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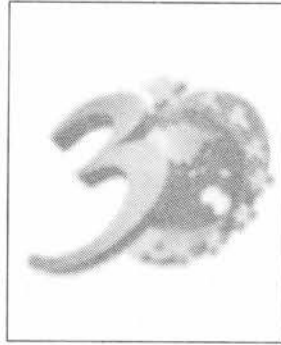
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Facing the New Millennium: The 30th NU Congress at the End of the 20th Century

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the Indonesian largest traditionalist Muslim organization with more than 30 million followers nationwide, faced the challenge of the new millennium by successfully holding its 30th congress (muktamar) at Pesantren Lirboyo in Kediri, East Java. Approximately one million Nahdliyyins, as NU followers, are called to have enjoyed one of NU's biggest ever cultural and ceremonial events for five days from November 22nd until November 27th 1999. The majority of participants came from Java, but many others came from as far away as Sumatera, Sulawesi, Kalimantan and Maluku.

In comparison with previous NU congresses, the Lirboyo congress was far more lively and, undoubtedly, was a joyful celebration for the Nahdliyyins. One of the biggest reasons for the festival atmosphere was certainly because K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid (better known as Gus Dur), NU's general chairman for the last three terms, was finally elected as the 4th president of the Republic of Indonesia. This was the first time in the long history of NU in Indonesia, that such position had been attained by

a NU leader. The occurrence held major historical significance since it confirmed that a NU cadre could become the leader of the largest Muslim country in the world. It is widely known that two previous Indonesian presidents, Soekarno and Soeharto, were regarded as cadres of Muhammadiyah, a strong modernist Muslim organization. Since Amien Rais, the Muhammadiyah's general chairman, became one of the strongest supporters of Gus Dur's presidential bid through the Poros Tengah (Axis Force) political movement during the presidential election of 1999, the event also represented a growing accord between these Muslim organizations. Thus, it was not surprising that many people coming to the congress, including foreign observers, noted the glittering presence of proud traditionalist Muslims.

In general, as opposed to the Cipasung congress in 1994, the Lirboyo congress revealed a relative reduction in tension concerning relations between NU and the government. At Cipasung, Gus Dur's reelection as the general chair of this strong traditional Muslim organization was marked by conflict among NU elites. The majority of them supported Gus Dur, yet an opposing group supported Abu Hasan, the government preferred candidate. The internal dispute that erupted was believed by many to be a result of the Soeharto regime's interference in NU affairs. In the last decade of the New Order era, it was a public knowledge that, at least for some time, Soeharto had looked disfavorable to the figure on NU under Gus Dur's command. At Lirboyo, long before the congress was held, several candidates for the new general chairmanship declared that the government would not interfere in the next NU leadership election. However, as event played out, the issue arose that Gus Dur himself, having just ascended to the presidency the previous month, in fact strongly supported a certain candidate for the post, namely Hasyim Muzadi, a longtime ally of Gus Dur hailing also from East Java.

In the opening ceremony, President Abdurrahman Wahid delivered his speech both as president and still as the general chair of NU. He proudly told the audience about the history of NU as a religious and social organization, and how it was politically oppressed during Suharto's New Order reign. Nevertheless, Gus Dur asserted, NU has proved its strong loyalty to Indonesia, and has never rebelled against the nation's legitimate government. In addition, he also asserted the need for NU to be a good counterpart for the current government, and he asserted that NU should not change its critical stance towards the government: NU should continue to offer constructive criticism on the entire process of development in Indonesia,

as was done in the past. He explicitly stated that there would be no special privileges for NU members during his rule, and he hoped that Nahdliyyins would not expect any. He stated that he wished to maintain a good relationship with NU—because he is a Nahdliyyin—but that relationship should not be based on any vested interest. He also reminded NU members not to behave *aji mumpung*—take what they can while they can.

Most importantly, in that opening ceremony Gus Dur emphasized the urgent need for NU, as a socio-religious organization, to keep implementing ideas of openness and moderation inline with its religious orientation: *al-muhafadzah 'ala al-qadim al-shalih, wa al-akhdu bi al-jadid al-ashlah*. These Arabic words are taken from *qawa'id al-fiqhiyyah*, the philosophy of Islamic legal theory, meaning “to preserve good old traditions, and develop much better new traditions.” Even though it has been widely used by modernist Muslims, this concept was deeply embraced by many NU activists and scholars.

Crucial Issues

As in previous NU congresses, the Lirboyo congress elected a new board and conducted several plenary and commission sessions elaborating current issues. The sessions that gained the most attention was the outgoing boards' responsibility speech. Gus Dur did not attend this session because he was engaged in an overseas presidential trip. The speech was delivered by the respected K.H. Sahal Mahfudz. Generally speaking, the responsibility speech was well accepted by congress participants (*muktamirin*). Many of them had the opinion that NU's administration under Gus Dur had been comparatively successful. One of the measurements of this success was the emergence of Gus Dur as Indonesia's 4th president, indicating wide acceptance of NU at the national level.

