THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE ISLAMIC TRADITIONALISM:
A CASE STUDY OF THE NAHDATUL ULAMA

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Abstrak
berpolitik dan bernegara. Selain penerimaan asas tunggal, keputusan untuk melepaskan diri dari politik praktis dan “kembali ke Khittah 1926” merupakan bentuk konsolidasi NU yang sangat bersejarah dan menentukan dinamika NU di masa-masa selanjutnya. NU kemudian lebih mengkonsentraskan energinya untuk transformasi internal lembaga pendidikannya (pesantren), pemberdayaan ekonomi, pemberdayaan kultutral, dan pemberdayaan masyarakat, terutama dalam merespon tantangan modernitas dan globalitas di masa sekarang.

**Keywords**: NU, Pesantren, konsolidasi, transformasi, modernisasi

### I. INTRODUCTION

Nahdatul Ulama (NU), according to Nakamura (1995:217), is one of the two largest Islamic social organizations in contemporary Indonesia. It embodies the solidarity of traditionalist ‘ulama and their followers who hold one of the four schools of Sunni Islam, among which the Shafi’i school has been dominant. The social basis of NU has been and still is largely the pesantren or traditional institution of Islamic learning, where santri (religious student) lives and learns classic Arabic text (kitab kuning) under the tutelage of a kyai (the head of pesantren). There are reportedly about six thousand pesantrens, with more than one million santries, mostly in rural areas throughout the country. Most pesantren are affiliated with NU, and almost all of them follow orthodox Sunism. The NU’s presence over the past three generations, with members and supporters currently estimated at thirty till forthy million, and are a testimonial to the resilience, adaptability, and vitality of Islamic traditionalism in Indonesia. Such as Muhammadiyah, NU created religious education as a booster of its changing process either in physical, economics, politics, education, or renewal of religious thinking (Fuad, 1995: 23).

As the Islamic traditionalism organization, NU is one of the most attractive and recognized institutions in Indonesia history, especially in relating between religion and state, or Islamic thought and “keindonesiaan”. Even, according to Komaruddin Hidayat (2010: 13). NU, together with Muhammadiyah, is “stock holders” of the birth of Indonesia country. NU, also Muhammadiyah, is a largest socio-religious organization in the Moslems world, which was born before the founding of Indonesia state. The both are much older and much bigger in their commandable than all of politics parties that are having a directionary cooky or power in this country at present. Therefore, Hidayat hopes that, the both, NU and Muhammadiyah, are always step forward as sources of moral and criticism for the shake of nation and the state of Indonesia. Moreover, Benny Sesetyo, an executive secretary of “HAK” commision, Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia, stated that NU is a nation asset which has great contributions to Indonesia civilization from the past era till the present. In this context, according to him, there is no reason to reject NU, as a main part of national anchor that activates, motivates, and directs Indonesia, either as a nation or as a collective home for us. Therefore, a discussion about how the NU consolidated its members or ummah and had a role in the state is an important thing.

This paper is a phenomenological study on religious phenomenon, with NU as a case study, especially about its religious thinking transformation in relating between religion and state. Of course, I aware this brief writing is not tend to record intactly
historical dynamics and religious thinking of NU, either its periods, thoughts, activities, or elites. So, this paper tends to explain about: (a) early development of NU, when it was born in Indonesia, and (b) its consolidation efforts in relating between religion, in NU context, and the state of Indonesia.

II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NU’S DEVELOPMENT

Nakamura stated that the name of the organization, Nahdatul Ulama (or ‘awakening of ‘ulama) reflects two aspects of its origin. Firstly, it was part of the wave of nationalist awakening spearheaded by Sarikat Islam (SI), which was formed in 1912. Abdul Wahab Hasbullah (1888-1971), a later cofounder of NU, is said to have formed a branch of the SI in Mecca in 1913. Upon returning to Indonesia, he established an educational organization named Nahdatul Wathan (“awakening of the nation”) in Surabaya, and this became a forerunner of the NU (Nakamura,1995: 218).

Secondly, at the same time, the challenge of reformism represented by Muhammad Abduh of Egypt was influencing Indonesia ‘ulama’ in the form of the Muhammadiyah in 1912. The abolition of the caliphate in Turkey and the fall of the Hejaz to the Wahabi Ibn Sa’ud in 1924 caused open conflicts in Indonesian Muslim Community. These changes profoundly disturbed the mainstream Javanese ‘ulama’ to which Hasbullah belonged. For him and like-minded ‘ulama’, reorganizing and taking measures against these threats of bid’ah (improper innovation) was an urgent need. Hasyim Asy’ari (1871-1947), kyai of the pesantren of Tebu Ireng, Jombang, East Java, who was then most revered of Javanese ‘ulama, approved their request to form the NU in 1926 and became its first president or rois akbar ((Nakamura,1995:218).

