

Islamic Post-Traditionalism in Indonesia



RUMADI

With a Foreword by

ABDURRAHMAN WAHID

Translated by

REBECCA LUNNON

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First published in Singapore in 2015 by ISEAS Publishing
ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614

E-mail: publish@iseas.edu.sg
Website: <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

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Originally published as *Post Traditionalisme Islam: Wacana Intelektualisme dalam Komunitas NU* (in Indonesian)

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The ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute gratefully acknowledges both the generous contribution of the Asian Law Centre at the University of Melbourne in funding the translation of this book, and the work of Tim Lindsey, Director of the Centre for Indonesian Law, Islam and Society at Melbourne Law School in initiating and managing the translation project.

The responsibility for facts and opinions in this publication rests exclusively with the authors and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or the policy of the publishers or their supporters.

ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Rumadi, 1970–

Islamic Post-traditionalism in Indonesia.

1. N.U. (Organization)—History.
2. Ulama—Indonesia—Intellectual life.
3. Islam and politics—Indonesia.
 - I. Title.

BP10 N83R93

2015

ISBN 978-981-4620-42-0 (soft cover)

ISBN 978-981-4620-66-6 (e-book, PDF)

Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

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in Indonesia**

The **ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute** (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) was established as an autonomous organization in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are the Regional Economic Studies (RES, including ASEAN and APEC), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS).

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FOREWORD

POST-TRADITIONALISM IN NU?

By Abdurrahman Wahid

In this book, the predicate "post-traditionalist" is applied to anyone who desires change within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). This of course is inherently problematic and must be resolved immediately. However, there is one aspect in the history of NU's foundation that Dr Rumadi does not cover, namely the dialogue between Islam and nationalism, which has been around since before NU was established.

In all his enthusiasm, Rumadi has the tendency to take anything that appears as a "deviation" from old traditionalism, and consider it part of the student revival that is needed today. This attitude, of viewing post-traditionalism as the essence of NU "revival", is frankly quite dangerous because it can be easily misused.

In fact, there is also a "revival" of older parties to strengthen this old traditionalism, including within NU, in reaction to the attitude that rejects tradition. This does not complement or serve post-traditionalism, but rather opposes it. The most obvious example of this is the emergence of figures such as KH Ma'ruf Amin and KH Sahal Mahfudz. They do not lead NU to "oppose" traditionalism; instead, they uphold traditionalism but in "deviation" to other parties who hold to the old traditionalism. How do we explain the attitude of the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI), which is so quick to deem others deviant? Is it not so that this leads to the religious formalism that NU has fought against from the very beginning? Rumadi does not explain this issue. This could well encourage others to consider all NU members as post-traditional.

Thus, it is clear that within NU there is also a denial of the creative dialogue between Islam on the one hand and nationalism on the other. So where then do we place people like Bung Karno, let alone our friends in dialogue such as KH M. Hasjim As'yari and NU *kyai* in general who are not usually considered? And what of the Mecca chapter of Syarikat Islam that was established in 1913 and went on to inspire a number of efforts to enforce religious traditionalism, but also freed religion from stagnation? What do we label it? And how should we consider the actions of H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto and his son-in-law Soekarno, along with KH M. Hasjim As'yari from Tebu Ireng *pesantren* in Jombang, his cousin KH A. Wahab Chasbullah, his nephew Ahmad Joyosugito (founder of the Ahmadiyah movement in Indonesia), his son KH A. Wahid Hasjim and his cousin KH A. Kahar Mudzakir (who later became a member of Muhammadiyah's national leadership)?

We must be careful here in judging those who, at the end of the day, have become the "NU Ulama". Indeed, it is not easy to follow the developments of an organization like NU over the decades. The creative dialogue between NU and the spirit of nationalism is by no means easy to explain. Before NU had been established, the Majelis Taswirul Akfar (Council for the Awakening of Thought) was formed, and before it the Nahdatu Al-Tudjar (Awakening of the Merchants) and the Nahdlatu al-Wathon (Revival of the Motherland). This was followed by the NU Congress in 1935 in Banjarmasin. All of this deeply influenced NU, and we do not now know whether it should be labelled as post-traditionalism or not.