In the commission sessions, all representatives from regional branches of NU at the provincial level, including those from Aceh and Ambon—two critical regions suffering massive human rights violations—were divided into four different commissions: *Bahtsul Masa'il* (The commission for discussing a variety of issues viewed from a religious perspective), *Organization, Program, and Taushiyah* (Recommendations).

The *Bahtsul Masa'il* commission focuses on two areas of concern. The first is the *Waqi'iyah*, which concentrates on elaborating contemporary issues. In 1999 issues such as praying with other religious groups, state leadership by non-Muslims, selling and trading worms and crickets, and other problems were discussed. The second area is the *Wadl'iyah*, a spe-

cific commission for discussing thematic problems such as tax, gender equity among Muslims and so forth.

One particularly interesting issue arose during the Organization Commission meeting. In the last twenty years, NU has been known for its strong support of Pancasila, state ideology, which during Soeharto era had been advanced as the sole basis for any social, religious or political organization. Some of the members of the commission wished to remove Pancasila as the foundation of organization and replace it with Islam. During this era of reformation, this type of proposition is not something peculiar, because many social and political organizations have reformulated their foundations since the downfall of Soeharto. The sizzling debate in this regard was not conclusively settled, and many recommended the topic be brought to a much bigger forum. Another hot topic concerned the question of who had rights to NU's wealth.

The Candidates and the Election Process

This congress was enlivened by the presence of many candidates for the chair of NU. They included K.H. Hasyim Muzadi (the chairman of East Java's NU branch) who also acted as the local chief officer of the congress; K.H. Dr. Said Aqiel Siradj, the General Secretary of NU's Syuriah (consultative assembly), who also acted as the national chief officer of the congress; K.H. Mustofa Bisri of Rembang, Central Java; Sholahuddin Wahid; Ahmad Bagdja; Hasib Wahab; and Fajrul Falaakh (one of the chairman of NU boards). All of these candidates, except Hasib Wahab, were close allies of Gus Dur, and they admitted to have gained support from him. In this context, in fact, Gus Dur's approval was extremely influential in the election process. On many occasions, Gus Dur himself had even mentioned these names as the future leaders of NU.

Meanwhile, from the very beginning, there had seemingly been an open consensus to appoint K.H. Sahal Mahfudz to the position of general chair (Rais Aam) of Syuriah. Gus Dur had explicitly stated in the congress's opening ceremony unveiling his support for K.H. Sahal Mahfudz for that position. He is probably the most fitting figure to lead NU's Syuriah board, since he is renowned as an expert in Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). Although almost all NU branch offices had disclosed their approval to Sahal Mahfudz, the election process was democratically conducted in two stages using a "one person one vote" system. The first stage was candidate selection. At this level, a candidate had to gain at least 40 votes in order to be able to proceed to the second stage. Even though it was clear that Sahal Mahfudz

had no other significant contender, the election process continued to the second stage because the congress's audiences wished to uphold the democratic process. Several were finally presented, but no one other than Sahal Mahfudz gained the minimum 40 votes. He was then automatically proclaimed as the Rais Aam of NU Syuriah.

Tension occurred during and some days prior to the election process of the general chair of NU's Tanfidziyah (executive board). Certain groups heightened tension by distributing provocative pamphlets throughout the congress arena, including the Lirboyo Islamic boarding school area. Some of these urged members not to "choose a leader who has been in churches", or to reject "a leader who graduated from Gontor Islamic boarding school"—each of which was referring to opposing candidates. Other printed materials were also spread in favor of certain candidates. Interestingly, Hasyim Muzadi as a candidate even used the opportunity to launch his book, a compilation of his religious and political thoughts—something that has never happened before. Many people appreciated his work, yet others, especially the older generations of kiyai, criticized the effort as too "progressive" and "un-ethical."

As the election commenced, many different supporting parties, including representatives of regional branches of NU boards at the provincial level, conducted their own meetings. In the first phase, there were only a few candidates including Hasyim Muzadi, Said Aqiel Siradj, Sholahuddin Wahid who succeeded to the next phase. Many people predicted that the election of the general chair would be a result of a political coalition between different interest groups. This later proved to be true as only two—Hasyim Muzadi and Said Aqiel Siradj—were finally left to contest the new post. As a consequence, the votes previously in favor of Sholahuddin Wahid, Musthofa Bisri and Ahmad Bagdja became crucial in determining who would win the election. At the final moment, the support of Sholahuddin Wahid's and Musthofa Bisri's votes advanced Hasyim Muzadi for the new post replacing Gus Dur as the General Chairman of NU's Tanfidziyah.

