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# NAHDLATUL ULAMA AND ITS COMMITMENT TOWARDS MODERATE POLITICAL NORMS: A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE ABDURRAHMAN WAHID AND JOKOWI ERA

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## Abstract

This article addresses recent development related to Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) – Indonesia’s largest Islamic organization - and its recent actions as it faces ideological and political challenges from other conservative Islamist organizations. In the process, NU seems to have engaged in backtracking its commitment to consistently promote moderate norms like democracy and tolerance toward different religious and political viewpoints. It examines the factors which explains this reversal and answers the following research puzzle: Under which socio-political conditions do a religious organization that has adhered to follow moderate political norms and discourses decide to backtrack from them and decide to pursue policies to embrace an ‘exclusivist moderation’? The article concludes the declining commitment to moderate norms within the NU is due to growing ideological competition from conservative Islamists both within and outside of the organization, leading NU to embrace immoderate responses to crack down against its competitors.

**Keywords:** Political Islam, moderate Islam, democracy, Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama.

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## Introduction

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) – Indonesia’s largest Islamic organization – is long known as a champion of moderate political norms such as religious moderation, tolerance, and democracy. This was enshrined during the 1990s, when NU’s leading clerics and activists became frequent critic of Indonesia’s former dictator Suharto and contributed to his ouster during the 1998 *Reformasi*. However, 22 years later, NU has come increasingly under fire for the actions of its leaders and activists that are contrary to the norms he had advocated above. For instance, on

November 27, 2019, Said Aqil Siradj – the general chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), issued a statement that his organization is now supporting the abolishment of direct presidential election in Indonesia - the largest Muslim-majority country in the world (The Jakarta Globe, 2019). Said Aqil also delivered a speech which stated that NU clerics and preachers should take over all mosques, Islamic courts, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. He claimed NU is “the only true moderate Indonesian Muslim group” - inferring that other Islamic clerics from non-NU organizations are harboring ‘wrong’ (read: ‘radical’) views (Atriana, 2019).

In addition, NU is increasingly being fraught by the actions made by its activists to disrupt and blocked events hosted by conservative Islamic groups and preachers with different theological and political views from the organization. GP Ansor, its youth wing – has blocked rallies sponsored by Islamist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and popular Islamist preachers like Abdul Somad and Felix Siauw, on the grounds that these groups are threatening the unity of the Indonesian state. Lastly, NU-affiliated clerics and activist have been implicated in a wave of persecution against Muslim minority sects such as Shi’a minorities in Sampang, East Java and Ahmadis in Kuningan, West Java (Suryana, 2019; Kayane, 2020; Miichi and Kayane, 2020). The intolerant action of NU activists against these minority groups have raises questions regarding the organization’s commitments to its long-cherished norms of tolerance and pluralism. Finally, a recent survey of Indonesian Muslims attitudes on the religious minorities in Indonesian politics and society revealed that NU members are no more tolerant than the general Muslim population in Indonesia. The survey also found that NU followers are more intolerant toward non-Muslims on a wide range of tolerance measures compared to those of Muhammadiyah – Indonesia’s second largest Islamic organization<sup>1</sup> (Mietzner and Muhtadi, 2020: 71-77).

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<sup>1</sup> The survey finds, for instance, that 54 percent of NU followers objects to the construction of non-Muslim houses of worship within their communities, compared to 39 percent of Muhammadiyah followers. 52

However, despite the rich and thought-provoking data offered by the aforementioned studies, we still do not know the processes that lead to the organization's backsliding in its commitment to democratic and tolerant norms. I disagree with the assertion that pluralism in the NU is merely a 'myth' and that it is merely "rhetorical instruments to defend key organizational interests" (Mietzner and Muhtadi, 2020: 62). Instead, I show in the article that pluralism and moderation is a contested norm within the NU – both when it was introduced and enacted by Abdurrahman Wahid and his allies during the 1980s and during the subsequent decades. As religious competition and decreasing religious authority in Indonesia increases after the *Reformasi* era, internal contestation over these norms within the NU also increases as well. It is this internal contestation and rivalry between moderate-leaning NU clerics and activists and those who adhered to more conservative theological positions within the NU that contributed to the inconsistent attitudes of the organization's activists responses toward questions of moderation and pluralism in recent years. This internal competition between moderates and conservatives within the organization has incentivized NU leaders to adopt more exclusivist policies against its Islamist rivals outside of the organization as well as against its activists who have conservative Islamist ideological leanings in recent years.

In this article, I argue that currently NU is backsliding into a path of *exclusivist moderation*, defined here as: *the willingness of a religious group to enact and implement policies designed exclude their ideological rivals from the public sphere, while continuing the lip service of promoting moderate norms and discourses the organization has long advocated*. Previously under Abdurrahman Wahid's leadership, the NU was pursuing *inclusivist moderation*, defined here as: *the degree by which a religious group is willing to moderate its theological views and political outlook and to accept and tolerate any political and religious viewpoints without any conditions or exceptions*. The current

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percent of NU followers also objects to non-Muslims to be elected as district heads or mayor of their localities, compared to 41 percent of Muhammadiyah followers (Mietzner and Muhtadi 2020: 76).

ideological contestation between moderate and conservative factions within the NU and how it affects the organization's commitment toward moderate political norms is creating a research puzzle that is of interest to scholars – not just those who study Islam in Indonesia, but also those who study Islamic movements and political Islam in general. The research puzzle is: *under which socio-political conditions do a religious organization that has adhered to follow moderate political norms and discourses decide to backtrack from them and decide to pursue policies to embrace an exclusivist moderation, especially toward their ideological rivals?*

The first section of the article is a reflection on the inclusion-moderation theory, and the gaps to the theory related to how do ideological rivalry could have influenced a religious organization to credibly commit to pursue moderate norms or alternatively to lead these groups to waver from such a commitment. However, the inclusion-moderation theory is not able to explain how ideological contestation, factionalism, and other internal dynamics within the organization affects the degree of commitments by the organization's leaders to adhere to its commitment toward moderate norms they had supported earlier. The section also discusses the relevance of the NU case to enhance scholarly understanding of the inclusion-moderation theory. The second section analyzes NU's ideological moderation under Abdurrahman Wahid's leadership. It finds that that the moderate norms Wahid first promoted upon assuming office was able to be sustained due to the combination of his own charismatic leadership and support from the Suharto regime's apparatus, enabling him to marginalize internal and external challenges against his rule. The third section details the growing ideological competition within the NU under Said Aqil Siradj's leadership – driven by both internal factionalism and external competition with other conservative Islamist groups. It also discusses the NU leadership's alliance with the Jokowi regime, the increasingly sectarian language they deployed against their critics both within and outside of the organization and how these contributed to the organization's backsliding from consistently promoting moderate Islamic

norms over the past few years. Lastly, the concluding section contains lessons learned from the analysis of moderation backsliding within the NU, which can improve upon the inclusion-moderation and ‘marketplace of ideas’ theses - with particular emphasis on explaining how do the political actions Islamic movements which aligned itself with the ruling regime has contributed to the ongoing democratic backsliding in Indonesia.