From 1930 until the outbreak of World War II the NU, according to Nakamura Mitsuo, grew rapidly, not only as a movement to counter the advance of reformism, but also as an agent for the internal transformation of the pesantren. Most prominent in this effort was Wahid Hasyim (1900-1957), son of Hasyim Asy’ari and, also, father of the former President Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), who introduced a modern educational system of madrasahs with graded classes and girls’ education into the pesantren. He also establishes NU’s youth (Anesor) and women’s (Muslimat) organizations. He represented the NU in the MIAI (Majlisul Islamil A’laa Indonesia), a federation of Islamic organizations formed in 1937; Hasyim Asy’ari served as its chairman. Through Wahid Hasyim the NU also joined a political campaign initiated by secular nationalist in 1939, demanding parliamentary representation for Indonesian people. Through these activities the NU organization grew nationally, extending its membership to the Outer Islands (1995:222). The NU, in Sudhamek A.W,S, a chairman of Majelis Budha Indonesia (MBI),’s point of view, has a unique thing because of it based on village domain or rural based organization and excelling in traditional Islamic education, viz., pesantren, which spreads from West Java, Center Java, East Java, until Mataram. As rural based organization, NU need to conserve its fundamental values one side and able to modernize its organization (2010: 26).

III. NU AND ITS CONSOLIDATION EFFORTS

Except two aspect of its origin above as its two earliest consolidations, there is some another consolidation efforts of the NU. Firstly, in the brief but turbulent years of the Japanese occupation (1942-1945) the NU, together with other Islamic organizations, experienced a major change in its relationship with the government—from being the
object of hostile colonial control by the Dutch to acting as a tool of mass mobilization for the Japanese. Toward the end of the Japanese occupation, Islamic leaders, including NU representatives, joined secular nationalist leaders in the preparation of a constitution for an independent Indonesia. Islamic leaders argued for an Islamic state under the shari'a, but they finally agreed on the formula of the Pancasila, in which belief in the one and only God was the first element. The constitution was promulgated on 18 August 1945, the day after the declaration of Indonesia’s independence. Islamic leaders had attained remarkable ascendancy in administration and politics during the Japanese occupation (Nakamura, 1995: 218).

Secondly, in the war of independence fought between 1945 and 1949, regular troops of the new Republic were drawn mostly from former PETA forces, while irregulars and militia were largely recruited from Masyumi’s Hizbullah units whose commanders included a number of NU ‘ulama. NU ‘ulama inspired Republican troops in October 1945 by issuing a fatwa calling on all able Muslim men to join the war as a holy war (jihad fi sabil Allah) of individual obligation (fard ‘ayn). This fatwa encouraged the Republican forces in their first major battle against the incoming allies in Surabaya in November 1945. A fierce war of independence, in which “Allahu Akbar” was a common war cry, continued until 1949 when the Dutch finally recognized Indonesia’s sovereignty (Nakamura, 1995: 220).

Thirdly, in the war of independence, Islamic forces were united under the Masyumi Party, which had been an umbrella group for all Islamic organizations, including the NU, since November 1945. In 1952, however, the NU withdrew from the Masyumi Party to become an independent political party because of disagreement over the status and role of the ‘ulama; in the party. The NU wanted to empower the council of ‘ulama’, the Syuriah, as the highest decision-making body of the party; however, the majority of the party leadership, most of them secularly educated, refused to recognize such a special position for the ‘ulama’ (Nakamura, 1995: 220). Whereas, one of the aims of the NU turn in politics was to place its members in key governmental positions. The fact that the post of minister of Religious Affairs was no longer occupied by NU members was can be seen as a one of the reasons for the NU’s withdrawal from the Masyumi. Moreover, the younger NU leaders wanted to maximize the role of the NU in political matters, something which could not be fulfilled unless the NU became a political party. As a result, shortly after becoming an independent political party, the NU gained more seats in parliament. At the time, according Lathiful Khuluq (1999), the NU’s 6.955.141 votes made it one of the three biggest parties after the PNI and Masyumi in the 1955 Indonesia’s General Election.

