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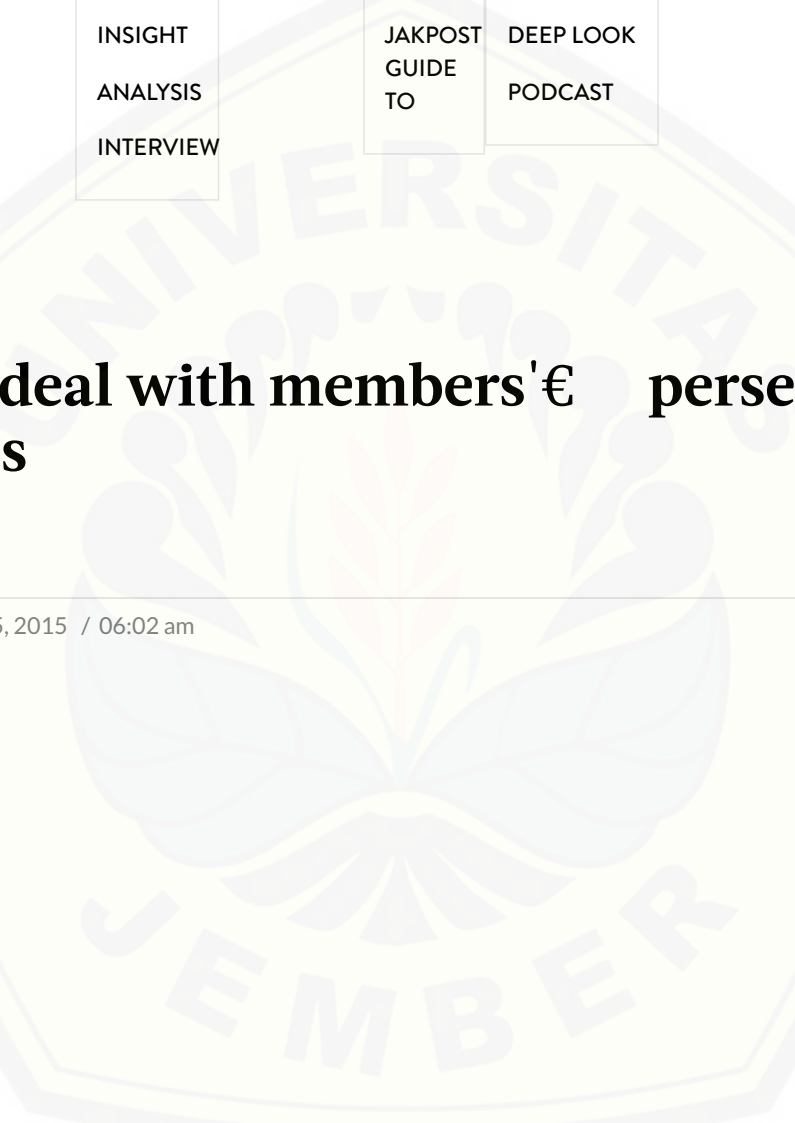
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NU must deal with members'€ persecution of minorities

Al Khanif

The Jakarta Post

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Since a few months ago, 'Islam Nusantara' or Islam of the Indonesian archipelago, which is the theme of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) congress this year, has stirred controversy. Even though some NU leaders have stated that the concept is not a new Islamic school of thought, some members and non-NU Muslims, especially those of more conservative views, have accused this term as being misleading.

The decision to use Islam Nusantara as the congress theme is a part of the NU's efforts to eliminate Islamic extremism in Indonesia. Additionally, this is also meant to revise traditionalist and modernist divides between the NU and other Islamic organizations. The NU represents traditionalist Islam because most of its members believe



generally incapable of grasping the patterns and intricacies of God's commands without a reliable guide.

Some NU intellectuals however have attempted to challenge this stereotype by undertaking ijtihad and

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Muslims agree that the *aqidah* (Islamic creed) does not accept transformation. However, Islamic law of *sharia* involving relationships between humans accepts adaptation because societies evolve and undergo change over time.

Accommodating local cultures can also be found in the history of Islam throughout the Muslim world. For instance, Amr ibn As allowed Egyptians to practice their conventional laws, except the custom of sacrificing a girl to the Nile to increase the river's water. At the time of the Mogul rulers, Hindus in India were allowed to practice their law except the custom of *sati*; burning a widow with the body of her late husband.

These examples illustrate that Muslim rulers have acknowledged that Islam enhances religious morality by limiting particular religious beliefs that may threaten public order and safety. Burning or sacrificing human beings is now incompatible with human dignity as a fundamental element of human rights.

The tradition of *ijtihad* in NU was seen in 2004 when most of the NU mass organizations disagreed with a controversial fatwa, declaring it was forbidden for the Islamic community to choose a woman as president of the country. They saw this fatwa, issued ahead of the presidential elections in which Megawati Soekarnoputri was a candidate, as inconsistent with aspirations for gender equality in Indonesian society.

Accommodating local cultures, responding to contemporary issues in state-religion relations and respecting other religions is not a big matter for NU. What really matters is that the NU still needs to work hard to deal with their fellow Muslim minorities because some NU members are responsible for the persecution of Muslim minorities. Thus, if upholding *Islam Nusantara* is meant to promote a moderate Islam, which can respond to contemporary issues including the protection of Muslim minorities, the NU must start from within.

On the issue of Muslim minorities, NU is split into two groups. The first group prefers to follow a more literal, conservative approach of Islam. For example, NU Garis Lurus (straight line), a puritan branch of the NU, has claimed that some aspects of human rights such as freedom of religion cannot be fully implemented in Indonesia. Indonesia's religious pluralism is said to be different with the liberal character of Western countries, which promote unlimited religious freedom for individuals, because this right tends to denigrate religion, they say.

Besides opposing *Islam Nusantara*, NU Garis Lurus is also a strident opposition of Muslim minorities and declares that whoever supports them is deviant. This group therefore opposes Said Aqil Siradj, who argues that the Shia school is an integral part of Islam and should be considered as Muslims. NU Garis Lurus argue that the concept of pluralism in Indonesia only regards sociological pluralism but not theological pluralism, because the latter will lead to misleading religious teachings.

The second group is the moderate NU. After Gus Dur, present chairman Said Aqil Siradj is well known as a moderate Islamic thinker and defender of Muslim minorities. Masdar F. Mas'udi is another one. He argues that judging other religious beliefs as deviations from a single truth is absurd because religious heterogeneity is the will of God, hence judging truth and falsehood in religion is only within God's authority.

The moderate NU group attempts to ensure Islam is capable of answering social problems, including human rights issues. Thus, if NU aims to expand the spirit of *Islam Nusantara*, it must persuade its puritan members that Islam must be used as a progressive tool to promote the realization of human rights, including the enforcement of

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Yet another critical question must be raised. Who will dominate the NU? If the puritanical elements in the NU overtake the more moderate parts, we will see a repetition of history in Islam, when the conflict between

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various interpretations of Islamic values regarding human rights. As a consequence, there has been no room for Muslim minorities because their Islamic interpretation is claimed as a degradation of Islam and a threat to the Islamic orthodoxy's role of maintaining public order.

The writer studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London and is writing a PhD dissertation titled Protecting religious minorities within Islam in Indonesia: A challenge for international human rights law and Islamic law.

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