نظرية في تفاعل العلوم
دراسة نقدية وتأسيسية في ثقافة الدين الإسلامي
أيا فوترا ويرمان
الدولة والجامعة الإسلامية في عهد النظام الجديد:
دراسة في فكر سومارتو من خلال الخطابات الدينية
في المناهج الإسلامية بإندونيسيا
محمد عيسى عبد السلام

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Tears and Cheers in Jombang: Some Notes on the 33rd Nahdlatul Ulama Congress

Dadi Darmadi

In the midst of the scorching heat and dry weather in Jombang, in the month of August 2015, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) finally chose K.H. Dr. Said Aqil Siradj as the Chairman of NU. The NU’s 33rd Congress (Muktamar), held in Jombang, East Java, re-elected him for his second term in office in this historical Congress, which was loaded with heat, competition, and compromise.

The re-election of this scholar and cleric from Cirebon (West Java) had been predicted by many. But this time, the NU Congress spawned a mixed atmosphere of tears, cheers, and—sometimes—mounting anger among its participants. Overall, despite disagreements during the meetings, and a melancholic atmosphere which later culminated in the courts, the Congress produced a number of dynamic sessions, and sometimes vigorous meetings between young NU activists and elderly scholars, held at five different locations: the Alun-alun (Town Square) of Jombang (for the opening, the plenary, and the closing ceremonies), and several commissions in four historic boarding schools, i.e. Pesantren Mambaul Ma’arif of Denanyar, Pesantren Tebuireng in Cukir Village, Diwek; Pesantren Bahrul Ulum Tambak...
Beras in Tambakrejo Village, and Pesantren Darul Ulum in Rejoso Village, Peterongan.

Approximately 50,000 participants attended the NU Congress, which was centered in the Town Square, including nearly 4,000 board members and registered participants from various regional Districts and Provinces across Indonesia. On Saturday night, August 1, 2015, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) officially opened the NU Congress. Wearing a black suit combined with a deep red sarong and sandals slippers, the President surprised the Congress organizers and invitees.

In the meantime, the dignitaries - including the East Java Governor Soekarwo, the Minister of Religious Affairs Lukman Hakim Saifuddin, and the NU Chairman Said A. Siradj—all wore formal, modern attire. Only K.H. Mustafa Bisri (Gus Mus), a charismatic scholar from Rembang (Central Java) who was then NU’s Rais Aam Syuriah, or Chairman of the Advisory Board, matched the President’s unique appearance that night.

This time the Congress theme was “Upholding Islam Nusantara for Indonesia and World Civilization.” Islam Nusantara, literally meaning “Islam of the archipelago,” may connote different things for different people. It may mean Islam that is rooted in local values, or the kind of Islam that has been promoted by scholars, traders and missionaries with peace, not war. Or, it could suggest a form of Islam that resulted from these various elements. But speaking to an audience weeks before the Congress, Said Aqil Siradj concluded that, as the largest Muslim mass organization in Indonesia, NU felt obliged to remind everyone about the importance of integrating the prinsip kebangsaan (national principles) in conducting worship (beribadah) and implementing religious beliefs (kepercayaan beragama). The theme was strengthened not only in the lively public discussions, book launches and book exhibitions across Jombang, but also in the way NU scholars framed their debates and arguments in the Bahth al-Masā’il forums. The latter is a primary and prestigious forum among NU scholars to discuss important socio-religious issues and produce NU’s formal and strategic decisions.

**NU Back to Jombang**

Jombang is a very special place for NU as an organization. K.H. Hasyim Asy’ari, the NU’s founding father, was born in Gedang,
Jombang in 1871. He went to study religion in Java and Madura, and in 1899, not long after his return from studying in Mecca, he established Pesantren Tebuireng. He taught students here and gained followers from different areas, making Tebuireng one of the biggest Islamic learning centers in early 20th Century Java. He was often called ‘Hadrat al-Shaykh,’ a very respected title for a Kyai, a religious teacher. While NU was formally established in Surabaya in 1926, it was Jombang that connected Muslim polity and religious traditions through its transmission of knowledge in Java and beyond.

In recent years, Jombang has become part of a new pilgrimage circuit in Java. As local pilgrimages to the tombs of the Nine Saints (the supposed founding fathers of Islam on the island) remain popular, the grave of Gus Dur (Abdurrahman Wahid, the grandson of K.H. Hasyim Asy’ari) in Tebuireng has attracted tens of thousands of pilgrims each month. Gus Dur is often regarded as a new Muslim saint, nicknamed as Wali Penggenap or “the Fulfiller of Saints.” Consequently, thousands of NU Congress participants flocked to Pesantren Tebuireng to pay homage to the tomb of Gus Dur, a former long-time head of NU and the 4th President of Indonesia (after Presidents Soekarno, Soeharto, and B.J. Habibie). As the Congress was held in five different locations, the organizers provided local transport for the pilgrims to commute between Jombang and Tebuireng.