In the Congress in Banjarmasin, NU decided it was not a religious obligation to establish an "Islamic State". That in itself was startling, and still we do not know what label to give this. In Banjarmasin five figures rejected the decision, holding tight to their convictions that an Islamic State had to be established. They later changed their tune in 1950, accepting the Republic of Indonesia that they had initially rejected. In fact, they became the "Pancasila Heroes" and essentially regarded the President of the Republic of Indonesia as the legal ruler of state (*waliyul amri al-dlaruri*) with effective authority for a set period of time (*bi al syaukah*). For how long? Forever, until doomsday. The phrase "for a set period of time" was used because the requirements for the President of the Republic of Indonesia were not the same as the requirements for the ruler of state. These results from the National Conference in Medan in 1957 are rarely used in considerations of NU's stance and attitudes.

It is clear from the discussion above that examining the term post-traditionalism requires a willingness to use all the materials available. However, this book is of great value as it reveals the enormous process currently taking place within NU. Whatever it may be called, it is of immense interest to studies of the changes occurring within the Muslim community in Indonesia. No matter the labels used, this book details with interest how the traditional ulama are reacting to challenges from within and from outside of their community. This is the most important thing to be obtained from this book.

The process through which NU was born was a result of historical developments, and not the cause of the changes that subsequently took place. This is the great value of the book you hold in your hands.

Jakarta, 7 February 2008

PREFACE

No words suffice but praise to God the Almighty for it was with His help that I was able to complete this dissertation through much hard work. Although the completion of this dissertation took much sweat, time, and money, I am aware that there are many gaps that were unable to be explored. This was a consequence of limitations I faced in being able to examine everything related to the research topic. However, this is not an excuse for any academic errors in this research. I take full responsibility for all the shortcomings in this book.

This work does not represent the end of my academic career, but rather the beginning of a long and more challenging academic journey. Consequently, I accept criticism from readers in order to become a more responsible intellectual.

Although I worked hard to finish this research, I feel indebted, both directly and indirectly, to many; those who helped, who gave motivation, who were discussion partners, who continually asked if my dissertation was finished, and to those who helped collect data in the field.

First of all, to my parents. They both worked hard, expending much energy and time to guide me while I obtained my degrees, from undergraduate through to doctoral. In all their simplicity and with all their restrictions, they have always been a light in my life that has never flickered nor died. To my father, who is now in the presence of God (7/1/2005), I hope you are peaceful by His side. Your sacrifice was not in vain.

To my beloved wife, Emmamatul Qudsiyah who wished that I would finish this dissertation quickly in amongst the busyness of making a living. My two children, Affan F. Azka and Najma Fuaida, who have forgone their right to my love and attention, you always give me inspiration.

To my supervisors, Prof. Dr Azyumardi Azra and Dr Bahtiar Effendy, who encouraged me to finish this dissertation, and who were both teachers

and discussion friends. Thank you for your advice and input in perfecting this dissertation.

To the management and academic staff at the Bengkulu State Islamic College (STAIN Bengkulu) who permitted me to study while I was still teaching there. Your assistance and flexibility helped me greatly in my studies. Similarly to the staff of the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University in Jakarta (UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta), especially in the Faculty of Islamic Syariah and Law, who willingly allowed me to forgo my duties as I finished my dissertation.

To my friends who became discussion partners and critiqued my dissertation. Yenni Wahid, Ahmad Suaedy, Abd. Moqsith Ghazali (The Wahid Institute), Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, Khamami Zada, the late Maskur Maskub, M. Imdadun Rahmat, and Fawaid amongst others (Lakpesdam NU's *Taswirul Afkar Journal*), Farid Wajdi (Yogyakarta/Leiden), Jadul Maula (LKIS), and others at P3M, Desantara, JIMM, ISIS, eLSAD (no longer active), Averoes (Malang), LAPAR (Makassar), and the Liberal Islam Network (JIL). I cannot forget Mr Masykuri Abdillah and others at Jakarta UIN's Center for Development of Human Resources (PPSDM) who were happy to give me room to do as I needed and obtain self-actualization. These friends have all helped me greatly in completing this dissertation, although perhaps they are not aware of this.