The methodology deployed in this article is derived from analysis of historical and secondary data sources that are utilized to construct analytical narratives which traces the leadership of Abdurrahman Wahid and Said Aqil Siradj and how do they each handle ideological challenges from internal and external challenges from conservative Islamists. The process tracing method<sup>2</sup> is deployed to construct analytic narratives on the NU case. Empirical data for the analysis is obtained through making inferences from reading historical and previous studies about the NU and its relations with the Indonesian state and other Islamic groups, analysis of Indonesian newspapers and digital media, and interviews with several NU clerics and activists.

### **Inclusion – Moderation Theory: An Overview**

Originally proposed to explain the moderation of ideological parties in Europe and Latin America (Huntington, 1993; Mainwaring & Scully, 2003), inclusion-moderation theory began to be applied in the case of Islamic parties and movements during the 2000s.<sup>3</sup> One definition of *moderation* is how “institutions and political opportunities provide incentives for previously excluded groups to enter the system, abandon more radical tactics, and ‘play by the rules’”

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<sup>2</sup>Process tracing is a methodology which utilizes historical narratives ‘to identify the intervening causal process – the causal chain and causal mechanism – between an independent variable (or variables) and...the dependent variable’ (George and Bennett 2005: 206). This article applies the method by constructing analytic narratives linking the main explanatory variable (religious competition) to analyze the varying outcome in the commitment toward moderation within the NU during the 1980s and 1990s (Wahid leadership) and during the 2010s (Said Aqil Siradj’s leadership).

<sup>3</sup> First generation studies applying inclusion-moderation theory to Islamic parties and movements include Kalyvas (2000); Wickham (2004); and Schwedler (2006).

(Schwedler, 2011: 352). Another definition is “a movement away from an unyielding ideology to one which is more malleable” (Abdullah, 2018: 408). While a more nuanced definition of moderation is “the abandonment of rigid ideologies to accept democratic principles - including the peaceful alternation of power, ideological and political pluralism, and citizenship rights” (Wickham, 2004: 206).

Building from these definitions, I define *moderation* as a movement from an ideologically rigid political principle into one grounded on progressive political norms such as democracy, tolerance, and pluralism. Practitioners should at least tolerate other viewpoints expressed by their opponents. The promotion of these moderate norms should not only be conducted in words, but also in deeds - particularly toward one’s ideological and political opponents. Moderation also means a formal rejection of the application of Islamic law (*sharia*) as one of the state’s legal foundation, although some moderate Muslims might favor the application of the law among members of their community.

The definition of *conservative Islamists* also requires an explanation. I define it as individuals or groups of Muslims who believe in the literal Islamic interpretation according to the Qur’an and the sayings of the Prophet (Sunnah). This includes a belief in the application of Islamic law (*sharia*) as a societal, legal, and political foundation of a Muslim-majority state. However, conservative Islamists usually advocates for the implementation of these beliefs through peaceful, democratic means such as participating in elections and peaceful protests. This contrasts with *hard-line* or *radical Islamists*, who often pursues their implementation by utilizing both verbal rhetoric and/or physical violence against religious minorities and other ideological opponents, such as moderate Muslims.

Under *behavioral moderation*, it is assumed that Islamic parties and groups will follow structural and institutional changes initiated by the state and participate in elections and other non-violent means of political expression, abandoning their formerly ‘radical’ goals (e.g., advocating for an Islamic state)

and adopting more moderate goals and strategies. The main logic underlying behavioral moderation is strategic calculation (Schwedler, 2011: 352) which is based on a simple cost-benefit calculation reached by party or movement leaders to pursue peaceful political strategy such as participating in elections and peaceful protests given their potentially more positive payoffs rather than risking further state repression. *Ideological moderation* – which is harder to measure and operationalize compared to structural changes like changing regime type or policy – is assumed to occur after the group has participated in elections or pursued other non-violent political strategies (Schwedler, 2011: 355). This simplistic assumption was questioned by latter proponents of the theory, who argued that in addition to strategic calculations, ideological changes and leaders' decisions also play an important role in influencing whether an Islamic group will embrace political moderation. Ideological moderation does not always follow behavioral ones, and neither change is always attributable to greater political opening (Tezcur, 2010, cited in Schwedler, 2011: 364).

While the inclusion-moderation theory is now more contextualized and nuanced thanks to the modifications made by later scholars who incorporated ideational and leadership variables into their analyses, it still suffers from several shortcomings. The moderation process shown in most studies utilizing the theory is still one directional, where a religious party or group moves from radical into a broadly defined moderate direction. However, it is unclear whether this process can be reversed – either wholly or partially – in a given political context. This shortcoming has been rectified in several recent studies (Jaffrelot, 2013; Pahwa, 2017). They show that these parties or groups can move back-and-forth between immoderate and moderate ideological positions over a long period of time, depending on the changing political opportunity structure that exists within a given period (Jaffrelot, 2013). Ideological challenge from rival factions within the same party or group can also force it to backtrack and pursue more ideologically conservative agenda from its more accommodative strategies (Pahwa, 2017).



Nonetheless, there are other gaps within the inclusion-moderation theory that has not been adequately addressed. In particular, the theory is silent on how localized variables such as organizational cohesion and level of religious competition faced by a particular religious organization helped to motivate them to either moderate itself further or reverse it (Pelletier, 2021: 2-3).

How do the internal dynamics within a religious group – particularly the degree of competition it encounters from other co-religionist groups– affect its commitment to pursue moderation – can be explained through the concept of the marketplace of ideas. It is defined as a market of Muslim believers where “previously suppressed and marginalized groups could promote different interpretations of Islamic theology, using innovative new media outlets.” (Arifianto, 2020a: 39).<sup>4</sup> As a consequence of increasing religious competition under this growing marketplace, Islamic religious authority – which formerly was dominated by clerics and activists affiliated by NU and Muhammadiyah – Indonesia’s two largest Islamic organizations – are increasingly being fragmented – as many Indonesian Muslims are now attracted to new theologically more conservative Islamic groups ranging from various quietist and non-political Salafi sects to openly political Islamist groups, such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), and others.<sup>5</sup> In addition, various new Islamist preachers managed to win broad popular appeal among Indonesian Muslims, particularly those from the millennial generation – due to their charismatic, populist, yet theologically conservative sermons that managed to attract millions of social media followers.<sup>6</sup> The growing influence of these new Islamic groups and preachers have

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<sup>4</sup> The new proselytization outlets utilized by these Islamist groups include the internet and physical outlets like mosques, campus preaching organizations, and community-based preaching groups (majelis taklim).

<sup>5</sup> For further in-depth analysis on these new Islamist groups, see for instance van Bruinessen (2013), Facal (2020), and Sebastian et al (2021).