Fourthly, in the Constitutional Assembly, the NU, and also other Islamic parties endeavored to adopt a new constitution that would make Indonesia an Islamic state. The PNI, PKI, Christian, and other minor parties preferred a secular state based on Pancasila. The assembly failed to produce a consensus on the constitution. Meanwhile, rebellions in the name of Darul Islam (Islamic state) continued in West Java, Aceh, and South Sulawesi. Moreover, several leaders of the Masyumi party joined the rebels and formed a countergovernment in 1958. President Soekarno dissolved the Constitutional Assembly, and banned the Masyumi party and the PSI (Socialists) for their involvement in the rebellion. He decreed a return to the 1945 constitution and formed the so-called NASAKOM government, a coalition of nationalists, religious forces (including the
NU), and communists. So, there were many reactions or responses from social organizations or elements to the President Soekarno’s policy (Nakamura, 1995: 220).

In all this the NU recognized Soekarno, in terms of *fiqh*, as the legitimate head of state to whom Muslim loyalty was due, with term of *ulil-amri dharuri bis-saukah* (the Emergency Government Representative by Strengthening) to supports the Soekarno President against the DI TII’s rebellion. Since the early period of the Republic the NU had joined a series of coalition cabinets, thus developing a number of its own politicians, the most prominent being Idham Chalid, who occupied ministerial positions beginning in 1952 when he was first appointed vice-premier. The position of minister of the Department of Religion was occupied by NU leaders from 1949 to 1972, making the department a basis for its political patronage. In the NASAKOM government (1960-1965), the NU’s share of power became much greater than before, leading to its deeper entrenchment in the religious bureaucracy (Khuluq, 1995).

Fifthly, after the PKI was dissolved in March 11, 1966, the NU still played a big role in the state constellation. However, the uprising of the President Soeharto with his “New Order” marked the decline of the NU in politics. Because of the Soeharto’s policy to weaken the political parties vis-à-vis the new supported-government “political” organization, the Golongan Karya (Golkar), forced the NU to be an opposes of the government. The NU still gained much votes in the 1971 Indonesia’s election, although the government treated it unfairly. As a result, it gained 13 more seat in parliament (of 58 seats) than of the 1955 election. However, the majority of the parliament members were of the “government party”. In the cabinet, the NU was also lost its power. In the Pembangunan Cabinet II which formed in 1971, no cabinet member was from the NU. Even the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which was usually seated by the NU members, was seated by non-NU figure, A. Mukti Ali of Sunan Kalijaga Institute of Islamic Studies at Yogyakarta, who was registered as the Muhammadiyah member. The NU party was then forced to merge with other Islamic parties to form the new party called Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP) on February 5, 1973 (Khuluq, 1995).

Sixthly, after the advent of the New Order, the government, as Nakamura said, implemented programs for rapid economic development with a massive influx of Western capital and technology. This created a number of social problems, including the concentration of wealth among the urban elite and the weakening of indigenous entrepreneurs. The PPP, and its NU faction in parliament particular, increasingly assumed the role of channeling popular grievances against the negative effects of economic development. Moreover, blatant attempts at the infringement of Muslim rights – for instance, the Marriage Law bill of 1973—and the favoring of Javanese indigenous religion over Islam in 1978 roused widespread resentment in Islamic organizations. As results, the PPP, under the leadership of the NU’s elderly Bisri Syamsuri (1886-1980), the last survivor of its founding fathers, even staged a walk-out in parliament. The critical stance of the NU and other Islamic organizations vis-à-vis the government was manifest toward the end of the 1970s (1995, 221).

Seventhly, in 1983, according to Douglas E. Ramage (1995: 53-4), the NU became the first major Islamic organization to agree to the Soeharto government’s *asas tunggal* (the sole foundation) and accept Pancasila as parts of its constitutional charter. At an NU conference in 1983 the organization had stated its intention to accept
Pancasila for reasons based on the nationalist heritage of the NU. The NU’s Islamic scholars concluded that there was no need to establish an Islamic state and that Pancasila was compatible with the principles of Islam. At the Situbondo’s National Congress, 1984, NU formally proclaimed that Indonesia is a state based on Pancasila and the Constitution of 1945 which is the “final form of state” that will govern the Indonesian archipelago. The acceptance of Pancasila by the NU was, as noted by former Minister of Religion Munawir Sjaidzali, a “brillian compromise”. This compromise was formulated by the late NU leader KH. Achmad Siddiq (1926-1990), who was elected president of the Syuriyah at that Congress and together with Abdurrahman Wahid (the General Chairman of Tanfidziyah) formed the duumvirate responsible for the transformation and revitalization of NU as a base for a pluralist, neo-modernist Islam. Siddiq argued that the NU could accept Pancasila as its asas tunggal because it was a “philosophy created by human being, whereas Islam was a revelation”. He argued also that the Pancasila was not a religion and could not replace religion. The pillar of belief in the one and only God was in accordance with the Islamic creed a tawhid (one-ness of God) and represented the Muslim commitment to practice Islam in Indonesia. Therefore, to him, there was nothing in the Pancasila that interfered with Muslim religious faith and Islamic law. He advised that the NU should accept the Pancasila as a manmade state philosophy and as foundation of its organization within the framework of the Republic of Indonesia while retaining Islam as the basis of its members’ religious faith. Meanwhile, Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) attempted to explain the NU’s policies and behaviors in the theological terms. According to him, the NU was neither opportunistic nor accommodationist, as outsiders often labeled it. The tradition of Islamic doctrine to which the NU adhered combined both worldly and other-worldly dimensions of life in one ongoing organic whole, thus forming an effective defense against secularism. He stressed that the NU’s political behavior was to be understood in this perspective.