Hopefully the kind favours of all are rewarded accordingly. I hope that this work is beneficial to all.

Kampung Semanggi, 16 July 2005

RD

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1

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary developments in religious (Islamic) thought within the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) community reveal an interesting phenomenon, especially amongst the young cadres. They have progressive religious ideas in responding to modernity that stem from the traditional knowledge base they possess, but that are also shaped by the new knowledge they have gained from modernity. They are not only concerned with modernity, which they critique and view very carefully, but also with revitalizing tradition. This revitalization of tradition is not about glorifying and sacralizing tradition, but deeply critiquing it, both in terms of action and thought. In fact, even the pillars of the *ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamâ'ah* doctrine (belief in the Qur'an, the Prophet's Sunna, and the Muslim community) do not escape criticism. The NU youth's thoughts and ideas are generally more responsive in facing the challenges of modernity when compared to their seniors.

Nevertheless, studying the development of thought within the NU community is no easy task. Although NU is known as a traditional organization, tracking the dynamics of its intellectualism involves many complex elements and variables. This is because although the roots of NU's intellectual tradition are relatively similar, their expression by different

NU thinkers is quite varied. This diversity demands that care be taken so as not to arrive at erroneous conclusions. This is even more important when taking a haphazard approach, such as applying the categories of traditionalism versus modernism. These categories are by now well and truly outdated when it comes to looking at where NU is at currently. In short, the spectrum of NU intellectualism has no single face.

This difficulty is also related to the reality that NU intellectualism is a field often neglected by academic studies. Those researching NU, both foreign and native, have the same tendency to examine NU purely from the aspect of politics and power. Meanwhile, the socio-intellectual aspects of NU remain largely unexplored.¹ This is evident in the number of books and works on NU, from the early years right up to the latest developments, that focus largely on the political rather than the socio-intellectual. Although it is clear that NU developments cannot be separated from national politics in general, this does not mean all NU activities are geared towards politics and power.² Very few, if any, serious studies of NU concentrate on tracing the intellectual roots of the NU ulama (religious scholars) and the Islamic discourse that has been developed.

This is of course quite concerning and not at all beneficial for NU. Why? Because it gives the impression that NU, both organizationally and culturally, is a community so preoccupied with political issues throughout its entire history that it has neglected the intellectuality which is in fact the very soul of the movement. This assumption is clearly at odds with the reality that NU — where ulama form the backbone of the organization — has embraced the mission of becoming the bridge between the wealth of classic Islamic intellectualism and the reality of modernity. On a macro level, it also gives the impression that Islamic intellectualism in Indonesia is very poor.

HISTORY OF NU INTELLECTUALISM

The emergence of a new passion within NU intellectualism has a long history and has been influenced by many things. The success of the modernists in developing educational institutes helped motivate NU *kiai* (religious scholars) to reform their education by adopting a system of secular education, while still keeping the old *pesantren* (traditional Islamic boarding school) system. For instance, Tebuireng *pesantren*, established by KH Hasyim Asy'ari (1874–1947), adopted a school system, especially in

studies of the Qur'an, from as early as 1916. The following decade, there were at least two pioneers who introduced educational reformation to this *pesantren*, namely Kiai Muhammad Ilyas (1911–70) and Kiai Wahid Hasyim (1914–53). The former was the nephew of Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari's wife, who completed his studies at HIS (Hollandsch Indlansch School) and led the Madrasah Salafiyah (the Salafi School) in Tebuireng *pesantren*. The latter was the son of KH Hasyim Asy'ari, who after returning from Mecca in 1935, introduced Dutch lessons to the madrasah (formal Islamic school).