<sup>6</sup> These popular preachers include Hanan Attaki, founder of the Hijrah Youth (*Pemuda Hijrah*) movement (8.3 million Instagram followers), Abdullah Gymnastiar, founder of the Daurat Tauhid Pesantren (5.9 million followers), and Felix Siau, Chinese Indonesian Muslim convert who is thought to have affiliated himself with HTI (4.7 million) (Arifianto 2020b: 120).

contributed to a growing decline in the authority of NU and Muhammadiyah, which as I argue in the latter sections, contributes to the political move of the former to align itself with the Jokowi regime and work together to push back and exclude many of these Islamist groups from the public sphere.

Thanks to the growth of these new Islamic groups and preachers, along with new innovative outlets of religious propagation such as campus preaching organizations (Arifianto, 2019) and social media (Slama, 2017; Akmaliah, 2020) - Islamic authority in Indonesia is fragmenting further as many ordinary Muslims are no longer primarily relying on the authority of NU and Muhammadiyah. Instead, they are now able to seek and follow alternative sources of Islamic knowledge and authority represented by these new Islamic group, preachers, and political activists.

Indonesia's democratic transition in 1998 brought about increased freedom of expression and freedom of religion that makes the country to have a pluralist religious authority and a more competitive marketplace of ideas. Religious authority. – the ability to speak religious leaders authoritatively about one's own religious teachings and doctrines – are increasingly being contested by new entrants, undermining the authority of established Islamic groups such as NU and Muhammadiyah (Pelletier, 2021; Arifianto, 2020a). Hence, it is appropriate for us to analyze how do increased competition within the Islamic religious marketplace in Indonesia has affected NU's commitment to promote moderate norms.

There is certainly an ever-growing number of new scholarships regarding the NU and the role it has played in Indonesian politics.<sup>7</sup> However, NU has not received much scholarly attention from political scientists seeking to test the applicability of the inclusion -moderation in Indonesia. Menchik (2014 & 2016) utilizes the inclusion-moderation theory to analyze NU (and Muhammadiyah)

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<sup>7</sup> See van Bruinessen 1994; Fealy 1998; Hefner 2000; Barton 2002; Bush 2009; Menchik 2016 & 2019; Kayane 2020; and Mietzner and Muhtadi 2020.

attitudes on (in)tolerance for religious minorities in Indonesia. However, his study did not outline an in-depth process detailing moderate and pluralist discourses were articulated, debated, and instituted within NU over the past few decades. Meanwhile, Pelletier (2021) applies religious economy theory to explain the variation in the level of religious persecution against religious minorities by Islamists. He finds higher level of persecution in regions where the Islamic religious market is more competitive and religious authority more decentralized. However, this study does not examine how do the level of competition faced by a mainstream religious group affect its willingness to credibly commit to moderate actions when it deals with its competitors in the religious market.

Indonesian specialists and scholars of Islamic politics can learn a great deal from the study of how moderation evolved within the NU and how increased religious competition have contributed to the changing commitment for moderation within the organization. Competition for religious authority – both internal and external of NU – has existed in varying degrees throughout NU's history. This is because it is a highly decentralized organization divided based upon ideologies and allegiances to different senior ulama (*kyai*), who served as factional leaders and power brokers within the organization. These senior ulama use both material benefits and charisma derived from genealogical linkages with the families of NU's founders to gain and retain their followers. In addition, these ulama generally respect each other's authority within the boundaries of the Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) that each of them led (Barton, 2002: 139). However, this custom helps to create disagreement and conflict between these ulama when it is brought up at the organizational level. When it comes to external competition, NU has long differentiated itself from other Islamic competitors by labeling itself as a 'traditionalist' instead of 'modernist' (or more recently 'Islamist') which it claims to be more compatible with Indonesian cultural traditions. NU leaders then utilize such differentiations in a sectarian-like manner

to attack, marginalize and exclude their rivals (Van Bruinessen, 1994; Bush, 2009).

During Wahid's chairmanship in the 1980s, NU managed to occupy dominant status in the Islamic religious marketplace due to the as the Suharto regime's repression of conservative Islamists during this period. Hence NU – along with modernist-leaning Muhammadiyah – held a duopoly market share<sup>8</sup> within the Islamic religious marketplace during the 1980s and 1990s<sup>9</sup> – so much so that both are considered as the official representatives of 'moderate' Indonesian Islam by the Suharto regime – a designation that continues to be applied to these groups by successive post-Reformasi regimes to the present day. At the same time, Wahid managed to deal with his rivals within NU through his utilization of charismatic leadership attributes and alliance with the Suharto regime during the early years of his chairmanship (1984 to 1990). As a result, NU faced fewer internal and external ideological competitors which enables Wahid and his allies to propagate moderate Islamic norms both within and outside of the NU with fewer ideological constraints.

However, after Suharto's downfall and subsequent democratic transition in 1998, the Islamic religious market becomes very competitive, given that hundreds of Islamic groups from a wide range of ideological and political perspectives are able to propagate their beliefs in Indonesia while facing no state-imposed restrictions (until very recently). By 2010s, these new groups – ranging from Muslim Brotherhood's influenced Justice and Development Party (PKS), Hizb-ut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) – and others are increasingly perceived as ideological threats by NU leadership led by Said Aqil Siradj. Within the NU, new

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<sup>8</sup> While there is a long history of NU versus Muhammadiyah sectarian-like animosity dated back to the 1920s, both organizations have largely respected each other's boundaries by the 1980s. Given the clearly marked ritualistic practices of both organizations, there were few conversions between the followers of both groups during this time.

<sup>9</sup> There are indications that increased competition from other Islamic groups might have reduced the number of followers for both groups. A recent survey estimated the number of Muhammadiyah followers at 5 percent of Indonesian Muslims (Mietzner and Muhtadi 2020, 71). This translates to approximately 12 million Indonesians – a much smaller number than the 30 million figure the organization often claims.

conservative factions such as ‘Straight Path NU’ (*NU Garis Lurus*) were founded to challenge the dominance of the moderate NU leadership. In response to these internal and external challenges, NU leaders put more priority to protect its status as one of Indonesia’s leading Islamic organization and align themselves with the Jokowi regime to contain their rivals using coercive measures – instead of utilizing democratic and tolerant norms to resolve their conflicts with Islamists.

### **NU’s Inclusivist Moderation under Abdurrahman Wahid**

Founded in 1926, NU is an Islamic organization consisting of traditionalist-oriented ulama and their *jama’ah*, with current estimated followers of approximately 60 million Indonesian Muslims.<sup>10</sup> For the first six decades of its existence – from its 1926 founding to the pathbreaking 1984 National Congress (*muktamar*), the NU was known as an organization which supported a conservative interpretation of Islamic law (*shari’a*) similar to numerous other conservative Islamic organizations. During the deliberation of the National Committee for the Preparation of Indonesia’s Independence (BPUPKI) in June 1945, NU leaders endorsed the Jakarta Charter – a clause proposed for the draft Indonesian Constitution - which would require all Indonesian Muslims to observe the *shari’a* law in their socio-political lives (Fealy, 1996: 19). The clause was removed from the final draft of the constitution announced after Indonesia’s declaration of independence in August 1945 after objections from nationalist and non-Muslim BPUPKI members.

