

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **Nahdlatul Ulama's Mukhtamar 2021 and its Implications: Some Field Observations**

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*Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is the largest Muslim organisation in Indonesia. Picture of Headquarters by Akhmad Fauzi available in [Wikimedia Commons](#).*

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is the largest Muslim organisation in Indonesia, and its 34<sup>th</sup> Mukhtar (5-yearly Congress), which elects its leadership and determines its position on pertinent socio-religious issues, held in December 2021, inevitably bears wide-ranging implications for the country.
- Both the key contenders for NU's top leadership position, Said Aqil Siradj (incumbent) and Yahya Staquf, have strong roots in NU's pesantren base. However, Yahya Staquf's projection of himself as the embodiment of regeneration and the representative of the younger generation resonated with many NU branches and won him the top position.
- Yahya Staquf also had tacit support from the government through the Ministry of Religious Affairs and from the political parties that did not want NU to support only the National Awakening Party (PKB).
- Yahya Staquf's leadership is expected to facilitate the emergence of younger leaders in NU's structure and a more expansive role for NU in the global arena.
- In addition to the leadership transition, the Mukhtar also dealt with socio-religious issues such as climate change, the land rights of common people, and legislative protection of domestic workers. These demonstrate its increasingly progressive role in Indonesian society.

## INTRODUCTION

The Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) held its 34<sup>th</sup> Mukhtamar on 23-25 December 2021 in Lampung, Sumatera.<sup>1</sup> This congress takes place once every five years nowadays on the national level, to address leadership succession and pertinent issues related to Islam in Indonesia. In this instance, the five-yearly congress had been delayed by a year due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Since NU is the largest Muslim organisation in Indonesia, with an estimated 90 million followers, its Mukhtamar is important not only for the *Nahdliyyin* (members of NU), but also for Indonesians in general, due to its influential role in the religious, political and social life of the country.<sup>2</sup>

This article analyses the internal dynamics of the 34<sup>th</sup> NU Mukhtamar. It unveils its significance by delving into its preparations and determination of the dates, the interest and influence of different “stakeholders”, important decisions and recommendations on Islamic reforms, as well as the leadership transition and its implications for the future agenda of NU, locally and globally, as the organisation approaches its centenary.

## THE MUKHTAMAR IN CONTEXT

NU was founded in 1926, meaning that whoever was elected Chairman of the Executive Council of NU at the 2021 Mukhtamar will be leading the world’s largest Islamic organisation into its second century and determine how it positions itself with respect to national politics as well as global issues. Where national politics is concerned, some issues on the table are: increasing religious intolerance; the relocation of Jakarta’s capital to East Kalimantan; and the state of Indonesian democracy. At the same time, NU had to speak out on current global issues, such as climate change. Choosing the right leader to address these challenges was therefore at the top of the agenda. However, the first point of contention was the date of the Mukhtamar.

The dates for the Mukhtamar – 23-25 December 2021 – were originally determined at a national NU meeting in Jakarta. However, when the Indonesian government proposed a policy to impose stricter social distancing measures across the country as Christmas and New Year approached,<sup>3</sup> the tighter restrictions were seen to be a potential impediment to the proceedings of the Mukhtamar. NU leaders were thus caught in a bind: Should they keep to the agreed date, hold the congress earlier, or postpone it to early 2022, especially since this had implications for the succession race.

The race for the NU leadership had started off with three candidates – Said Aqil Siradj, Yahya Staquf and As’ad Ali (former Indonesian Intelligence Agency vice chairman) – but As’ad Ali dropped off from the race due to insufficient support, leaving the first two as the key contenders. Both candidates have no direct genealogical connection with the founder of NU, Hasyim Asy’ari, but both have prominent ulama background and deep roots in the pesantren (religious schools). Said Aqil Siradj had led NU for ten years and enjoys a strong

support base among the pesantren of Cirebon, West Java, while Yahya Staquf was spokesperson for former president and NU leader Abdurrahman Wahid and has his support base among the pesantren of Rembang, Central Java.

Yahya Staquf and his team had lobbied for an earlier Mukhtamar to avoid the tighter restrictions, and also because they appeared to have garnered stronger support than the incumbent, Said Aqil Siradj. In contrast, the Said Aqil Siradj faction preferred a postponement, apparently as a way to buy time to gain more support for the reelection bid.

The two contending factions could not reach an agreement, and the issue divided the organisation. Fortunately, the Indonesian government revised the level of social restrictions it was imposing, and both factions agreed to keep to the original dates of the Mukhtamar.

