority was to improve the institution’s administration of its programmes. During the Congress, he expressed commitment to upholding Islam Nusantara. If Ma’ruf wishes to forge close relations with the

²² Majelis Ulama Indonesia. (2011). *Himpunan Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia Sejak 1975*. Jakarta: Erlangga, p.98-99.

²³ Tessa Unsworth, “Miss Indonesia and her ‘Swimsuit problem’,” *Reuters*, 20 May 2005.

²⁴ Ma’ruf, A., Yunahar, I., Y., Ichwan., & Amirsyah. (2013). *Mengenal dan Mewaspadaai Penyimpangan Syi’ah di Indonesia*. Depok: Gema Insani.

²⁵ Shodiq, R. (2014). SUSI, Penyebab Lambatnya Fatwa Tentang Syiah. Retrieved 28 March, 2014, from <http://www.voa-islam.com/read/suaraislam/2012/03/28/18424/susi-penyebab-lambatnya-fatwa-tentang-syiah/#sthash.QL9LleLB.dpbs>

²⁶ Author’s notes of Ma’ruf’s speech taken during the event.

²⁷ Kementerian Parawisata dan Ekonomi Kreatif, (2012). *Kriteria Dan Panduan Pariwisata Syariah*. DSN-MUI. Jakarta.

²⁸ I had this impression interviewing him on 3 December 2013 in Jakarta.

Jokowi administration, he will have to portray a progressive image. On the flipside, as the *Rais 'Aam*, Ma'ruf Amin now has the opportunity to push his conservative brand of Islamisation agenda in NU, just as he has been doing in MUI. His rise in NU can be a vehicle for him to further consolidate his powers in MUI, and set the stage for him to have a broader Muslim audience in Indonesia. In fact, during the 2015 MUI congress, Ma'ruf was appointed the new MUI Chairman, beating incumbent and former Muhammadiyah Chairman, Din Syamsuddin. Having said that, the ability of one man to change the organisation should not be overstated, even if Ma'ruf Amin will be a key player in the defining of Indonesian Islam in the years to come. Recent developments, however, shows he is on the rise.

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