In 1959, when Indonesia’s Constituent Assembly was debating a new Indonesian constitution, NU representatives proposed an amendment which declared not only “that the Jakarta Charter be made the official preamble to the

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<sup>10</sup> This number is only an estimation as NU does not keep a precise tally of how many followers it actually has. Much of the people affiliated with this number can be considered “Cultural NU” (*NU Kultural*) - people whose ritual practices and traditions are closer to NU but are not part of the everyday activities and decision-making circles of the organization – whether at national, regional, or local levels. Those belonging to the latter can be considered “Structural NU” (*NU Struktural*).

new Constitution, but...that the requirement for Muslims to follow the *shari'a* be added to the body of the Constitution as well” (Bush, 2009: 54). During the height of authoritarian Suharto rule in the 1970s, NU was able to block the government from enacting a secularist-oriented marriage bill that sought to limit polygamy as well as the authority of Islamic courts to legalize marriage (Bush, 2009: 68). Senior NU clerics during this period frequently issued statements that the Indonesian national ideology *Pancasila* was merely a ‘man-made ideology,’ and that it contradicted the Islamic belief in a monotheistic God (*tauhid*) (Kadir 1999: 181). By analyzing the actions of NU leaders and activists during this period, we can establish that at the time NU had a conservative political theology that influenced its political actions. This position was taken consistently even though NU was willing to participate in the 1955 general election (Feith, 1962).

By the mid-1970s, through its participation in the officially sanctioned Islamic party called the United Development Party (PPP), NU was one of the few groups expressing frequent opposition to the Suharto regime’s policy – particularly those related to Islamic affairs. The regime responded to NU’s growing opposition against its rule during this period by stripping the organization of its traditional position as Minister of Religious Affairs in 1972, which was usually awarded to a senior NU ulama for nearly two decades. The regime also cut subsidies for Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) ran by the NU, leaving clerics increasingly called for NU to stop its opposition against Suharto’s policies (Bush, 2009: 70-71). More measures against the organization was taken in 1982, when Suharto issued a new decree which required all sociopolitical groups and civil society organizations to adopt the national ideology *Pancasila* as their sole ideological foundation or risk losing their legal status and be classified as illegal organizations (Kadir, 1999: 198).

Faced with more restrictive political opportunity structure and the threat of further state reprisal, NU was forced into a difficult political choice on whether to continue its opposition against the regime and risk further sanctions and

reprisal, or to accept *Pancasila* - which it formerly considered a man-made political ideology - in exchange for relief from the regime's reprisal and the restoration of government subsidies to its *pesantren* schools and universities. In 1984, a group of young NU activists led by Abdurrahman Wahid took over the 1984 NU National Congress (*muktamar*) in Situbondo, with the blessing of several senior clerics who were dissatisfied against the organization's former leaders (Arifianto, 2012: 112-114). The *muktamar* declared that NU would withdraw from active political participation and would also accept Pancasila as its official ideology, ending its demand that Indonesia should be turned into an Islamic state. Instead, it should endorse the principles of human rights, religious tolerance, and pluralism – to take into account Indonesia's multi-ethnic and religious society (Arifianto, 2012: 105-107).

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<sup>11</sup> The senior NU clerics who supported the leadership change orchestrated by Wahid included Kyai Haji (KH) As'ad Syamsul Arifin, Ahmad Siddiq, and Ali Ma'shum. They supported Wahid due to different rationales. As'ad lent his support in order to gain more patronage funds for his *pesantren* (Barton, 2002, 149) while Siddiq and Ma'shum supported Wahid due to his family genealogy since Wahid was a grandson of NU's founder KH Hasyim Asy'ari (Barton 2002: 141 & 171).

*tawassut (moderate), al-tawazun (balance), al-i'tidal (justice), and al-tasamu (tolerance)* (Burhani 2012: 570). By affirming these principles as those NU followers ought to follow, Wahid and Siddiq began to transform NU as a promoter of moderate norms – albeit with mixed results over the long run. However, Wahid faced resistance from other senior clerics within NU, mainly from older ‘political clerics’<sup>12</sup> who used to align NU closely with the Suharto regime but were sidelined by Wahid. These clerics included Idham Chalid - the former NU chairman that was removed by Wahid – who formed a rival leadership team within the NU (Bush, 2009: 82) and his own uncle Yusuf Hasyim – who was the last living son of NU founder Hasyim Asy’ari, hence possessed family genealogy that outranked Wahid – Asy’ari grandson and threatened his legitimacy (Barton, 2002: 176). These challenges imposed a threat against Wahid’s power and authority as the leader of the largest and most dominant Islamic organization in Indonesia and his political survival.

Wahid resolved these leadership challenges from these ‘political clerics’ using a two-fold strategy: 1) Utilizing his charismatic appeal based on his familial genealogy to gain support from senior ulama within the NU, and 2) aligning closer with the Suharto regime to protect him from conservative Islamic challengers – while at the same time he framed himself as a moderate Islamic cleric who extolled democratic and pluralistic norms to Indonesian Muslims. Charismatic appeal is an important mechanism within a highly decentralized Islamic organization like the NU to rally support among senior ulama who might otherwise use their personal autonomy to ignore decisions made by the organization’s leaders. It is also instrumental to assure their public support towards NU leaders and to minimize the likelihood of other ulama to resist and issue a rival claim against their authority. Such an appeal is based on deep

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<sup>12</sup> NU insiders made distinctions between ‘political clerics’ – those who sit on its national and regional leadership boards and are regularly interacting and lobbying politicians for a wide range of policies and favors with ‘religious clerics’ – those who take few or no part in everyday politics yet are deeply revered due to their spirituality and personal charisma (Bush 2009: 35-36).



knowledge of Islamic texts and scriptures, personal attributes, and genealogical linkages with founding NU families (Arifianto, 2012: 110).

Utilizing his familial linkages as grandson of NU founder, Wahid manages to strengthen his power as NU chairman from the time he assumed office in 1984 until he stepped down due to his election as Indonesia's first democratically elected president in 1999. Due to such linkages, senior ulama like As'ad Syamsul Arifin who did not approve of the moderate norms instituted by Wahid became reluctant to publicly oppose him.<sup>13</sup> Numerous other senior ulama within the NU were also deferential towards Wahid and did not openly criticize him and the reforms he brought forward inside the NU due to his perceived charismatic attributes as well. While there remained opposition towards Wahid and towards the moderate norms he promoted, few leading ulama stepped forward to challenge him openly. When Wahid's uncle Yusuf Hasyim declared his candidacy to oppose his re-election during NU's national congress in 1989, he failed to gain the minimum of 40 NU branch votes necessary to contest the post, which allowed Wahid to be re-elected as chairman by acclamation (Barton, 2002: 176).