## **“STAKEHOLDERS” IN THE MUKHTAMAR**

There were many “stakeholders” with an interest in the 2021 NU Mukhtamar, ranging from private groups to the government, from politicians to academicians. Where the government is concerned, NU is considered a partner whose support for government initiatives had been important, as with the controversial Omnibus law and the moving of the national capital. Needless to say, although President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo did not express overt support for any specific candidate in the succession race, he would definitely have preferred an NU leader that was supportive of his programmes.

In this respect, it is important to note that Said Aqil Siradj (incumbent) had often been at odds with the Jokowi government. Although NU was expected to be supportive of the Jokowi government since one of its key leaders, Ma’ruf Amin, was the Vice President, Said had remained critical of government policies. He had contended that the Jokowi government’s policies tended to concentrate the nation’s wealth in the hands of the economic oligarchy at the expense of ordinary Indonesians, and that the Omnibus Law was one instance of such a dynamic.<sup>4</sup>

Political parties were also highly interested in the Mukhtamar. Conventionally, NU has strong affinity with the National Awakening Party (PKB). PKB was set up when Abdurrahman Wahid led the NU, and it became the ruling party when Wahid became president. Subsequently, NU’s support for PKB was diminished when then-NU leader Hasyim Muzadi was nominated as Megawati’s vice-presidential candidate for the presidential election in 2004.<sup>5</sup> In the last decade, under Said’s leadership, NU had returned to endorsing PKB. However, besides PKB politicians such as Muhaimin Iskandar, the 2021 Mukhtamar had attracted representatives from other political parties such as Suharso Monoarfa (United Development Party)<sup>6</sup> and Nusron Wahid (Golkar), who was playing a role in Yahya Staquf’s campaign team. To some extent, since NU’s support for PKB was seen to be against the NU Khittah 1926 (Guidelines of 1926), whereby NU was supposed to reprise the role of a non-partisan socio-religious organisation, the interest of political parties other than PKB in the Mukhtamar was to support the election of a new leader who

would keep a distance from the PKB. In turn, this would give NU members more leeway to support other political parties.

## “STATE INTERVENTION”

In the history of NU Muktamar, it had been not uncommon for the state to intervene, due to the wide-ranging implications of the outcomes. One clear case was in 1994, when then-President Suharto did not wish to see Gus Dur reelected as NU leader for a third time.<sup>7</sup> In turn, in 1999, when Gus Dur was president, he hinted at his support for Hasyim Muzadi as NU leader in his opening speech.<sup>8</sup>

Subsequently, state intervention came in the form of involvement by officials of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) who held positions in NU branches at the provincial and district levels. Through such proxies, the state supported the late Slamet Effendy Yusuf<sup>9</sup> (2010 Muktamar, Makassar) and the late Salahuddin Wahid<sup>10</sup> (2015 Muktamar, Jombang) in the leadership race; but in both these instances, it was Said Aqil Siradj who emerged the winner.

In the 2021 Muktamar in Lampung, many high officials from MORA were present through MORA forums and activities that had no direct connection with the agenda of the Muktamar, such as the State Islamic Universities Rector’s Forum<sup>11</sup> and Coordinating Meeting of BIMAS Islam (General Guidance for the Muslim Community),<sup>12</sup> among others. Although the Minister of Religious Affairs, Yaqut Cholil Qaumas<sup>13</sup> (who is Yahya Staquf’s younger brother) stated publicly that MORA activities at the Muktamar would not interfere with the leadership race, it was clear that MORA, with its heavy presence at the Muktamar, was in favour of Yahya Staquf as the new general chairman.

## REFORM OF ISLAMIC-SOCIAL ISSUES: BAHSUL MASA’IL

Besides ascertaining new leadership for NU, the Muktamar also serves as an expansive forum for *Nahdliyyin* to discuss crucial issues in society and determine the Islamic responses from NU. This forum is called Bahsul Masa’il (forum for discussing, researching and solving crucial problems). There are three categories of issues discussed in the Muktamar: contemporary issues, thematic issues and constitutional issues. All are approached from the discipline of Islamic sciences such as fiqh (Islamic legal jurisprudence), usul fiqh (Islamic legal theory) and other Islamic disciplines. In all these three categories, the 2021 Muktamar addressed and provided important responses to certain pressing issues.

