

## Notes

# The Radical Traditionalism of the Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia: A Personal Account of the 26th National Congress, June 1979, Semarang

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## I Introduction: An Apparent Paradox of the Nahdlatul Ulama

The Nahdlatul Ulama (literally, 'The Awakening of Islamic Scholars') is one of the oldest Islamic religious organizations in Indonesia. It was established in 1926 as an association of ulama, i.e., Islamic scholars and teachers, as well as of ordinary Muslims who followed strictly the Sunni orthodoxy of Islam.<sup>1)</sup> After a half-century's history, the Nahdlatul Ulama, or the NU as it is commonly abbreviated, is reported to have grown to be the largest of all Islamic religious organizations or, for that matter, of all non-



A plenary session of the 26th Congress of the Nahdlatul Ulama in Sport Hall, Semarang, June 9, 1979. Photographed by Mitsuo Nakamura.

governmental organizations in Indonesia today in terms of membership and organizational strength.<sup>2)</sup>

I had the opportunity of attending the 26th National Congress of the Nahdlatul Ulama held in the city of Semarang, the provincial capital of Central Java, for seven days from the 5th to the 11th of June, 1979. My experience with the NU prior to this occasion was not only meager but somewhat biased. I first came into contact with some NU members while I was doing anthropological field work in the Central Javanese town of Kotagede

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1) The spelling of the name of Nahdlatul Ulama in this paper follows the one employed by the organization itself. Also in this paper, a distinction made in the Arabic original between 'alim (singular) and 'ulamā' (plural)—meaning 'man of knowledge'—has been ignored, following the Indonesian convention. In other words, *ulama* is used both for singular and plural.

from 1970 to 1972.<sup>3)</sup> The NU in the town was, however, rather insignificant in its size and influence, for it was overshadowed by the Muhammadiyah, the so-called reformist rival of the NU, which dominated the religious sphere of the town. Doctrinal and organizational con-

flicts between the Nahdlatul Ulama and the Muhammadiyah colored part of the pre-War history of the town, as they did elsewhere. But these conflicts were already things of the past and the NU itself was regarded largely irrelevant by most of the Muhammadiyah members, who made up a large portion of the informants for my study. In this situation, I did not feel any disagreement with a characterization of the Nahdlatul Ulama widespread among Western students of Indonesia that it was the organization of old and old-fashioned ulama in the countryside of Java who were religiously traditional, intellectually unsophisticated, politically opportunistic, and culturally syncretic.<sup>4)</sup> In other words, I did not think much of the NU as a subject of study.

Yet several developments during the 1970s have since aroused my curiosity about the Nahdlatul Ulama. Politically, the NU has emerged as the boldest and most defiant critic of the New Order government.<sup>5)</sup> The NU has not only withstood the merciless onslaught of the government upon the existence of any social forces independent of it but has even developed broad criticism of the development strategy of the current regime.<sup>6)</sup> There are emerging from

2) The NU was established in 1926 as *jam'iyah diniyah Islamiyah*, or 'Islamic religious association,' and its fundamental character has not changed since. However, from the viewpoint of its relationship with government and politics, the history of the NU can be divided into five periods as follows: (a) 1926–1942, when the NU maintained a strict non-political and non-cooperative stance vis-à-vis the Dutch colonial government; (b) 1942–1945, when it was forced to cooperate with the Japanese occupation authorities; (c) 1945–1952, when it participated in the newly established republican government through the Masjumi party, in which it held the status of a special member; (d) 1952–1973, when it participated in government and politics directly and independently in its own name, i.e., the NU as a political party; and (e) 1973–present, when it relinquished its political activities to the newly formed Development Unity Party, or Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP), and re-confirmed its fundamental character as *jam'iyah diniyah*, religious association. The most recent change has been described by one of the NU leaders as the act of 'releasing' (*melepaskan*) and 'bestowing abundantly' (*melimpahkan*, *limpah* denotes overflowing of some liquid from a container) the 'practical political activities' (*aktivitas politik praktis*) of the NU to the PPP [Achmad Siddiq 1979: 7]. These expressions seem to illustrate aptly the change as viewed by the NU leadership.