The Suharto regime's tough measures against 'radical' Islamists such as this certainly discouraged preachers and groups with Islamist leanings to engage in political mobilization and open recruitment to attract prospective converts to join their groups. Instead, these groups operated underground inside state university campuses, mosques, and other settings to recruit members through small, cell-like study groups to escape detection from Suharto's intelligence apparatus (Arifianto, 2019: 329). While they were able to recruit a small number of dedicated cadres using these methods, the limited public space available under the Suharto regime prevented Islamists from being able to recruit large number of followers, leaving essentially NU – along with Muhammadiyah - as dominant

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<sup>13</sup> As'ad recognized that 'Wahid was the grandson of his teacher, Kyai Hasyim Asy'ari. Thus, he had to defer to Wahid as he would defer out of respect to his teacher' (Kadir 1999: 96).

groups within the Indonesian Muslim community during the 1980s and 1990s, hence clerics and activists from both groups constituted a hegemony over Islamic discourses and ideas in Indonesia during this period. While Islamic proselytization were tolerated and even encouraged by the regime, especially after Suharto underwent an 'Islamic turn' during the 1990s to bolster his support among the ranks of pious Muslims (Liddle, 1996), Islamists made few breakthroughs in obtaining mass popular appeal due to the strict public space restrictions imposed by the regime. Hence, NU retained its control of a significant share of Indonesia's Islamic religious marketplace.

Wahid also secured his position by aligning himself closer to the Suharto regime – at least during his first term as NU chairman from 1984 to 1989. Suharto – wary about the prospect of growing Islamism among middle class Indonesians enrolling in public universities– viewed Wahid, who advocated ideas such as compatibility between Islam and Indonesia's national ideology *Pancasila*, religious pluralism, and religion-state separation while rejecting an Islamic state, as a potential ally. However, he rejected Wahid's call to promote further political opening and democratic reforms (Barton, 2002: 151). In return, Wahid sought a closer alliance with the regime to minimize possible challenges against his power and authority as he consolidated his position within the NU.

However, unlike what was implied by some scholars, Wahid was not complacent against Suharto's tyrannical rule. He projected himself as an advocate for democracy and pluralism both within the NU and in the Indonesian public sphere through his regular sermons, public speeches, op-ed columns, and other venues. By the early 1990s, Suharto and Wahid had a fallen out after the former began to court conservative Islamic activists to bolster his regime standing among the modernist Muslim constituency – a rival of Wahid and the NU (Barton 2002: 181). Afterwards, Wahid moved back and forth between expressing strong criticisms the regime whenever there was an opportunity to do so and making further accommodations towards the regime when it threatened harsh measures

against him – for instance, Wahid’s decision to endorse Suharto’s final presidential term in 1996 and campaigned with his daughter Siti Hardiyanti Rukmana during the following year’s general election campaign (Bush, 2009: 86-87). While some have criticized Wahid’s inconsistencies in his dealings with the regime, others considered that they were ‘a perfect method of dealing with an authoritarian regime with totalitarian aspirations’ and that ‘reactive rather than proactive’ response toward the regime was probably the best strategy he could have pursued when dealing with an unpredictable regime such as Suharto (Barton, 2002: 369).

Wahid along with his counterparts mentored and inspired a new generation of NU activists who founded affiliate organizations and independent NGOs which promoted democratic and pluralist norms to NU followers during and after his chairmanship was concluded in 1999.<sup>14</sup> However, despite these notable achievements during his chairmanship, Wahid did not nominate a clear successor who would further institutionalize his ideas within the organization. The lack of Wahid protégé who became influential NU clerics has made conservative clerics to continue having some influence within the organization and eroded the propagation of the moderate norms Wahid had introduced after he stood down from the organization. The rationale for this decision – and for Wahid’s numerous inconsistent decisions made during his tenure as NU chairman and later, as Indonesia’s fourth president, is best explained by Greg Barton:

*[Wahid] was always a tactician, not a strategist. Although he was brilliant at short-term political plays....he seldom showed any sign of planning for the long term (Barton, 2002: 369)*

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<sup>14</sup> Young NU activists who were inspired by Wahid include Ulil Abshar Abdalla (co-founder of the Liberal Islam Network (JIL), Rumadi Ahmad (current Executive Director of Lakpesdam – a NU affiliate which worked in the field of interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding) and Ahmad Suaedy (former Executive Director of the Wahid Foundation)

### **Towards Exclusivist Moderation: NU during the Reformasi Era**

The lack of continuity of Wahid's ideas within NU was clearly seen after he was succeeded as Nahdlatul Ulama's general chairman by Hasyim Muzadi, a prominent *kyai* who was more theologically conservative. He purged the young NU activists who were close to Wahid from PBNU immediately upon assuming the chairmanship (Van Bruinessen, 2010). Under Muzadi's chairmanship, NU issued a clerical opinion (*fatwa*) condemning the minority Ahmadiyah Muslim sect (Brown, 2019: 408), following the *fatwa* issued by the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) which had condemned it earlier. Muzadi harshly criticized the Shi'a minorities, which have suffered from several acts of persecutions (Fealy, 2017). Local NU ulema and activists were accused of perpetuating and participating in these violent incidents, particularly those occurred in Sampang, East Java province (Suryana, 2019; Miichi and Kayane, 2020; Kayane, 2020).

In 2010, Muzadi – whose term as NU chairman had expired - was replaced by Said Aqil Siradj, a West-Java based NU scholar who had unsuccessfully challenged Hasyim in the race for NU chairmanship six years earlier. While Said Aqil was not close to the recently deceased Wahid and the NU activists who came under the latter's patronage, he was perceived to have a track record expressing tolerant views toward religious minorities and had promised to include more moderate NU activists in the organization's leadership board if he was elected NU chairman (Van Bruinessen, 2010). Upon assuming office, Said Aqil faced several challenges regarding NU's future. During the Suharto era, NU - along with Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's second largest Muslim organization- was considered to have commanded the allegiance of the majority of Indonesian Muslims. By 2010, both NU and Muhammadiyah face a strong competition from dozens of new Islamic organizations with transnational linkages to Middle Eastern Islamist movements (Van Bruinessen, 2015: 13), further eroding their authority over the Indonesian Muslim community. Aided by generous financial assistance from their mother organizations and their innovative usages of social

media technologies (Van Bruinessen, 2015: 12-14 & Arifianto, 2020a: 41), these new Islamist organizations have increasingly been able to compete with NU and Muhammadiyah and recruit their former followers – particularly those from the young millennial generation.

Within NU itself, authority has become more fragmented, especially during Said Aqil's chairmanship. This is because unlike Wahid, Said Aqil does not come from a prominent NU family or own a large *pesantren*.<sup>15</sup> This hinders him from obtaining a large number of support base from other prominent NU ulama to support his policies. Former NU chairman Hasyim Muzadi partnered with Solahuddin Wahid – Abdurrahman's younger brother who had a more conservative outlook to establish a separate faction within NU that was backed by most NU clerics based in East Java (interview with Asruddin Azwar, Depok, West Java, August 23rd 2019). Due to this lack of genealogical linkage with NU's founding fathers – a necessity attribute for a senior cleric to win support and loyalty from other senior clerics, Said Aqil aligned himself with senior Indonesian political figures such as Megawati Soekarnoputri – Sukarno's daughter and current PDI-P chairwoman. Hence, the strong ties between NU and PDI-P – both at the elite and grassroots level, help to cement their current political alliance, notwithstanding political frictions between Wahid and Megawati when both served together as Indonesian President and Vice President during the early years of Reformasi (Barton, 2002; Bush, 2009).