But Jombang is not only about K.H. Hasyim Asy’ari, Gus Dur and Pesantren Tebuireng. Jombang is famous for other things as well; there are few other big names of scholars and major Islamic institutions that have made Jombang the city of Santri (Muslim students). The NU Congress was held simultaneously in these major Pesantrens across Jombang, all of whom carry their own traditions of learning as well as political affiliations. For example, several members of the Congress Committee such as Saifullah Yusuf (also known as Gus Ipul, the Deputy Governor of East Java) chose Pesantren Mambaul Ma’arif of Denanyar as a hosting institution. All Congress administration was centered here, and entrance to this site was restricted. During the Congress, only those registered participants with ID cards were allowed to enter the site. In addition to that, Pesantren Denanyar is also known as strong base of Muhaimin Iskandar, the current Chairman of Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB). PKB, or National Awakening Party, is a Muslim-based political party. It was founded in Jakarta on July 23, 1998, by some
senior scholars of Nahdlatul Ulama, such as K.H. Munasir Ali, K.H. Ilyas Ruchiyat, Abdurrahman Wahid, K.H. A. Mustafa Bisri, and K.H. A. Muhith Muzadi. Long before the Jombang Congress, rumor was that PKB had strengthened its relations with PBNU. Despite notable differences in the 2014 Presidential Election, Said Aqil Siradj, the NU Chairman, is often said to have been “very close” to the PKB Chairman. During the Jombang Congress, most of Said Aqil Siradj’s supporters were camped at the pesantren with close ties to the party. Thus, with this background in mind, some people alleged that Pesantren Denanyar would be the “camp of the winners.”

In the meantime, some NU leaders and participants who stayed in Pesantren Tebuireng voiced their concern that they were disregarded and marginalized, as evidenced by the lack of committee supports and facilities for their work. During the Congress, Pesantren Tebuireng was associated with another figure: K.H. Hasyim Muzadi, the former NU Chairman (1999-2010) who ran the organization after Gus Dur’s long period of leadership (1984-1999). But at this Congress, Hasyim Muzadi was running for the Rais Aam Syuriah. He chose to make Pesantren Tebuireng his home base because he would team up with Sholahudin Wahid (known as Gus Sholah), currently the Head of Pesantren Tebuireng. Sholahudin Wahid is the younger brother of Gus Dur; he is the son of K.H. Wahid Hasyim, a well-respected NU leader who once led Indonesia’s Ministry of Religious Affairs in the early 1950s. They planned to put forward Gus Sholah as a candidate for Chairman, a strong challenge to Said Aqil Siradj as the incumbent NU Chairman. Both K.H. Hasyim Muzadi and Gus Sholah claimed to have received support from NU leaders of various regions, including those of outside Java.

Historically, Pesantren Tebuireng and Pesantren Denanyar have had close relations. Many elite members of these two Pesantrens such as K.H. Wahid Hasyim and his wife are linked through lineages and inter-marriages, a very common practice among NU elites. But this historical fact could not be seen in political tensions between the two during the Congress. In fact, those who have made deep observations of NU and its meetings would believe that NU Congresses are actually never far from this kind of tension and rivalry.

But arguably the 33rd NU Congress in Jombang, East Java, was among the fieriest Congresses in the history of the organization. From the Congress opening ceremony up until the plenary sessions, the
political temperature kept escalating. First, it was triggered by a new mechanism called “Ahl al-Hall wa al-‘Aqd” (also called AHWA) in the election process of Rais Aam (Chairman). Second, it was prompted by the matter of the registration process where some Congress participants were upset by the organizers. There were rumors that some participants were “abducted” in order to shift the voices of voters. Finally, there was a disputed issue of interference from political parties, especially PKB and PPP, bringing the Congress’s political temperature to a boil.

There were other disagreements, too. For example, the Chairman of the NU Congress Regional Committee, Saifullah Yusuf, did not think the installation of PKB flags, paired with the NU flags at some locations in Jombang streets, a major concern. In his view, the installation of flags of political parties made the Jombang Congress more “lively.” In other locations, there were also several banners rejecting tolerance towards Muslim minority groups such as the Shi’ites.

The plenary session, which was held to discuss the agenda of the Congress Rules of Procedure, for instance, was delayed for hours. There were too many hard-hitting questions and interruptions from participants, to the point that the plenary session had to be suspended several times. At that time, a number of interruptions targeted the Article No. 19 of Chapter VII about the Election of NU Rais Aam. In the draft it was mentioned that the selection of Rais Aam should be done through consensus via the new system of AHWA.

Many participants fought over this issue, and thus political tensions heightened. Some participants recalled, “it was almost like chaos.” But the tension in the plenary session finally subsided after K.H. Maimoen Zubair (known as Mbah Mun) and K.H. Mustafa Bisri (Gus Mus) stepped up. Both directly assisted the hearing that was held at the Jombang Town Square.

