
It is Time to Recognize Indonesia's Place in the World

Paul Marshall
Senior Fellow, Religious Freedom Institute

Bernard Adeney-Risakotta, noted Indonesian social science and religion professor, describes Indonesia as “the most important country in the world about which most people know practically nothing.”^[1] But Indonesian Islam, which may be the country’s most influential feature, is beginning to draw considerable attention.

Indonesia is the world’s fourth most populous nation, the third largest democracy, and the largest country and economy in Southeast Asia. [According to the World Bank](#), it is the world’s 10th largest economy in purchasing power parity (PPP). In PPP terms, it [ranks ahead](#) of the U.K., France, Spain, Italy, Canada, Brazil, South Korea, and Mexico. Many [projections suggest](#) it will be the third or fourth largest economy by 2050.

Indonesia is the world’s largest Muslim-majority country and at the same time it is also one of the most religiously diverse. Despite growing Islamist radicalism there, Indonesia has historically and contemporarily shown tolerance for religious diversity.^[2] During Dutch colonial rule and the half century following independence, most of this general acceptance of pluralism was confined within the country’s borders, but there are now several significant initiatives that have the potential to propel these pluralist influences into the rest of the Muslim-majority world and far beyond.

LEIMENA INSTITUTE AND THE FOREIGN MINISTRY

One of these initiatives was a seminar, “Roles of the Abrahamic Religious Family in Promoting Peace in the World,” which took place in Jakarta on October 27 under the auspices of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Leimena Institute, a Christian public policy think tank. This think tank (full disclosure—I am a Senior Fellow there) is named after Johannes Leimena, who was head of the Indonesian Christian Party (*Parkindo*), Health Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, and, on seven occasions, Acting President of the country. In 2010, he was declared a National Hero of Indonesia, which is the country’s highest honor, awarded for “extraordinary service furthering the interests of the state and people.”^[3]

The opening speaker was H. E. Fachrul Razi, the Minister of Religious Affairs, who was followed by K. H. Said Aqil Siroj, the Chairman of the Executive Council of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and then

Prof. Dr. H. Abdul Mu'ti, Secretary General of Muhammadiyah. These are the world's two largest Muslim organizations. Other luminaries included Cardinal Ignatius Suharyo, chair of the Indonesian Catholic Bishops Conference, and Rev. Gomar Gultom, chair of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia, the main organization of Indonesia's Protestants. International representatives included Shaykh Abdallah Bin Bayyah, the chair of the United Arab Emirates Fatwa Council; Rabbi David Rosen, International Director of Inter-Religious Affairs for the American Jewish Committee; and Javier Piedra, who directs the Asia programs for USAID.

Of course, the world is replete with religious dialogs, perhaps too many of them, but here certain things stand out. One is the high level of the participants, including five of the most senior religious leaders in the country. Another is that the discussion, initiated by a Christian organization, included senior Muslims and Jews. Alluding to Israel and the Palestinians, Minister Razi stressed that there cannot be real peace without real communication and that right now communication between states is sadly limited. Despite this challenge, however, he emphasized that religious leaders can communicate and can urge their countries to take moderate stances. In the Indonesian context and beyond, these are important words.

U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE, NAHDLATUL ULAMA, AND ANSOR

Then, in what was turning out to be a very busy week for interreligious discussion in Indonesia, American Secretary of State Mike Pompeo arrived in Jakarta on October 29 as part of his Asia travels to India and Sri Lanka, and his visit has drawn much press attention in the region and back in the U.S.

Most coverage focused on the prospects for further economic cooperation between Indonesia and the U.S. (which has now led to extended preferential trade terms for Indonesia), tensions in the South China Sea, Palestinian issues, and most especially on Pompeo's appeal to Indonesian and other Muslims to speak up about China's vicious repression of its Muslim Uighur minority.^[4] His comments hinted at 15 Indonesian Muslim groups that had travelled to Xinjiang in February 2019, including representatives from the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), the NU, and Muhammadiyah, on a trip organized by Beijing. Subsequently, NU leadership, including Chairman Said Aqil Siradj, has been silent on the situation of the Uighurs.^[5]

However, other media attention to Pompeo's trip, while also emphasizing these topics, suggested that a major reason for his one-day visit was to address a Muslim youth organization.^[6] Much of the press coverage underplayed this aspect of the trip. *Reuters* referred to Pompeo speaking to an "Islamic youth group" while the *Wall Street Journal* referred to a "Muslim youth group."^[7] These referents make the audience seem like the local mosque young people's gathering. But this is not just any Muslim youth organization: it is the 5 million-member Ansor, the youth wing of the 90 million-follower NU. And the meeting coincided with the celebration of the birthday of Islam's Prophet Muhammad (*Maulid*)—it was not a side show.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE MUSLIM MEETING