Internal challenges against the NU leadership also came from a group of young NU *kyai* who formed "Straight Path NU" (*NU Garis Lurus* or NUGL) – a new faction which seeks NU's return to its original founding principles and the removal of "liberal and pluralist ideologies" promoted by Abdurrahman Wahid and other reformers - on the ground they are not compatible with traditional

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<sup>15</sup> Said Aqil Siradj's *pesantren* in Cirebon, West Java only has about 500 students (*santri*) – a relatively small number considering that many prominent NU boarding schools – like Sidogiri in Pasuruan and Tebuireng and Lirboyo in Jombang, have more than 10,000 *santri* each, a testimony to their lineage as *pesantrens* which were founded by one of NU founding *kyais* (interview with Asruddin Aswar, Depok, West Java, August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019).

Sunni Islamic (*Aswaja*) teachings (Iqbal, 2021: 104-105). NUGL was founded by Luthfi Bashori, Idrus Ramli, and Buya Yahya – all received advanced theological training in the Middle East and commanded large popular following both in person as well as in social media (Iqbal, 2021: 97-99). In addition, this NU faction was also supported by Abdul Somad – a Riau-born traditionalist Islamic preacher whom has become one of the prominent online preachers in Indonesia today. At the peak of his popularity Somad commanded 9.7 million Instagram followers – the highest among all conservative Islamist preachers (Akmaliah, 2020: 14).

While Somad is not considered as a NUGL founder, he does hold several leadership positions in the provincial branch of NU Riau, including a secretary of the NU Riau province's *Bahtsul Masa'il* (Islamic theological issues board) and a board member of the MUI Riau provincial branch (Iqbal 2021: 98). These positions give him a lot of theological legitimacy among NU followers, particularly those who sympathizes with NUGL agenda. The popularity of NUGL preachers is related to the fact that they propagate much of their preaching contexts via social media, which has become the most popular way for millennial-age Muslims to access Islamic knowledge (Arbuckle-Gultom & Sirait, 2019). The ideological challenges from NUGL and other conservative factions within the NU means that the organization's moderate-leaning leaders no longer have the ideological hegemony within and outside of the organization that they once did under the Wahid chairmanship.

In addition, NU activists have frequently expressed concerns toward the Muslim Brotherhood-inspired Prosperous Justice Party (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* – PKS) and Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) – the Indonesian branch of the transnational Hizb ut-Tahrir movement. Both groups are believed to have engaged in campaigns to take over the mosques and *pesantrens* affiliated with NU (van Bruinessen, 2015: 14) and their respective youth wings are thought to engage in aggressive recruitment of NU-affiliated students in public universities throughout Indonesia (Arifianto, 2019: 329-331 & Arifianto, 2020a: 41-42). PKS

– through its youth wing the Islamic Muslim Students Action Union (KAMMI) and HTI have engaged in nationwide recruitment campaigns in the campuses of Indonesian state universities over the past two decades. Many university students – including those from NU background – were attracted to these groups because their egalitarian structures allowed them to advance through the ranks quickly compared to NU and Muhammadiyah youth preaching groups (Arifianto, 2020a: 41-42). PKS has also persuaded some NU *kyais* and their children in regions like East Java to run for national and regional legislative positions as its candidates, instead of through the National Awakening Party (PKB) – NU’s electoral vehicle (Machmudi, 2021: 166).

Some younger NU clerics also have an affinity towards HTI – whom they considered as an ally in their fight against immorality and injustice within the Indonesian society. For instance, a deputy head of NU’s East Java provincial branch states that:

*NU and HTI are ‘brothers-in-arms’ (teman seperjuangan). While they may deploy different tactics and strategies, they share one common goal – to enact and implement Islamic law within the Indonesian society (interview with KH Abdurrahman Navis, Surabaya, February 13rd, 2017).*

NU leaders are concerned against competition from new Islamist movements and the fragmentation of their own authority, as factions like *NU Garis Lurus* are gaining followers within the NU ranks (Iqbal, 2021: 98-99). This – alongside material concerns like gaining additional access to state patronage (Mietzner, 2018: 273-274) - motivated NU chairman Said Aqil to develop a closer alliance with the Jokowi regime.

During the 2015 NU *muktamar* in Jombang, NU chairman Said Aqil announced a new theological innovation, *Islam Nusantara*, which is designed not only of consolidating the moderates’ hold over NU in the face of growing ideological challenges coming both from within and outside of NU. Derived from the term *pribumisasi Islam* (Islamic indigenization) coined by Wahid in an earlier article (Wahid, 1983), its proponents claimed that it is a synthesis which combines

traditionalist Islamic theology and local customs, rituals, and traditions. As NU chairman Said Aqil Siradj states:

*Islam Nusantara is an Indonesian-style Islam, which adopts Sunni Islam (Ahlusunnah wal jamaah) principles, which promotes tolerance, strengthens Islam as a blessing for humanity (rahmatan lil alamin), and is based on the principles of balance (tawazun), moderate (tawassut), tolerance (tasamu), and justice (i'tidal) (Hasyim 2018).*

Siradj further elaborates, *Islam Nusantara* is an affirmation of the NU to sit in the middle of two ideological poles, “the radical pole which is very rigid or strict and confrontational, and a liberal pole which is very compromising, permissive, and hedonist” (Siradj, 2010). NU leaders stated that *Islam Nusantara* is neither an ‘alien’ theology nor ‘liberal’ Islam. Instead, it is originated from the original interpretation of Sunni Islam (*Ahlul Sunnah wal Jama’ah*). Hence, NU inherits “the original interpretation of Sunni Islam that is now abandoned by most Middle Eastern Muslims. One that tolerates local cultural practices and also promotes nationalism – loyalty to one’s own country.”<sup>16</sup>

From the very start, *Islam Nusantara* was framed by NU leaders as an antidote to the perceived ‘radicalism’ of Indonesian Islam that is thought to have come from the influence of Islamist groups influenced by transnational ideologies. These groups – HTI, *Tarbiyah* Movement, and various Salafi groups – are often lumped together as ‘Wahhabis’ or ‘Saudi-Islamists’ by *Islam Nusantara* proponents. The latter’s acceptance of unorthodox customs and traditions has enabled its leaders to differentiate NU from other Sunni Islamic groups. This identity enables NU leaders to define itself in a sectarian-like manner. Drawing a metaphor similar to ‘good Muslim’ vs ‘bad Muslim’ analogy described by Mamdani (2004), NU and its ‘moderate’ *Islam Nusantara* theology is presented as ‘good Muslims’ vis-à-vis the ‘alien’ Islamists who brought ‘foreign’ and ‘intolerant’ Islamic interpretations to Indonesia.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with K.H. Marzuki Mustamar. General Chairman, Nahdlatul Ulama East Java Provincial Branch (Malang, East Java, February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020).