Firstly, in response to the crisis of climate change whose impact had already begun to be felt in daily life, the Bahsul Masa’il asked for Indonesian lawmakers to draft a national law on climate change to implement effective measures to reduce global warming. NU needs to address this issue, considering that Indonesia’s position<sup>14</sup> in protecting the environment is

not too clear, since deforestation continues unabated under Jokowi's watch. Secondly, with respect to issues of land ownership and disputes that happen between communities, corporations and sometimes government, the Bahsul Masa'il decided to support the land rights of common people. This decision indicates that the land rights and interests of the people had to be protected even in the face of government acquisition, and signals NU's partiality to the interests of common people. Thirdly, in response to the weak protection of (around 4.2 million) domestic workers, the Bahsul Masa'il recommends lawmakers to push for legislation on Protection of Domestic Workers in Indonesia.<sup>15</sup> So far, this law has been proposed to lawmakers but no serious response from them has been announced. The law aligns the rights of domestic workers with workers in general in the public sector and industries, and it is hoped that this fatwa can at least pressure lawmakers into speeding up the legislative process. These examples demonstrate how NU can pull its weight in influencing the Islamic public and government policies.

Although the Bahsul Masa'il does not get as much limelight as the leadership race, its deliberations reflect some of the key issues that Muslims are concerned with. The decisions and recommendations of the Bahsul Masa'il of the 2021 Muktamar have shown the NU to be increasingly progressive in dealing with social, cultural and political issues related to Muslims in Indonesia. To be sure, the fact that both chairman candidates could be considered progressive rather than conservative in their ideological leanings suggests that NU as an organisation has changed significantly in recent times.

## **NEW LEADERSHIP, REGENERATION AND GLOBAL INFLUENCE**

The results of the 2021 Muktamar, for some observers, indicate leadership renewal. Conventionally, the leadership of NU has been dominated by the *kaum santri*, that is, those whose background is in the pesantren or Islamic education. So far, the *kaum santri* involved in the operations of NU are mostly from the NU's organizational wings, such as Ansor (NU's youth wing), PMII (Pergerakan Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia, Islamic Students of Indonesia Movement) and institutions and independent agencies (Lembaga dan Badan Otonom) such as LAKPESDAM NU (Lembaga Kajian dan Pengembangan Sumber Daya Manusia Nahdlatul Ulama, Institute for the Study and Development of Nahdlatul Ulama's Human Resources), LLKNU (Lembaga Kemaslahatan Keluarga Nahdlatul Ulama, Institute for the Prosperity of Nahdlatul Ulama Family) and others. Many criticised the leadership model of NU for being restrictive and for not accommodating other NU groups who were not from the *kaum santri*. One such modernist *santri* group is the HMI (Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam or Muslim Students' Association), which is often not considered an integral part of NU. However, the fact that Yahya and some other elite NU leaders used to be HMI members may be an indication of a gradually shifting mindset.

In the 2021 Muktamar, regeneration became an important issue. Yahya Staqf was able to project himself as a symbol for regeneration and the representative of the younger generation in NU. While many suggested that Yahya, aged 55 at the point of election, was still young and could bid his time to become the next leader of NU, Yahya believed that

regeneration had to start soon and that he could become the prime champion. This campaign theme resonated with many NU branches, enough to give Yahya his victory. The theme of regeneration was also reflected in the composition of the membership of the new Executive Council, which consisted of many younger leaders in strategic positions.

Regeneration also implies expansion of the influence of NU at the global level, as Staquf has plans to make NU an important player in the global arena. He asserts that NU, as the largest Muslim organisation in the world, can contribute to world peace. Most recently, in the case of Russian aggression against Ukraine, Yahya Staquf voiced his commitment to help,<sup>16</sup> stating that Russian military action was a violation of the sovereignty of Ukraine,<sup>17</sup> and asks Putin to stop the invasion and the international problems it has created.<sup>18</sup>

## **POLITICAL AGENDA OF 2024**

2024 will be an important year for NU; this is due to the presidential and parliamentary elections which are to be held then. As NU holds a large vote bank, candidates will definitely vie for NU's support or endorsement. The 2019 presidential election was a case in point; Jokowi chose NU leader Ma'ruf Amin as his vice-presidential candidate.<sup>19</sup>

Yahya's stance of distancing NU from formal politics certainly won him broader support from NU's stakeholders. Juxtaposed against Said, who was closely affiliated with PKB, Yahya's positioning gained him strong support from other political parties. Thus, it is expected that NU will play an informal role in supporting candidates in the presidential and parliamentary elections. The difference is that NU's influence will be broader where political parties are concerned, since that influence will not be exercised only on PKB. However, such a stance may also compromise NU's access to cabinet posts, since there is no expected official alignment with any presidential candidate or political party.

