

## SUFFERING FROM 'POLITICAL EXHAUSTION': The Dynamics of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Indonesia's Political Arena

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### Book Review



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Whilst many literature and books tended to approach Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as just among many political players, later works focused on NU's interests and power relations *vis-à-vis* the state as the most important explanatory variable in its behaviour. This book aims at providing us with distinctive analysis by arguing that it is NU's relationship with modern Islam that shapes much of its public and political behaviour. In other words, NU's political interactions with the state and public political discourses are primarily intended to improve NU's political position *vis-à-vis* modernist Muslims, not to strengthen its position *vis-à-vis* the state. So, it is the modernist-traditionalist contestation as the focus of this study rather than NU's relationship with the state, which primarily explain NU's public and political behaviour. Another distinction that we can find in this book and not in other literature is its analysis on NU that focuses on civil society movement and civil society discourses, especially from the perspective

of the activists and intellectuals that made up the movement. Though this movement may be politically motivated, it eventually appears to be the struggle to show its set of religious beliefs, cultural norms and NU's identity as well as to maintain and protect its cardinal values of *abl al-sunnah wa al-jama'ah* (sunnism) and the promotion of religious tolerance and pluralism.

On the whole, this book comprises three main parts. The first part deals with the origin of NU and its relationship with the modernist-traditionalist at the time of its birth and the history of NU's relationship with Masyumi. The author believes that NU has always been politically active, but this does not necessitate the exclusion of religion as a fundamental and formative element of its identity (p. 29). One way of interpreting this complicated relationship between these two intertwined elements is to view the NU's birth as a primarily a response to the development of modernist Islam in Indonesia. This approach then leads us to the finding of the rich interplay of religious and political factors involved in the history of conflict between the modernists and traditionalists in Indonesian Islam. These two elements—religious and political factors—can be understood as embedded forces within the organizational identity of NU even from its early inception. This is not to deny that some findings show that NU's origin tends to downplay any political motive behind its formation with religious purpose, using religious methods. With regard to the modernist-traditionalist relationship, the author believes that from the early inception NU's conflict with the modernist Muslims, and subsequently with Masyumi, were neither about the government nor national politics but rather about how to maintain and protect the interests of traditionalist Muslims and about the leadership within religious community. It is therefore religiously, rather than politically, motivated in the establishment of NU. However the conflict between the two was played out most frequently in the formal political arena which involved matters of resource allocation and government policy on religious issues.

The second part deals with the discourse on civil society and the return to the *Khittah* 1926 as the original spirit of NU. In this part the author has tried to look at NU from within in terms of the internal development and dynamics of young generation of NU and its civil society movement, especially from the activists and intellectuals that emerged as result of the establishment of the *Khittah* 1926 policy and

from the external political constellation. It is interesting to note that although the policy of the return to the *Khittah* 1926 is a sincere withdrawal from the politics in order to focus on social and religious activities, NU remained politically very active throughout the New Order period. The decision to return to the *Khittah* 1926 and being untied to any particular political party was indeed highly appreciated and was excellent strategy, as NU gained more room to do political maneuvers and obtained more freedom to act politically or even oppositionally within the restrictive political system of the New Order regime. For NU –under the return to *Khittah* 1926–, although one may say that NU always remained politically active, it had created a new understanding of ‘politics’ as being about raising the quality of life for the people rather than just competing for gaining seats in formal political institutions.

The return to the *Khittah* 1926 and the increased room to make political manoeuvres have resulted in the emergence of the civil society discourse within NU. Though there are variety of visions in the civil society discourse, three have been considered as core elements of NU’s discourse on civil society; autonomy *vis-à-vis* the state, opposition to political Islam and religious tolerance and pluralism.

The third part deals with the role of NU and its political development in the time of *Reformasi* during the period of 1998-2001 in which Abdurrahman Wahid, the director of *Tanfidhiyah* (executive board) of NU, was appointed as the President of Indonesia (October, 1999 – July, 2001), and the issue of the return to the *Khittah* 1926. Despite campaigning to keep NU out of formal politics –referring to the *Khittah* 1926–, Abdurrahman Wahid and his NU fellows were persuaded to form a political party so that the National Awakening Party (PKB) was formed as vehicle which later had succeeded to bring him to be elected as the president of Indonesia. However, PKB is not NU and NU is not PKB. NU will remain as a socio-religious organization that is not involved in formal politics, but it is the NU members who do so and should be in a responsible way. During the early post-New Order reform, much of the political maneuverings and activities of both Abdurrahman Wahid and NU can be seen in the light of tension between modernist Muslims and traditionalist counterparts in Indonesia, even the rhetoric and manoeuvres that solely directed to the state were also motivated by underlying tension between these two groups. The author then comes up with the example of Wahid’s