According to Gus Dur, there were two momentous decisions taken by NU in 1983 and 1984, viz.: firstly, the adoption of Pancasila as asas tunggal, and, secondly, a decision to withdraw from active participation in politics. NU formulated this decision in a statement known as “Kembali Ke Khittah 1926”, or “Return to the Commitment of 1926”. The NU was originally established as a purely socio-cultural organization primarily concerned with educational and spiritual well-being of the umat. The NU participated as an independent political party from 1952 to 1973 and then until 1983 as a faction of the PPP. For many reasons, particularly cleavages within the Islamic movement, and manipulation of Islamic politics and parties by the Soeharto government, as well as internal organizational disputes over doctrine and politics, a progressives NU faction won control of the organization at its 1984 Congress. Abdurrahman Wahid and Achmad Siddiq, as leaders of the progressives of NU, succeeded in convincing the membership that NU should withdraw from formal participation in party politics and return to its original 1926 charter as a purely socio-cultural organization, and, then, it would redirect its energies away from national politics towards educational, cultural, and economic activities designed to improve the condition of the umat (Ramage, 1995: 55).
IV. EPILOGUE: TRANSFORMATION TO MODERNIZATION

The development of Islam in Indonesia provides an interesting picture of unique experience, especially in relating between religion and modernization (Wahid, 1985: 41), including what happened in NU, as one of two biggest socio-religious organization in Indonesia. Here, NU faced with enormous social transformation as the twenty-first century approaches. Industrialization and urbanization are reducing the proportion of rural population and changing rural ways of life at a rapid rate, while the expansion of modern national education is affecting the continuity of traditional Islamic scholarship based on pesantren education. The shape of Islam in the future of Indonesia, as well as that of Indonesia itself, in turn seems to depend much on the direction and behavior of the NU in responding to these challenges of Modern Era (Nakamura, 1995: 222).

To recognize the limitation of pesantren’s role in a comprehensive and fundamental social transformation is a very important attitude toward what happens at present not only in, also to the pesantrens. Too much stress on one possibility to develop pesantren would invite on our part on the utmost important attitude of always being aware of pesantren’s experience mainly as an educational institution. The need for this warning is evident from the fact that activities on pesantren at present rarely attempt to address the quest to improve pesantren as an educational sub-system within the national educational system, a part of from patchworks to improve language and mathematical teachings in several pesantrens. A coherent and comprehensive study of pesantren educational system is needed before we can proceed with developing pesantren in other ways, and before assigning to pesantren’s grandious tasks such as effecting social transformation in rural areas. The question of how to develop the three basic elements of pesantren, without basically changing its cultural properties proven to be beneficial for pesantren in the past, into new elements of progress commensurate with the future roles of pesantren, is a crucial one. Gus Dur asked that should we continue to let pesantrens use the antiquated text books, with their great drawbacks as an anomaly to the changing situation? But what we put in their place, considering the fact that those old text books provide a cultural background for the value system developed by pesantren later?. If the latter-day “pesantr en planners” could agree on a solution, how they plan to enforce their decision among the too-fragmented landscape of pesantren in Indonesia right now? (Wahid, “Principles of Pesantren Education”, 1987: 3).

There are, at least, three strategies the Islamic movements in Indonesia, as Gus Dur saw them, which have effects on pesantren. The increasingly differentiated strategies employed by various Islamic organizations to serve the cause of Islam unavoidable make their basic approach to social change, those strategies include the following respective categories: the socio-political, the cultural, and socio-cultural strategies. The socio-political strategy stresses the need to spell out items of formalization of the Islamic movements, preferably through an explicit Islamic party or an exclusive political party for the muslims at a later stage. Anticipating the coming that stage, muslims should educate themselves in the right Islamic morality and develop Islamistic way of life both individually and socially. The campaign for Islamizing national law should be given priority in this context.