## **CONCLUSION**

The NU Mukhtamar has always been a significant event for many sectors of Indonesia's body politic. The 2021 Mukhtamar in Lampung was successful in leadership renewal and setting NU's direction for the next five years. The new leadership has introduced various agendas, from an insistence on non-partisanship to decisions on pressing Islamic and social issues, and the organisation's global outlook.

The victory of Yahya Staquf demonstrated his strong network with NU's branches, leading to support at the provincial and district levels which was consolidated before the due date of the Mukhtamar in December 2021. Whether Yahya's victory will lead to a new model of NU organisational management and a more visible presence by NU on the global stage remains to be seen. But what we should expect from NU under Yahya is a focus on deepening inclusive and humanitarian Islam.

**ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> The first NU Mukhtar was held on 21 October 1926 in Surabaya. Subsequently, it was held annually till 1934, after which it was organised on a five-yearly basis as the organisation's highest forum to elect its leader and to discuss and decide strategic and important issues.

<https://www.nu.or.id/fragmen/muktamar-nu-dan-catatan-sejarah-nya-dari-masa-ke-masa-5P5Nm>, viewed on 7 April 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Robin Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power within Islam and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> <https://nasional.kontan.co.id/news/pemerintah-batalkan-kebijakan-ppkm-level-3-serentak-saat-nataru>, viewed on 30 December 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Kyai Said states that the Omnibus Law is only beneficial to the oligarchy rather than ordinary people, see [https://www.viva.co.id/berita/nasional/1309983-kritik-keras-omnibus-law-cipta-kerja-nu-akan-gugat-ke-mk?page=1&utm\\_medium=sebelumnya-1](https://www.viva.co.id/berita/nasional/1309983-kritik-keras-omnibus-law-cipta-kerja-nu-akan-gugat-ke-mk?page=1&utm_medium=sebelumnya-1), viewed on 17 February 2022.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/79501/ketika-nahdliyin-kehilangan-induk>, viewed on 1 January 2021. PKB and Hasyim Muzadi's relationship with NU became uneasy following their rapprochement with Megawati, who had previously participated in Gus Dur's impeachment.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.republika.co.id/berita/r4hzz430/sejumlah-tokoh-politik-nu-hadiri-muktamar-di-lampung>, viewed on 17 February 2022.

<sup>7</sup> G. Fealy, *Tradisionalisme Radikal ; Persinggungan Nahdlatul Ulama-Negara* (LKIS, 1997) p. 330.

<sup>8</sup> This is based on direct observation in the Mukhtar NU Kediri.

<sup>9</sup> The late Slamet Effendy Yusuf was a senior politician of Golkar party. He got support from MORA because he was close to the government. Based on the first author's personal observations at the 2010 Mukhtar at Makassar, South Sulawesi.

<sup>10</sup> Based on the first author's personal observations at the 2015 Mukhtar at Jombang.

<sup>11</sup> <https://lampung.rilis.id/Ragam/Berita/Forum-Rektor-Gelar-Sarasehan-Berdampingan-Muktamar-NU-AonOrSx>, viewed on 16 February 2022.

<sup>12</sup> <https://kemenag.go.id/read/rakor-bimas-islam-di-lampung-bahas-program-prioritas-dan-pelayanan-publik-berkualitas-gmnlx>, viewed on 16 February 2022.

<sup>13</sup> <https://kemenag.go.id/read/menag-pastikan-tidak-ada-intervensi-kementerian-agama-di-muktamar-nu-ke-34-lampung>.

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/berita\\_indonesia/2015/11/151129\\_indonesia\\_jokowi\\_cop21](https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/berita_indonesia/2015/11/151129_indonesia_jokowi_cop21), viewed on 17 April 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Panitia Mukhtar NU 34, *Satu Abad NU: Kemandirian Dalam Berkhidmat Untuk Peradaban DuniaPa* (Jakarta: PBNU, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2022/03/09/05572381/ketum-pbnu-yahya-staquf-minta-putin-gencatan-senjata-sekarang-juga?page=all>, viewed on 7 April 2022.

<sup>17</sup> <https://kabar24.bisnis.com/read/20220225/15/1504820/ketum-pbnu-bicara-soal-dampak-perang-rusia-dan-ukraina>, viewed on 7 April 2022.

<sup>18</sup> <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2022/03/09/05572381/ketum-pbnu-yahya-staquf-minta-putin-gencatan-senjata-sekarang-juga?page=all>, viewed on 7 April 2022.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.liputan6.com/pilpres/read/3691715/gara-gara-sosok-ini-maruf-amin-bersedia-dampingi-jokowi-di-pilpres-2019>, viewed on 21 February 2022.



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