reluctance in January 1998 to join Amin Rais in a unified *Reformasi* movement and his relatively conciliatory attitude towards Suharto compared to other reformist leaders of the time or Wahid's stated rationale for forming PKB -to curb political Islam from growing. All of them fit in with a framework of conflict between modernist and traditionalist Muslims that dates back to the early 1900s (p. 142 and 193). However these two groups have been able to form alliance and join force together against Islamic militancy or even terrorism in Indonesia in the early 2000s. They also nurture a spirit of Islamic brotherhood and solidarity with the rest of Islamic world when confronted with the Western domination and between Western and Islamic values.

During this period of *Reformasi*, NU did many things which were incredible in terms of its political development and socio-religious activities as well as civil society discourse. Islam was made as the cultural basis of the organization and Pancasila was the basis of its social activities. In addition, PKB was not an official NU party but acknowledged as affiliated to NU. NU continued to advocate civil society discourse against the threats of political Islam. More importantly, Wahid's ascendancy to the presidency on the basis of modernist coalition despite prolonged conflict of modernist-traditionalist which was still prevalent marks the peak of NU's achievement.

Although Robin Bush holds PhD degree in political science from the University of Washington and an MA in International Studies from Ohio University under tutelage of the late prominent Indonesianist Daniel S. Lev, she is a person with long experience in civil society activities in Indonesia. She has been with the Asia Foundation since 1998, when she joined its Indonesia office as a Program Officer for the Islam and Civil Society program. Prior to becoming the Country Representative of the Asia Foundation for Indonesia in 2008, Dr. Bush was the Regional Director for Islam and Development, responsible for assisting Foundation offices Asia-wide in developing Islam-related programs such as civil society, education, and anti-poverty programs implemented in collaboration with Muslim organizations. As a result, she finds what NU does in its capacity as a civil society force in Indonesia fascinating. She points out the collaboration between religion and civil society activities have been common phenomena elsewhere in last few decades. This long and intense experience

working with Muslim organizations such as NU does give extra advantage for her to discuss more deeply about NU as she has shown in this book. Certainly, this book has given account on NU's civil society role among Indonesian Muslims in depth and breadth in addition to new lights on NU historical background and political player in Indonesia. However, this closeness also bears risks as it makes objectivity elusive. Alternatively, she tries to be polite - like Indonesians tend to do - to the subject discussed since she has been living in Indonesia for about 20 years.

One point to be highlighted is about the ramification of the decision of returning to the *Khittab* 1926. There is no guideline whatsoever about what is meant by returning to the *Khittab* 1926. Such uncertainty led confusion as well as freedom among NU members when performing their public activities. Shortly after Muktamar Situbondo, Abdurrahman Wahid himself interpreted the return to the *Khittab* as a means for NU in order not to be involved in electoral political activities (1997). In contrast, many NU members believed that the return to the *Khittab* gives them liberty to channel their political aspiration to any political parties available. As a typically NU way, there was no formal effort to "clean the air." Rather, they enjoyed political manoeuvring under the umbrella of returning to the *Khittab* 1926.

Indeed, there is difference between internal dynamics and lack of discipline which the author tends to consider them as equivalent. NU is always a loose organization since its inception. It means that organizational discipline is a vague concept among NU members. Certain degree of autonomy is always retained by NU members vis-à-vis organizational decisions. They reserve the rights to differ in organizational life as it is prevalent in *fiqh* discourse in NU *pesantrens*. One might say that it is yet another difference between traditionalist and modernist Muslims. Consequently, there were times when certain NU members openly did not heed or even violated organizational decisions that cannot be categorized as organizational dynamics. A couple years after returning to the *Khittab* 1926 decision KH As'ad Syamsul Arifin, a crucial actor of that decision, withdrew his support (*mufaraqah*) from Abdurrahman Wahid as NU leader. In the instance of Muktamar Cipasung, albeit political intervention from the New Order regime, certain NU members and *kiais* chose to oppose the Abdurrahman Wahid leadership in NU by creating KPPNU. Plenty more occurs after *Reformasi* as far as the politics is concerned. Such

lacks of discipline continues until today which somewhat takes its toll at the expense of NU as an organization. As As'ad Said Ali (2008) points out, NU is suffering from 'political exhaustion'. A call by Hasyim Muzadi that NU should move from being *jama'ah* (crowd) to becoming *jam'iyah* (organization) now should be seriously considered.[]