Gus Mus spoke for about 30 minutes in front of thousands participants of the plenary session. In tears, Gus Mus admitted his deep concern with the chaos that had occurred. In a thrilling speech, Gus Mus was quoted as saying, “I am ashamed of God, I am ashamed of Mbah Hasyim, of Mbah Wahab, as well as of Mbah Bisri. An accident occurred to me because I must replace Kyai Sahal, so I was forced to accept this position. Why Kyai Sahal had to die first?” said Gus Mus, who became the Rais Aam after replacing K.H. Sahal Mahfud, who died several years earlier.
Gus Mus continued his remarks. He said he even was willing to kiss the feet of the Congress participants, as long as they would stop debating (and condemning) each other. “I felt ashamed. If necessary, I will be kissing your feet in order to show you humble attitude as taught by K.H. Hasyim Asy’ari,” he added. The gloomy words of Gus Mus stunned the crowd; they were quietly listening. Even some of them appeared to break down, tears pouring down their face.

Only after that fateful speech from Gus Mus, the tension in the Congress arena began to subside. The participants were no longer rowdy in the plenary session. They immediately submitted their opinions and shared their views in an orderly manner. This was more than enough to give the Jombang Congress participants reason to cheer some of the decisions made.

Post-Congress Lawsuit

Despite the tears and cheers inside the Congress, disagreements among NU elites continued to brew over the validity of the Congress. Just two weeks after the Jombang Congress ended, a lawsuit was filed. Jamaluddin A. Mariajang, an NU leader from Central Sulawesi, contested the Congress result. He claimed that the outcome from the Congress was illegitimate because it involved illegitimate processes. Then, by the end of September 2015, the Forum for Regional Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (Forum Lintas PWNU) in Indonesia, led by Gus Sholah (Sholahudin Wahid) of Tebuireng, continued to plan action against the NU Congress results. After briefly dropping the lawsuit to repair and improve the lawsuit materials, Gus Sholah and the Forum re-registered the lawsuit in the District Court of South Jakarta. He made a bold statement to support his arguments: the recent NU Congress in Jombang violated the existing statutes and bylaws (AD/ART). He said the Congress unlawfully determined the members of “Ahl al-Hall wa al-’Aqd” (AHWA) without proper election. In his view, AHWA members must be chosen only by Congress participants.

Weeks after the Jombang congress, some leaders and members of provincial and district branches of NU gathered in East Java. One of the events was held in a major pesantren in Jember attended by several influential figures of NU such as K.H. Hasyim Muzadi (former NU Chairman), K.H. Azaim Ibrahimy (Situbondo, East Java), K.H. Mohammad Adnan (Central Java) and Ali Syekh Ali Akbar Marbun.
(Medan, North Sumatra). Criticizing the process and contesting the result of the Jombang Congress, the group tried to display their loyalty to the old values of the NU founding fathers and reinstated the argument of “Strengthening Back the Spirit of the 1926 NU Khittah.”

Coming out of the Congress, the legal challenges are twofold. The first lawsuit was undertaken by the Rais Syuriah of the Regional Board (Pengurus Wilayah or PW) of Central Sulawesi. He filed the lawsuit to the court as an individual. The second lawsuit was filed by at least 10 PWs and Branch Boards (Pengurus Cabang or PC). By mid-September, one of the lawsuits, filed by Jamaluddin A. Mariajang, was revoked. The second lawsuit, though, was still filed with the court. According to Rumadi, currently the Chairman of the Institute for Research and Development of Human Resources (Lakpesdam NU), the two lawsuits are two sides of the same coin; both have the same material and goal, which is to contest and reject in its entirety the 33rd NU Congress held in Jombang.

Conclusion

The 33rd NU Congress in Jombang was clearly an important religious and political event. Not only did this occasion preserve the internal dynamics of the NU as an organization, but it also continued to show external dynamics of Islamic religious organizations in Indonesia. There is no doubt that there has been an increased gap inside NU, both among some of its elderly scholars and their young disciples. There is still a role to be played by charismatic elder clerics, but more significant roles can be played by younger generations of NU activists, some of whom are very political. Everything was fought out and debated in democratic forums, though laden with political struggles, especially among two Muslim-based political parties (PKB and PPP). Like other organizations, both compete for greater influence among NU leaders and followers.

Jombang is a historic city, and for NU’s followers, it is a special place like no other. It has affected the way NU has grown as both a religious organization and a social movement. After decades, for the first time NU held its Congress in its strongest base. However, the 33rd NU Congress in Jombang also showed that the organization has grown well beyond its heartland. Since the late 1920s NU has evolved into a socio-religious organization that primarily maintains the traditional values of
Islam. With Said Aqil Siradj’s win for a second term, NU has slowly come out of the shadows as a forward-looking organization, deeply political, though its high deference towards charismatic leadership remains strong.

Several issues have been highlighted as the main themes of the Jombang Congress. NU has portrayed itself as an upholder of traditional Islam but, as the increased tension with Wahhabi fanatics loomed large, the organization has used the Congress to strengthen its base. NU then promotes “Islam Nusantara,” a concept that still requires a robust definition, but its mission is pretty clear: NU is more respectful to the teachings of Islam that respect local values, as has been adopted by its followers for years with openness.

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