3) Nakamura [1972] gives an overview of the scope of this field work. For a history of social and religious developments in the town from the turn of the century up to the early 1970s, with a particular focus on the growth of the Muhammadiyah, see Nakamura [1976; 1977].

4) This picture of the NU, first presented and developed by Harry Benda and Clifford Geertz in the 1950s [Benda 1958; Geertz 1960a; 1960b], was unchallenged for the next two decades and even elaborated into a particular type in the political constellation of modern Indonesia by Feith and Castles [1970].

among the NU circles a number of young intellectuals who are seeking alternative

- 5) The earliest documentation of this phenomenon seems to have been made by Ken Ward when he observed the 1971 general elections in East Java [Ward 1974]. On the basis of Ward's report and also of his own earlier work [Anderson 1970] in which the *pondok-pesantren*, the traditional rural Islamic boarding school, was viewed as the generator of revolutionary youths for the Indonesian independence struggle of 1945-1949, Ben Anderson warns of prejudice often found in the conventional secular view of the Nahdlatul Ulama as 'politically opportunist' [Anderson 1977: 23-24]. For descriptions of the struggles of the NU and the PPP in and around the 1971 and 1977 elections, see Liddle [1978], May [1978], and McDonald [1980].
- 6) Various parts of the "Basic Program for the Development of the Nahdlatul Ulama, 1979-1983" adopted by this NU Congress in Semarang attest to this [Nahdlatul Ulama 1979b]. A more politically explicit criticism of the government can be found in the statement of the Development Unity Party presented to the MPR (Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat, or People's Consultative Assembly) on March 15, 1978, by one of its leaders, H.A. Chaild Mawardi, who is also a member of the current Central Executive Council of the Nahdlatul Ulama. Criticizing the presidential speech on the government's performance, 1973-1977, Chalid Mawardi advocated the following six points: (1) change the economic structure from one which is colonial and dependent on international markets into one that is more independent and based on self-reliance; (2) change dependence of economy on imported capital, technology, and management to reliance on domestic human resources; (3) first priorities should be given to the basic needs of food, clothing, housing, education, and health; (4) the bottom 40% of the population must receive special attention; (5) a nation-wide full employment policy is needed; and (6) inequalities in the distribution of property ownership, trade facilities, and the availability of education must be reduced (See McDonald [1980: 247-249]).

development models inspired by Islamic social ethics.<sup>7)</sup> Young, well educated ulama and 'lay-activists' are growing as a new leadership of the NU at all levels of its organization. The stereotype of the NU as 'a gerontocratic organization of opportunistic and unsophisticated rustic ulama' seems to have become less appropriate in view of the reality of the NU today, if, indeed, it ever was justifiable.

- 7) The most articulate spokesmen for this category of young activists include Abdurrahman Wahid and Mahbub Djunaidi. The former was elected to the position of vice-secretary of the Central Religious Council, Syuriah, and the latter, to that of second chairman of the Central Executive Council, Tanfidziyah, of the Nahdlatul Ulama through the Semarang Congress. Both are popular and frequent contributors to a number of newspapers and magazines, including the most widely circulated, *KOMPAS* and *TEMPO*. Their recent writings are now conveniently compiled into booklets, Abdurrahman Wahid [1979] and Mahbub Djunaidi [1978] respectively. *WAWASAN*, a journal for intellectual discussion in search of alternative development strategies (published by the Lembaga Studi Pembangunan [LSP], Institute of Development Studies, Jakarta), should be given particular attention for the fact that its initial chief editor was Abdurrahman Wahid. Of course, search for alternative development models is not confined to the NU circles. A number of young intellectuals and social activists are emerging and cooperating with each other regardless of their diverse ideological backgrounds and formal organizational affiliations. LSP is only one example of such cooperation. The popular social science journal *PRISMA* also provides a common forum for these people. For earlier attempts by a group of young Islamic intellectuals at re-evaluating the pesantren for its potentiality in rural community development, see Dawam Rahardjo [1974a; 1974b; 1975] and Sudjoko Prasodjo *et al.* [1974].

