

Nahdlatul Ulama is home to its own hardliners



In a [recent *New Mandala* article](#), Greg Fealy wrote about how Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation, is moving away from its highly prized position of political neutrality, and is increasingly being closely linked with the National Awakening Party (PKB) as well as with Indonesian President Joko Widodo (Jokowi). The closeness of the organisation's leadership with the incumbent administration has created divisions within the organisation's ranks, in a context where NU's sway over the Islamic grassroots is being challenged by the rise of diverse, and frequently conservative, new Islamic figures.

What the article does not address, however, is the fact that some of these new religious authorities come from the ranks of the organisation itself and are forming alternative institutions within the NU that challenge the dominance of its leadership, which officially represents more moderate ideological and political views. The growing pull of Islamism within NU's ranks has not been featured much in contemporary scholarship on Indonesian Islam. Even the oft-cited volume by Martin van Bruinessen's, [which warned about the "conservative turn" in Indonesian Islam](#) approximately six years ago, did not include a chapter about this growing trend within NU.

Rivalries and factions are common within NU, exacerbated by its decentralised structure, in which the 18,000 or so Islamic schools (*pesantren*) affiliated with the organisation are run by *kiais* who operate independently from the organisation's leadership board. More recently, however, these factional divisions are coming to be more based on ideological differences—primarily between NU clerics who want to retain the organisation's moderate outlook and other clerics who are influenced by more conservative Islamic teachings from the Middle East and seek to institute them

within the organisation. The latter argue that such teachings are compatible with the original teachings of its founder Hasyim Asy'ari, who with a number of associates founded the organisation in 1926.

After the organisation's 2015 national congress (*muktamar*), a group of young NU clerics founded the "True Path NU" (NU Garis Lurus or NUGL) grouping, with an aim to serve as an alternative voice for the organisation in opposition to the NU leadership led by chairman Said Aqil Siradj.

These young clerics received their education in Islamic theology in the Middle East. Some like Abdul Somad Batubara were trained in traditional Islamic learning institutions like Egypt's Al-Azhar University, while others like Buya Yahya received their decrees from institutions such as Al-Ahgaff University in Yemen. Regardless of these varying backgrounds, however, NUGL clerics tend to have a narrower interpretation of Islam than the more nuanced and contextualised ones advocated by moderate NU clerics such as Said Aqil and the late Abdurrahman Wahid.

NUGL rejects Said Aqil and the NU elite's promotion of Islam Nusantara, stating that it is a form of theological heresy (*bid'ah*). They argue [there is only one universal Islam for all Muslims](#) and thus, there is no need for "localised" Islamic interpretations—such as *Islam Nusantara*—within NU.

However, NUGL clerics went beyond criticising Said Aqil and the Islam Nusantara concept. They stated that they want to eradicate "liberal" theological influence from the NU, which they say has corrupted the organisation's aim as an Islamic organisation adhering to Sunni principles (*Ahlu Sunnah wal Jamaah*). These "liberal" influences are not just limited to the ideas articulated by NU activists who used to be affiliated with the Liberal Islamic Network (JIL)—for instance Ulil Abshar Abdalla—but also those articulated by Abdurrahman Wahid, NU's long-time chairman (1984–1999) and Indonesia's fourth president (1999–2001). Because of these propositions, NU Garis Lurus serves as the most serious challenge towards NU's moderate theological outlook promoted by Wahid and his successors over the past three decades.

More troublingly for NU moderates, clerics affiliated with NUGL—like Luthfi Basori, Idrus Ramli, and Buya Yahya—are gaining a popular following both in traditional propagation (*da'wa*) activities as well as online sermons via social media platforms. On YouTube, their sermons have attracted hundreds of thousands of viewers. For instance, one in which Idrus Ramli condemns Islam Nusantara [generated almost 62,000 viewers](#). Another, in which Buya Yahya condemns Said Aqil and expresses his support for Rizieq Shihab, the leader of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), [generated approximately 390,000 viewers](#).

Idrus Ramli is an alumnus of Sidogiri pesantren—one of the most prominent NU pesantren in Pasuruan, located in the "horse shoe" (*tapal kuda*) region in East Java province. While the pesantren claims to remain faithful to its traditionalist NU heritage, in recent years it frequently invites Islamist preachers—such as Adian Husaini from the Indonesian Islamic Propagation Council (DDII) and Syamsuddin Arif from Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought and Civilisation

(INSIST)—[to give sermons for its pupils](#), even though they are considered by moderates within NU to harbour Wahhabi ideology the organisation has formally opposed.