Discussion Forum

The Lirboyo congress was undoubtedly an affirmation of the growing number of young intellectuals in NU, and a reflection of Gus Dur's intellectual influences on the Nahdliyyins in the last fifteen years. During the five-day congress, there were numerous discussions, panels and book launchings elaborating many of the crucial issues faced by NU and Islam.

Formal interviews and press conferences by political elites and NU observers took place day and night. Several Indonesian private TV stations also covered the hottest news from the event, some even broadcasting live. As a consequence, news of the congress was assuredly reported nationwide.

One of the most interesting aspects of the forum was the presence of several of NU's young women activists who highlighted the urgent need for more position for women in the organization. One controversial opinion that was publicly expressed was that women can lead NU and there should have been spaces designated for women on the administrative boards of NU. Women have been very influential in NU communities, but their roles have been limited to Muslimat and Fatayat organizations and memberships—the formal NU women organizations. The issue of gender equity has been widely publicized among the Nahdliyyins, through training conducted over the last three years by several NGOs and organizations closely related to NU, such as P3M and Lakpesdam. Spokespersons for gender equity tried to raise women's issue on many occasions during the conference, but apparently failed to rouse supporters. In fact, it was a rather unfortunate and disappointing moment for one activist, when on one occasion she was booed by members of the audience—mainly male Nahdliyyins—for her moderately provocative position on male-female relationships. Even though many people have appreciated the newly emerging voices of women in NU—most of whom have derived from intensive discussions among women activists at the Muslimat and Fatayat—the fact in the congress has suggested that, just like issues of democracy, human rights and social justice, gender issues were not widely understood by common people of NU, especially at the grass-roots level.

The Contested Congress

Despite of its significance to NU, the emergence of Gus Dur as the 4th President of Indonesia has in turn caused political and psychological anxieties for a number of NU scholars, especially those known as generasi muda NU, the young generation of NU. This group has in fact developed more liberal and progressive approaches in Islamic discourse. Cooperating with several international funding agencies such as the Ford and Asia Foundations, these young groups have advocated the importance of women's empowerment and gender equity.

Before the congress was held, many members of generasi muda of NU, including many of NU's young activists in LKiS (Institute for Islamic and

Social Studies)—a Yogyakarta-based intellectual circle—carried out an alternative NU congress. This congress was deliberately held by these young liberal NU followers to criticize many NU members all over Indonesia for their overwhelmingly exuberant political euphoria resulting from Gus Dur's presidential victory. The activists asserted that NU must not overlook its future agenda, and members should be pursuing more important roles in their communities. These ideas were clearly stated in a printed pamphlet entitled *Srakal*.

According to its organizers, this mirror congress was not essentially a rebellious effort. Rather, it was a place for *generasi muda* of NU who have been mostly left overlooked; and whose aspiration have been rejected by the formal congress. Interestingly, many topics discussed at this controversial congress were themes that were typically not put into the agenda in the formal congress, such as issues of labor and social work with farmers in the villages.

Unfortunately, this interesting event was not properly organized and lacked coordination. Moreover, it was not adequately covered by the media. As a consequence, its influence was not widely appreciated by the Nahdliyyins. Nevertheless, even though its organizing committee stated that it was not meant to contest the formal congress, the *generasi muda* NU congress served as shock therapy for many elites who for many years have neglected the aspirations of these young activists. For many NU followers who have been in favor of this new tendency among NU's intellectuals, this phenomenon has indicated that it is unlikely that NU will lose its dynamic quality now that Gus Dur has become president.

Three Problematic Issues

In observing the many crucial issues addressed during the five-day congress, observers may note that there were several problematic issues that became apparent during the *Lirboyo* congress. First, the issue of changing NU's philosophical and organizational basis from *Pancasila* to Islam is certain to cause discord within the organization. Even though this idea was presumably put forward by Nahdliyyins who have been so far considered part of the "silent majority" by NU elites, this notion could affect the position of NU, especially during the rule of Gus Dur who has strongly supported *Pancasila*. At this point, if such an aspiration was adopted, many Indonesians would certainly question NU's commitment to the nation.

Second, the issue of "political society" and "civil society" has become important. Even though it has been under the surface, there has been a

clear tendency among many *Nahdliyyins* to attempt to formalize a certain political party which functions as the locus of their political aspirations. Seen from the perspective of “civil society”—which has interestingly been advocated for years by NU—this has been a negative trend, if not a failure for NU in building “civil society.” Third, the issue of gender remains an extremely sensitive topic, and much work needs to be done within NU’s own ranks. Even though this issue was given much attention at the National Convention of NU in Lombok two years ago, the *Lirboyo* congress appeared to be disappointing for NU’s gender activists. If the Lombok convention recognized the need for gender equity in almost every sector, the discussions at the *Lirboyo* congress proved that this was merely a slogan.

Syafiq Hasyim and
Dadi Darmadi