While, the cultural strategy is designed for the development of mature individuality for the muslims by widening their horizons, enlarging their scope of
commitment, deepening their awareness of the complexity of the human environment and the strengthening of their solidarity with fellow human beings regardless of political ideology, ethical origin, cultural background and religious conviction. The venue to attain those objectives is the full-fledged development of the Muslims’ rational attitude toward life. This strategy stresses open dialogue with all ideologies and philosophical thoughts, with the aim of enabling Muslims to absorb as much as possible all kinds of knowledge and information. This attitude, necessarily, avoids all kinds of institutionalizing Islamic teachings, since the very effort to formalize those teachings would narrow them into exclusivistic attitudes and respective measures inhibiting the freedom of expression and liberal thoughts valued very highly by this strategy. It prefers the ideas of the secular state, since only this form of governing is objective enough to guarantee that very freedom.

Then, the socio-cultural strategy sees the necessity to develop societal frameworks using Islamic values and principles, which results the “common” institutions, its mean is not exclusive Islamic institutions, acceptable for all. In other words, the societal frameworks developed by the Muslims should correspond to those developed by others people as well. The commonality should reflect the desire for a fundamental transformation of the society by the people’s own efforts. Formalizing of Islamic teachings is not part of that transformation, but they contribute to the establishment of a society where the Muslims could implement them individually or socially as social ethics. So, Gus Dur asked, how the pesantren respond to those strategies? Several pesantrens would naturally apply the first strategy, namely, the socio-political approach, since historical developments of Islamic movements in Indonesia in the past dictates that. But, a safe bet would yield either the cultural or socio-cultural strategies among the majority of pesantrens. This is dictated by the main existence of pesantren as an educational institution. In this context, the pesantrens faced the challenge to develop ideological insights in the view of its increasing role in the process of social transformation of the nation. As educational institution, the pesantrens must respond this challenge (Wahid, “Principles of Pesantren Education”, 1987: 4).

Beside the pesantren context, relating between NU and developing process of Islam and society in Indonesia can be seen generally in several aspects, as following, are: (a) in developing of its knowledge tradition, (b) in point of view of its societies, (c) in manner of its making decision, and (d) in reconciliation process of its internal conflicts. Especially, in developing of its knowledge tradition, NU practices knowledge tradition that relates organizationally between ta’wîd, fiqh, and tasawuf in order to grow dunniawiyah (the profane) dimension and, all at once, ukhrawiyah (the hereafter) dimension in human life. This relating both dimensions is a mechanism of spiritual that develops in NU surroundings when it faces secularization, which is caused by modernization process of human life (Wahid, “Nahdatul Ulama dan…., 1984: 33-4).

However, modernization and globalization cannot be rejected and avoided by human being. Even, the both are a certainty for human life itself, and, religion, as a part of human life, also can not escape from social change of its adherents when they get facing modernization process (Kato, 2003: 419). Whereas, beside there is a positive side, the globalization has also a negative side or, as Ahmad Syafii Maarif called with a dark side of globalization, that impacts for individuals, communities, and nations, including the Muslim world (2002: 136). Rapid economic development, combined with
fundamental changes in the society’s life caused by the process of modernization, which in most cases reflect the Westernization of the society at the expense of the traditional way of life, according to Gus Dur, brings with it deep concerns among Muslim religious activists and thinkers (Wahid, “Islam in Indonesia:…”, 1985: 3).

In the last, as seen from the present situation in Indonesia, Gus Dur predicts (Wahid, “Islam in Indonesia:…”, 1985: 5), we know that the prospects of Islam in the future of Indonesia lies with the ability to formulate a satisfactory answer to the old problem: the relationship between religion and state according to Islamic perspectives. The current developments in Islamic education, non-political social life, and Islam’s increasing influence in the cultural life of the nation world accelerate in the future, if the integrative approach is taken by the Islamic groups. In reverse, a merely legal-formalistic approach to life, presenting Islam as an alternative to the whole social system in existence at present, would certainly endanger the prospects of Islam in Indonesia. How to find the right answer without stamping out to the evident thirst for awareness of Islam values among younger generation of Muslim Indonesians is the problem faced by Indonesian Muslim intellectuals and leading activists.

References