Indeed, there is evidence that this meeting was the key reason for the trip. Joe Cochrane, one of the most informed analysts of Indonesia, emphasized that "the real catalyst for his visit to Indonesia...

is not about China but a scheduled address to the world’s largest Islamic youth organisation focusing on a recently released US State Department Commission on Unalienable Rights – key among them religious freedom.”^[8]

The head of Ansor, K.H. Yahya Cholil Staquf, who is also General Secretary of NU, has on at least three occasions met with Vice-President Mike Pence, including at Pence’s specific invitation. Hence, Pompeo’s address to Ansor would be more than a pleasant public relations add-on to his discussions with President Jokowi and Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi. It is also part of an ongoing effort to help give Indonesia’s humanitarian Islam a larger platform on the world stage.^[9]

RELATION TO COMMISSION ON UNALIENABLE RIGHTS

According to Cochrane, in early September 2020, Ansor had invited Pompeo to visit, following the much-anticipated release of a report by the U.S. State Department’s Commission on Unalienable Rights in late August. Pompeo then added the Indonesia trip after his visits to India and Sri Lanka. Cochrane’s article is worth quoting at length (ellipses are mine):

“The trip originated with the invitation from Ansor and Nahdlatul Ulama,” Peter Berkowitz, director of policy planning at the State Department and executive secretary of the commission, told *This Week in Asia*, “... to speak about the report on inalienable rights.” “This... exemplifies one of our hopes... to stimulate a conversation across nations, across people about common human principles: no genocide, no torture, no arbitrary arrests and detention, religious liberty in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to provide a minimum standard of principles among peoples,” he said.

“The commission’s report resonated among Indonesian civil society groups, led by NU, promoting “Islam Nusantara,” or “East Indies Islam”.... “Mary Ann Glendon, the commission’s chairwoman and a senior adviser to Pompeo, stated “... we are enormously encouraged by the interest that Nahdlatul Ulama has displayed in our report, especially since there seems to be a significant correspondence between the findings of our report and the core teachings of humanitarian Islam.”^[10]

Another knowledgeable observer, James M. Dorsey, notes:

“You have a battle for religious soft power, which involves on the top level the Saudis, the Emiratis, the Turks, the Iranians, and the NU. On the second level there is Malaysia, Pakistan. The NU is different because first, NU is not a state, whereas all the others are states.... Dorsey noted that the Indonesian government was not involved and so “In that sense, what NU is doing is much more real to me.”^[11]

INDONESIA’S FUTURE

Bernard Adeney-Risakotta believes that “As time goes by, Indonesia is going to have a greater and greater influence on Islam and on the rest of the world, because Indonesians — many Indonesians — are not ashamed of Indonesian Islam. If anything, they think it’s superior to Middle Eastern

Islam.... They do not think that Islam needs to be cleansed from all traditions and cultural expressions. They think that it needs to be preserved and strengthened.” (ellipses are mine).

“The four Axial civilizations that laid the foundation for the modern world are all deeply a part of Indonesia, but Indonesia has not become one with any of them.... It’s not part of China, it’s not part of the Sinosphere, it’s not part of India, even though it was called the Dutch East Indies, it’s not part of Europe and it’s not part of the Middle East. It’s its own creation, which has, I think, something to offer to the rest of the world.”^[12]

Pompeo, Pence, and others appear to have recognized this important reality, and it is something that should continue beyond the U.S. election.

Endnotes

[1] Max Levine, “Indonesian Professor Predicts Growth of Indonesia’s Influence on Islam,” *The Hoya*, October 15, 2018, <https://thehoya.com/indonesian-professor-predicts-growth-indonesias-influence-islam/>. See also Adeney-Risakotta’s *Living in a Sacred Cosmos: Indonesia and the Future of Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 2018).

[2] For an overview, see Timothy S. Shah, “Indonesia Religious Freedom Landscape Report,” *Religious Freedom Institute*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/publication/indonesia-religious-freedom-landscape-report>.

[3] “Bagaimana Prosedur Pengusulan Gelar Pahlawan Nasional? Ini Penjelasannya,” *Suara.com*, October 21, 2020, <https://www.suara.com/news/2020/10/21/133039/bagaimana-prosedur-pengusulan-gelar-pahlawan-nasional-ini-penjelasannya>. Translation at <https://tekdeeps.com/what-is-the-procedure-for-proposing-the-title-of-a-national-hero-this-is-the-explanation/>.