For instance, senior NU *kyai* Mustofa Bisri declares that:

*...genuine Islam, Islam Nusantara...has been supplanted by Saudi Islam, a grasping and materialistic Islam, coarse, cruel and savage. The Wahhabi view is just a ghoulish nightmare that keeps the world awake at night, trembling in horror (Loveard 2016).*

Islamist groups like HTI and PKS were also portrayed by NU senior clerics as “agents of Arabization” (Burhani 2018: 5). The ideological and political struggle between NU and these groups are considered by many NU activists as “being at least as important, if not more so, than violent struggles in the Middle East and South Asia and even efforts to counter domestic violent extremist group” (Woodward 2017: 240). In contrast, NU leaders portrayed their organization as:

*promoters of moderate Islam that is compatible with the principles of the Pancasila and the Unitary State Republic of Indonesia (NKRI)...Pancasila turns Indonesia into a religious state. However, not a single religion may dominate and impose its will over the others. NU and the Jokowi regime are committed to promote Islam Nusantara as an antidote against both liberalism and Islamic radicalism/Wahhabism and to safeguard Indonesia’s national unity (interview with KH Marzuki Mustamar, Malang, February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020).*

NU’s leadership under Siradj was united to promote Islam Nusantara and attack conservative Islamists. To be sure, there are many critics within the organization who opposed Siradj’s promotion of Islam Nusantara, including his predecessor the late Hasyim Muzadi and clerics who are affiliated with *NU Garis Lurus*. However, since Siradj’s faction is in full control of the NU leadership board, he managed to sideline the critics very easily. Hence, even though NU is also fraught with multiple factions and has a significant Islamist contingent within the organization – its leadership was willing to use strongarm tactics to marginalize more conservative factions and pushed them back into a more obscure public space.

In sum, NU has adapted an aggressive strategy to counter the perceived conservative Islamist challenge against its ideological and political hegemony over the right to speak on behalf of Indonesian Muslims. The organization utilizes

its long history of differentiating itself from other Indonesian Islamic organizations by promoting a sectarian-like distinction between itself and conservative Islamists organizations whom it accuses to bring ‘foreign’ (Arabic) influences to divide Indonesian Muslims and to establish an Islamic or a caliphate state in Indonesia. This sectarian difference is also being utilized by NU leaders and activists to develop confrontational campaigns to disrupt the activities of hardline Islamist organizations that is perceived to be NU’s main rivals to win the heart and minds of Indonesian Muslims, particularly the millennial age generation.

NU’s campaign to articulate *Islam Nusantara* - both nationally and worldwide - received a strong endorsement from the Jokowi regime, as the president increasingly came under pressure from the conservative Islamist groups and was widely considered by hardline groups to have insufficient Islamic credentials. Jokowi felt even more threatened by these group after the 2016 Defending Islam rallies (*Aksi Bela Islam*) against former Jakarta governor and ally Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, contributing to Purnama’s defeat and subsequent trial and conviction for alleged religious blasphemy (Mietzner, 2018: 272-275). In the aftermath of the rallies, Jokowi has been increasingly solicitous toward NU compared to other Islamic groups – for instance by speaking positively about *Islam Nusantara* as an ideology that is compatible with Indonesia’s national ideology in his various appearances in NU-related gatherings (Hamdani, 2019).

Most importantly, Jokowi has given substantial support to NU’s promotion of *Islam Nusantara* internationally. *Islam Nusantara* has been adopted by the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and promoted via official diplomatic channels throughout the world as a tool of Indonesia’s “soft power diplomacy” (Saiman, 2019). The ministry brought senior NU leaders to sponsored conferences and seminars promoting religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue overseas. In addition, Indonesian security agencies such as the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) have adopted *Islam Nusantara* as part of their

strategy to promote 'moderate Islam' to counter more 'radical' Islamic groups. The agency has supported international conferences and seminars where speakers from NU promoted *Islam Nusantara* as an antidote to radicalism and extremism (Mandaville and Hamid, 2018: 25).

After aligning the NU closer to Jokowi, Said Aqil and other moderate NU leaders are becoming bolder in attacking their opponents, both within and outside of the organization. In addition to labeling his critics as 'Wahhabis,' NU chairman Said Aqil began to demand that NU should be in charge of all mosques and other Islamic institutions in Indonesia, in order to safeguard the country from conservative Islamist interpretation. In a January 27, 2019 speech, he declared that "all mosque prayer leaders (*imams*), preachers, judges (*qadi*), and the Minister of Religious Affairs have to come from NU. Otherwise, they may lead the faithful astray" (Nuary, 2019). Such remarks drew strong reactions from Muhammadiyah leaders, one of whom declared that Said Aqil's declaration is "a dangerous statement that might endanger Indonesia's national unity" (Atriana, 2019). These are troubling signs that NU has embraced exclusivist pluralist strategies to deal with ideological challenges from conservative opponents, which heightens sectarian divide between itself and other Indonesian Islamic organizations, including with Muhammadiyah.

NU's effort to counter radicalism and promote moderation through Islam Nusantara is also achieved by its closer alliance with the Indonesian state. Its efforts have received a strong endorsement and support from ruling regime of President Joko Widodo (commonly known as 'Jokowi'). This is because president increasingly comes under pressure from the conservative Islamist groups, especially after the 2016/17 Defending Islam rallies that resulted in the re-election defeat of his ally, former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama. The clearest sign of Jokowi's favor towards NU was his selection of Ma'ruf Amin – the organization's supreme leader (*rais aam*), to become his vice-presidential nominee on the eve of his presidential re-election campaign in 2019. This was done despite

the fact Amin's theological viewpoints closely resembles those from more conservative NU factions. As former chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) – Amin was responsible for the issuance of numerous fatwas against a minorities such as Ahmadis and LGBTQs, along with the ruling against former governor Purnama that declared him to have committed religious blasphemy, justifying the action of the Defending Islam supporters (Fealy, 2018b).

NU's alliance with the Jokowi regime has emboldened it to take tough – sometimes violent measures – to disrupt its Islamist opponents and exclude them from the public sphere. For instance, *Banser*, a militia group affiliated by Ansor – the organization's youth wing – has frequently disrupted HTI-sponsored gatherings and forcefully disbanded *da'wa* activities conducted by popular Islamist preachers such as Felix Siauw - who is considered to have close ties with HTI (Burhani, 2018: 18). Ansor's tactics to disrupt peaceful mobilization activities sponsored by HTI and Islamist organizations like FPI, has been criticized by human rights activists, including those affiliated with NU. One activist called this tactic “echoes the strategies adapted by the Indonesian Army to disrupt the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) activities during the mid-1960s” before it launched a massacre against PKI members and activists in 1965 and 1966.<sup>17</sup>

Even peaceful social movements like *#2019ChangePresident* (*#2019GantiPresiden*), which happened to have many members from the ranks of Alumni 212 and other conservative Islamist groups, were often harassed by the authorities and have their rallies often forcefully disbanded by security officials just before the 2019 presidential campaign season started (Warburton and Aspinall, 2019). *NU Garis Lurus* website – where it propagated its views - went offline after 2018 – allegedly because it was shut down by the Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Information (Iqbal 2021). Abdul Somad – the most prominent preacher affiliated with *NU Garis Lurus* - has been banned from

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Aan Anshori, a human rights activist affiliated with NU, Surabaya, February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

speaking in several state universities and other public institutions (Hadi, 2019). The initiative to limit Somad's preaching activities seems to come from senior NU leaders whom have accused him to harbor sympathies to the now banned HTI, while also have concerns regarding his ambitions for a future leadership position in NU (Arbuckle-Gultom & Sirait, 2019).