Through its publications such as *Buletin Sidogiri*, the Sidogiri pesantren has condemned the Shi'a minority as "a deviant form of Islam". It also criticises the Indonesian State Islamic University (UIN) system, which is primarily staffed by lecturers affiliated with NU's moderate wing. It discourages its students from going to UIN to pursue university-level studies, as by attending UIN they might be exposed to religious pluralism, that they "may begin to doubt their own faith and religious practices".

Sidogiri [has followed the NUGL line and declared its opposition](#) to Said Aqil and Islam Nusantara, stating that it violates the original essence of Islam. Hundreds of *pesantren* located in NU strongholds—like the *tapal kuda* region and the island of Madura—have similarly declared they are breaking away (*mufarogh*) from the organisation's national leadership for similar reason.

Meanwhile, the Sumatra-based Abdul Somad has become the most famous NUGL-affiliated cleric. He first became well-known because of his involvement in the 2016 rallies against former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama. His popularity has soared to the point that he is now one of the most influential popular cleric in Indonesia today, with large base of followers ([1.275 million on Facebook](#) and [3.7 million on Instagram](#)) that transcends the traditionalist–modernist divide within the Indonesian Islamic community.

Somad was initially known as a learned cleric with a comprehensive and well-balanced understanding of Islamic law. However, he has issued controversial statements—for instance, [endorsing a caliphate state](#) and [condemning non-Muslims as infidels \(*kafir*\)](#)—and critics have accused him of [having sympathies with hard-line Islamist groups](#) such as FPI and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI). His criticisms of religious minorities such as Shi'a Muslims and Christians have attracted [large number of views on YouTube](#), but have also [invited accusations of intolerance](#) from these minorities.

Despite such accusations—[which led to a ban issued by Hong Kong authorities](#) against his planned *da'wa* visit there—Somad remains a very popular preacher, especially among sections of the NU rank-and-file. Live *da'wa* tours easily draw hundreds of thousands of attendees, many willing to travel dozens if not hundreds kilometres just to catch a glimpse of him.

[Somad is also one of the leading backers of Muhammad Zainul Majdi \(known as Tuan Guru Bajang or TGB\)](#), the governor of West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) province, in the latter's quest to become either a presidential or vice presidential candidate in the 2019 elections. He praised TGB—a fellow al-Azhar graduate—for upholding Islamic principles in the policies he issued during his decade-long tenure as the province's governor. Such policies include converting the province's state-owned bank into a *shari'a* bank and developing NTB as a leading destination for Islamic tourism. However, TGB is widely criticised by human rights advocates for [his lack of response toward the persecution](#)

[of the Ahmadi minority in Lombok](#), who were forcefully evicted by a mob from their residents in 2006 and remained homeless today. Somad has muted his endorsement for TGB ever since news emerged [the latter is now being seriously considered as Jokowi's vice presidential nominee](#).

On 29 July 2018, a national Islamic clerics' summit in Jakarta—organised by the National Movement to Guard Ulama's Religious Edicts (GNPF Ulama), the same group which organised the 2016/17 rallies against Ahok in Jakarta—[nominated Somad to become Prabowo Subianto's Vice Presidential running mate](#). However, [Somad turned down the nomination](#), stating that currently he wants to focus on Islamic education and propagation activities. Somad's Vice Presidential nomination is likely given by GNPF Ulama in recognition of his status as one of Indonesia's leading popular preacher and his support for the causes advocated by the organisation, including anti-Ahok movement.

Certainly, Said Aqil and the NU leadership often claim that NUGL and its affiliated clerics [only represent a small minority](#) within NU. But based on the rising popularity of Somad and other NUGL preachers, they are clearly a growing force within the organisation.

NU Garis Lurus' rising profile might have consequences for the next NU national congress (*muktamar*) scheduled for 2020. At least one leading NUGL-affiliated cleric is expected to contest the general chairmanship position that will be vacated by Said Aqil in 2020. [Idrus Ramli, whom had sought the position during the 2015 muktamar](#), is expected to seek the position again in 2020. At the same time, no leading candidates from NU's moderate wing have emerged to command a similar level of followership comparable to what Somad and other NUGL clerics have been able to obtain in their preaching activities, making it more likely that one of them might be able pose a strong bid for the NU chairmanship in 2020.

If a Garis Lurus figure does get elected as NU's next general chairman in 2020, it would have the potential to fundamentally shift the theological and political orientations of the largest Islamic organisation in Indonesia. While the likelihood of such an outcome is remote—as NU's moderate wing and Jokowi (if re-elected) would do everything in their power to prevent it—if it does happen it would be another marker which signifies the continuation of the “conservative turn” within Indonesian Islam, particularly within NU, long known to have a moderate, tolerant, and inclusive worldview.