Since the 1950s, a number of *santri* (Islamic students studying at *pesantren*) and sons and daughters of *kiai* have gone on to study at tertiary institutes, both in Indonesia and overseas. At the same time, in 1951, the Minister for Religious Affairs KH Wahid Hasyim established the state Islamic college known as Perguruan Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri (PTAIN), which later became the State Islamic Institute (IAIN) in 1960. Subsequent developments have seen no fewer than fourteen IAIN campuses across the archipelago; and in 1997, faculties that had been part of the IAIN network became part of the State Islamic College (STAIN), which now has thirty-three campuses.³ Besides this, there are many private Islamic Tertiary Institutions (PTAI) that also help spread developments in Islamic education throughout Indonesia. Their existence plays an important role for the continued mobility of *santri* after they have graduated from *pesantren*. This fast-paced modernization of education means that NU youth are increasingly more educated, attending tertiary institutions, and living in academic environments.

The emergence of a number of religious non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has also greatly influenced the NU youth. NGOs do not only invigorate religious life, but also play a role in creating a progressive religious discourse. Since the 1970s, young NU cadres became active in NGOs working towards the development of village communities. These activities gave NU youth the opportunity to openly participate in the intellectual discourse and have a direct impact on social reality.

Several NGOs influenced the development of NU intellectualism, including P3M (Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat/ The Indonesian Society for Pesantren and Community Development), which was established in 1983, and Lakpesdam NU (Lembaga Kajian dan Pengembangan Sumber Daya Manusia NU/NU's Institute for Human Resource Studies and Development), which was established in 1985, shortly after NU announced a return to the Khittah of 1926 (a socio-religious rather

than political orientation) in 1984. In the 1990s a number of NGOs emerged, motivated by the NU youth. They included LKiS (Lembaga Kajian Islam dan Sosial/The Institute for Islamic and Social Studies) in Yogyakarta, the Desantara Institute in Jakarta, Ilham in Semarang, eLSAD in Surabaya, Avveroes in Malang, INCReS in Bandung, Bildung in Cirebon, LAPAR in Makassar, and Syarikat in Yogyakarta.

The emergence of this new passion in NU intellectualism cannot be separated from NU's decision to leave the bustling life of practical politics and return to the NU Khittah of 1926. This important decision forced the NU elite and community to step away from the busyness of practical political affairs. Much of their time instead was channelled into responding to issues of education, poverty, injustice, and realignment to the NU framework of thought. The election of Achmad Shiddiq as chairman of the 'Âm Syuriah (central legislative body of NU) and KH Abdurrahman Wahid as head of the Tanfidhiyah PBNU (NU executive body) in Situbondo in 1984 further facilitated critical and progressive religious thought in NU circles.

KH Abdurrahman Wahid's leadership from 1984 brought two important changes. The first one was a repositioning of politics with the decision to return to the Khittah of 1926, which represented a transition from formal politics on the New Order's platform to informal politics without a platform. This repositioning allowed NU to create its own political platform and gave it a bargaining position with the New Order government, though it also made the New Order government continually suspicious of NU. In addition, the reorientation allowed NU to struggle for the development of society, rather than being oriented towards securing political positions. Secondly, Abdurrahman Wahid provided room for the growth of new thought, related to theology, fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), *tasawuf* (mysticism), and the doctrine of *ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamâ'ah* (belief in the Qur'an, the Prophet's Sunna, and the Muslim community). This theological repositioning was crucial because, in accordance with the Khittah of 1926, NU was returning to being a religious organization (*jam'iyah diniyah*) concerned with social issues (*ijtima'iyah*). In this context, NU placed theological belief as the basis of community development through promotion of universal issues such as human rights, democracy, civil society, and gender equality.⁴

Abdurrahman Wahid's leadership stimulated change in NU's religious discourse. Without hesitation, he published articles in several journals, magazines, newspapers, and other media forms on a variety of issues, including criticism of the NU and *pesantren* traditions. Abdurrahman

Wahid's criticism and appreciation of new thought motivated the NU youth to think critically in a way that broke away from the establishment. On this basis, it can be reasoned that under Abdurrahman Wahid's leadership, NU's religious thought appeared more dynamic compared to that of other religious organizations.