Due to the increasing state-led persecutions against conservative Islamist groups and activists - often backed by NU and its affiliates like Ansor - growing number of Indonesian scholars are calling Ansor's actions to be no different from those practiced by its self-proclaimed nemesis – FPI – in “threatening those who have different religious ideas by halting and disbanding their activities” (Burhani 2018: 18). Both NU and Ansor's actions against conservative Islamist groups – emboldened by their alliance with the Jokowi regime - has clearly helped to promote further sectarian divisions between the contending groups that further led NU to embrace a exclusivist pluralist direction in the past few years.

Jokowi managed to win his 2019 rematch against Prabowo and accordingly, NU has been rewarded by the regime with the appointment its supreme leader Ma'ruf Amin as his new Vice President of four of its cadres as ministers in the new cabinet. In the latest cabinet reshuffle conducted in December 2020, Ansor Chairman Yaquut Cholil Qomas was appointed as Ministry of Religious Affairs – a position long coveted by the NU leadership and its activists. However, some observers within the NU have begun to question whether the organization has grown too close to the Jokowi regime. A junior NU scholar has questioned whether the close relationship between NU and its leaders and the Jokowi regime has led the organization to become:

*....a little more than government-sanctioned 'loudspeakers' to justify any policies made by the president. To be a 'progressive Islam' has become a little more than backing the Jokowi-Ma'ruf regime in its totality.... Gradually, 'progressive Islam' [within NU] has evolved to become 'statist Islam.'* (Fitriyah, 2019).

To conclude, NU's promotion of *Islam Nusantara* and close alliance with the Jokowi regime has lead it to embrace exclusivist moderation – where the

rhetoric of NU leaders praising moderate norms like democracy and tolerance is increasingly contradicted by the actions of its activists who attack conservative NU clerics and other Islamic groups with differing theological interpretations – both conservative Islamists like HTI and ‘deviant’ minorities such as Ahmadi and Shi’a Muslims. Such rhetoric is also contradicted by the action of its leaders in support of the Jokowi regime’s effort to rollback democratic institutions – as seen in their support for the restoration of the indirect presidential election system that was highlighted in the introduction to this article.

### **Conclusion**

Why and under which socio-political conditions do a religious organization that has adhered to follow moderate political norms and discourses decide to backtrack from them and decide to pursue policies to embrace an exclusivist moderation, especially toward their ideological rivals? This article seeks to find the answer to this puzzle by examining the Nahdlatul Ulama's case. It analyzes the internal dynamics faced by a religious organization driven by an increasingly open religious marketplace and detailed how increasing competition and declining religious authority have lead the NU to backtrack from its commitment toward moderate norms that were originally initiated during the Abdurrahman Wahid chairmanship. Instead, the organization is increasingly pursuing exclusivist and illiberal policies to exclude its ideological competitors out of the public sphere, both on its own accord and in alliance with the state.

The main factors which explains the changing level of commitment to political moderation within the NU case is the increasing competition of the Islamic religious marketplace and the fragmentation of religious authority faced by the NU starting after the Reformasi era but is particularly troublesome for the organization within the past decade. This competition and authority breakdown did not occur during Abdurrahman Wahid's leadership – under which he was able to propagate moderate norms to upheld democracy and pluralism by utilizing a combination of charismatic leadership and alliance with the Suharto regime (until appx. 1990). At the same time, Wahid framed himself as a moderate Islamic leader who extolled pluralist and democratic values both within the NU and the Indonesian public space throughout his NU chairmanship. He was able to consistently promote these norms while also prevailed over ideological challenges put forward by conservative Islamist rivals both within NU and externally as well. Wahid and Nurcolish Madjid – his modernist counterpart – became influential authority figures who promoted moderate norms within constrained religious marketplace in Indonesia, then dominated by NU and Muhammadiyah – in a

time where the marketplace was closed to conservative Islamist groups which faced severe reprisals from the Suharto regime and could only conducted their activities underground.

However, Wahid failed to prepare and implement a succession plan to succeed him in the NU leadership and to become standard bearers to promote these moderate norms, once he resigned his NU chairmanship to become Indonesia's first democratically elected president in 1999. This failure to prepare the next generation of NU activists with potential to be future leaders of the organization has negative consequences for the prospect of moderation within the NU later on, as Indonesia's religious marketplace was opened and quickly became competitive after the 1998 *Reformasi*. As a result, NU is increasingly losing authority to more conservative Islamist groups and preachers. Said Aqil and the NU leadership are facing a very competitive religious marketplace characterized by the influx of conservative Islamist organizations, alongside the emergence of conservative clerics within NU's own ranks, like those who affiliated with *NU Garis Lurus* as well as Abdul Somad, who despite not being formally affiliated with the former is considered enough of a threat to the NU leadership that the organization supports the efforts to restrict his proselytization activities.

To counter these Islamist-leaning groups and preachers NU leadership are promoting the *Islam Nusantara* ideology, aligning the organization more closely to the Jokowi regime and lending their support to his initiative to combat 'radical' and 'extremist' Islamist ideas allegedly supported by conservative Islamist groups. In addition, both unilaterally and in coordination with the regime, its activists launched strategic assaults and persecutions against its ideological rivals to marginalize and exclude these religious competitors from Indonesia's public space. As a result, NU managed to become Jokowi's main Islamic political ally. However, this alliance comes at a high price as the organization increasingly backtracks from its commitment toward the democratic norms it vows to support.



This article contributes to further the insights of the inclusion-moderation thesis by showing a pathway to explain internal dynamics within the organization, in which a religious organization might backtrack from its commitment to promote moderate norms after democracy has been attained. Utilizing the ‘marketplace of ideas’ framework to fill a theoretical gap of the thesis, it shows that a religious group’s declining commitment to democratic and pluralistic norms is a reaction for its decreasing membership and authority due to growing ideological competition from conservative Islamist organizations and clerics. I conclude that genuine support toward these norms, even in Muslim democracies – is not constant and can change due to changing political climate of the country. Since moderate Islamic organizations like NU have in the past serve as critical voices which provided a ‘check and balance’ role towards the Indonesian state – its current alliance with the Jokowi regime poses a risk that it might abandon this crucial role to assure the institutionalization of democracy and pluralism in the largest Muslim-majority nation of the world.

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