[4] For example, see Alya Nurbaiti and Dian Septiari, “Pompeo calls on Indonesian Muslims to oppose China's Uighur issue,” *Jakarta Post*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/10/30/pompeo-calls-on-indonesian-muslims-to-oppose-chinas-uighur-issue.html>; John Emont and William Mauldin, “In Indonesia, Pompeo Urges Muslims to Challenge China’s Xinjiang Policies,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 29, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-indonesia-pompeo-urges-muslims-to-challenge-chinas-xinjiang-policies-11603970520>; and the State Department’s own press release, “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo And Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi,” October 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-and-indonesian-foreign-minister-retno-marsudi/>.

[5] On the situation of the Uighurs, NU Supreme Council Secretary-General K. H. Yahya Cholil Staquf, the head of Ansor (see below) who organized the event with Pompeo, has been more open. Responding to Pompeo’s remarks, he said that NU had yet to have a final stance regarding the Uighur Muslims case as there was a U.S.-China rivalry bias surrounding it. “We need more information to apprehend the real situation. However, if there is proven to be a violation of human rights [in Xinjiang], we will not remain silent.” See Alya Nurbaiti and Dian Septiari, “Pompeo calls on Indonesian Muslims to oppose China's Uighur issue,” *Jakarta Post*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/10/30/pompeo-calls-on-indonesian-muslims-to-oppose-chinas-uighur-issue.html>.”

[6] Heru Andriyanto and Natasia Christy Wahyuni, “Pompeo to Visit Indonesia Next Week,” *Jakarta Globe*, October 22, 2020, <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/pompeo-to-visit-indonesia-next-week>.

[7] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-asia-indonesia/pompeo-to-find-new-ways-to-cooperate-with-indonesia-in-south-china-sea-idUSKBN27E0CF>; <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-indonesia-pompeo-urges-muslims-to-challenge-chinas-xinjiang-policies-11603970520>.

[8] “Pompeo’s Indonesia visit to focus on Muslim youth group and engaging with ‘humanitarian Islam,’” *South China Morning Post*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3106855/pompeos-indonesia-visit-focus-muslim-youth-group-and-engaging>.

[9] Pompeo also lamented the rise in “blasphemy accusations” and discrimination against nonofficial religions, both growing problems in Indonesia. For background regarding humanitarian Islam, see my “Muslims and Evangelicals form Joint Working Group to Counter Extremism,” *Providence*, April 27, 2020, <https://providencemag.com/2020/04/muslims-evangelicals-form-joint-working-group-counter-extremism/>; “New Christian-Muslim Political Alliances?” *Providence*, February 3, 2020, <https://providencemag.com/2020/02/new-christian-muslim-political-alliances-indonesia-centrist-democrat-international-yahya-staquf-victor-orban/>; “Muslim leader Yahya Cholil Staquf: Need to address ‘problematic elements of Islamic orthodoxy’ after Christchurch attack,” *Religion Unplugged*, April 3, 2019, <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2019/4/3/muslim-leader-yahya-cholil-staquf-need-to-address-problematic-elements-of-islamic-orthodoxy-after-christchurch-attack>.

[10] “Pompeo’s Indonesia visit to focus on Muslim youth group and engaging with ‘humanitarian Islam,’” *South China Morning Post*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3106855/pompeos-indonesia-visit-focus-muslim-youth-group-and-engaging>.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Max Levine, “Indonesian Professor Predicts Growth of Indonesia’s Influence on Islam,” *The Hoya*, October 15, 2018, <https://thehoya.com/indonesian-professor-predicts-growth-indonesias-influence-islam/>. See also Adeney-Risakotta’s *Living in a Sacred Cosmos: Indonesia and the Future of Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 2018).

Paul Marshall is Wilson Professor of Religious Freedom at Baylor University, Senior Fellow of the Religious Freedom Institute and member of its South and Southeast Asia Action Team, and Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute’s Center for Religious Freedom.

All views and opinions presented in this essay are solely those of the author and publication on Cornerstone does not represent an endorsement or agreement from the Religious Freedom Institute or its leadership.



Permanent Link:

https://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/cornerstone/it-is-time-to-recognize-indonesias-place-in-the-world#_ednref12

The Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) is committed to achieving broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, a source of individual and social flourishing, the cornerstone of a successful society, and a driver of national and international security

Religious Freedom Institute
316 Pennsylvania Ave. SE | Suite 501
Washington, D.C. 20003
202.838.7734 | rfi.org