Today, the progressive thought of the NU youth has continued to develop, both through NGOs and tertiary institutions. Recently, their thoughts have become increasingly crystallized and marked by their own unique characteristics, which they refer to as Islamic post-traditionalism. However, this transformation within Islamic intellectualism is not well known amongst the public. How intellectual dynamics within the NU community moved from the traditional-conservative to the outbreak of Islamic post-traditionalist thought, the factors that influenced this change, the issues and Islamic discourses that have developed, and the implications and future of this post-traditionalist movement within the context of NU intellectualism, are all topics that need to be elaborated further in an academic manner.

NEGLECT OF SOCIO-INTELLECTUAL STUDIES

Academic elaboration is also important in response to the general conception of NU, which has been stereotyped as a traditional community that is old-fashioned, anti-modernity, and static, amongst other things, but which is in fact leading developments in very progressive new thought in Indonesia.

This misconception is a result of at least three factors. First, although recently I have been paying much greater attention to NU developments by reading academic studies of NU for my honours, Masters, and PhD, from both within Indonesia and overseas, the majority of these studies look at developments in NU's political behaviour instead of its intellectual dynamics.

Secondly, the development of progressive thought in NU is quite startling. This is understandable given that NU, which has always been seen as the guardian of Islamic orthodoxy, the most loyal heir to tradition, and a group which is nearly without intellectual dynamics, has suddenly produced a generation of NU youth who have developed NU's intellectual character as if to separate it from its traditional foundations.

Thirdly, studies of socio-intellectual dynamics in Indonesia are generally neglected. As a result, research on NU intellectualism would make

an important contribution to the study of socio-intellectual developments in Indonesia.

To date, there are very few academic studies of NU compared with studies of modern organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Persatuan Islam (Persis, Islamic Union). This is of course very worrying. In-depth research into NU only really took off at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. It was then that NU's changing role in the second half of the 1980s caught the interest of (Western) scholars.

This led to the publication of a foreign-language book, albeit an edited collection, which specifically discussed NU, titled *Nahdlatul Ulama: Traditional Islam and Modernity in Indonesia*. It was edited by Greg Barton and Greg Fealy and published by Monash University, Australia, in 1996. The book was later translated into Indonesian and published by LKiS, Yogyakarta, with the title *Tradisionalisme Radikal: Persinggungan Nahdlatul Ulama-Negara/Radical Traditionalism: NU-State Interaction* (1997). Three years after this initial publication, a second foreign-language book was written in French by Andree Feillard and later published by LKiS under the title *NU vis a vis Negara: Pencarian Bentuk, Isi dan Makna/NU vis a vis the State: A Search for Form, Content and Meaning* (1999).

Native Indonesian scholars produced more works on NU, including Choirul Anam (1985), *Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan Nahdlatul Ulama/Growth and Development of Nahdlatul Ulama*; Kacung Marijan (1992), *Quo Vadis NU: Setelah Kembali ke Khittah 1926/Quo Vadis NU: After the Return to the 1926 Khittah*; Mahrus Irsyam (1984), *Ulama dan Partai Politik, Upaya Mengatasi Krisis/Ulama and Political Parties, An Attempt to Overcome the Crisis*; Bahtiar Effendy (1988), "The Nine Stars and Politics: A Study of Nahdlatul Ulama's Acceptance of Asas Tunggal and Its Withdrawal from Politics", MA thesis at Ohio University; Einar Martahan Sitompul (1989), *NU dan Pancasila: Sejarah dan Peranan NU dalam Penerimaan Pancasila sebagai Satu-Satunya Asas/NU and Pancasila: The History and Role of NU in Accepting Pancasila as the Sole Basis*; A. Gaffar Karim (1995), *Metamorfosis NU dan Politisasi Islam di Indonesia/NU Metamorphosis and Politicisation of Islam in Indonesia*; Ellyasa KH Dharwis, editor (1994), *Gus Dur, NU dan Masyarakat Sipil/Gus Dur, NU and Civil Society*; Ali Haidar (1994), *Nahdlatul Ulama dan Islam: Pendekatan Fiqih dalam Politik/Nahdlatul Ulama and Islam: A Fiqh Approach in Politics*.

Almost all of these books favour a political approach. More recently, Djohan Effendi (2000) wrote a dissertation that took an intellectual