Religiously, however, the NU's traditionalism seems to have remained intact. It proudly calls itself *ahlus sunnah wal jama'ah*, 'the people of the Sunna (the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad) and of the community,' and its members remain strict followers of the Sunni tradition. It treasures the institution of *pondok-pesantren*, the rural Islamic boarding school, where the traditional scholarship of ulama is maintained, transmitted, and regenerated.<sup>8)</sup> Hence I was puzzled by the paradox of political radicalism and religious traditionalism within the recent developments of the Nahdlatul Ulama. I was also curious about whether this paradox had anything to do with the organizational strength of the NU. So I attended the 26th Congress of the NU held in Semarang full of curiosity and hoping to learn as much as possible about the organization first-hand.

8) As far as I know, the best, though brief, exegesis of the NU tradition written for its own members is found in Achmad Siddiq [1979], an NU leader of national fame living in Jember, East Java. An 'autobiographic novel' written by Saifuddin Zuhri [1977], an NU leader from Banyumas, Central Java, and former Minister of Religion, depicts vividly the world of rural kyai and ulama and the development of the Nahdlatul Ulama from the 1930s through the post-independence period. An invaluable semi-official source book for the history of the NU is the commemorative volume dedicated to the late Wahid Hasjim, the NU leader from the late 1930s to the early 1950s, edited by Haji Aboebakar [1957]. For historical and ethnographic accounts in English of the intellectual and social organizational aspects of the pesantren tradition, see Zamakhsyari [1980; 1981].

The experience I gained at the NU Congress met these expectations. Most importantly, I realized that there was only an apparent paradox in the conjunction of political radicalism and religious traditionalism within the NU. In fact, what I had seen as a paradox was illusory, caused primarily by a prejudice in my own perception that radicalism could not co-exist with traditionalism. The fact of the matter is, however, not that the NU is becoming politically radical *despite* its religious traditionalism but that it is becoming politically radical precisely *because* of its religious traditionalism. It seems, therefore, no contradiction to talk about the radical traditionalism of the Nahdlatul Ulama. The key to resolving this apparent paradox seems to lie in an understanding of the organizational features of the NU as an Islamic religious association of the Sunni tradition.

I would like to expand this point in the rest of my paper as follows: in Section II, which immediately follows, I shall present an account of my personal observation of the NU Congress; in Section III, I shall develop, on the basis of my observations, some points of analysis and interpretation of what I call the radical traditionalism of the NU; and finally, in Section IV, I shall conclude this paper with a few remarks on the study of religion and politics.

## II Field Observation: The Militancy of Local Delegates

I spent most of the seven-day period of the NU Congress attending and observing its plenary sessions and commission meetings and I mingled with local delegates as much as possible by eating, talking, staying, sleeping, bathing, and commuting to and from the Congress with them in the same accommodation and facilities provided by the Congress organizers.<sup>9)</sup> I learned so many new things within that very short period of seven days that it is still difficult for me to present a comprehensive picture of what took place at the Congress.<sup>10)</sup>

Certainly, this NU Congress was conspicuous for one feature, that is, the militancy on the floor of the local delegates vis-à-vis the central leadership. As far as I know, all reports on the Congress in the Indonesian mass media unflinchingly mentioned this fact.<sup>11)</sup> It seemed to me, then, that the appreciation

of the significance of this phenomenon of local militancy might lead us to an understanding of the Congress and of

9) The Congress was held in the Sport Hall of the Province of Central Java (GOR, Gedung Olah Raga Propinsi Jawa Tengah) in the city of Semarang, gathering together about 4,500 delegates from 343 branches of the Nahdlatul Ulama in all provinces of Indonesia (except Timor Timur). The delegates were accommodated in numerous middle to low class hotels and lodging houses (*losmen*) in the city, from where they were transported to GOR every day by a large number of micro-buses hired by the Congress Organizing Committee. A common kitchen (*dapur umum*) was set up, under a huge tent raised next to the GOR building, to serve meals to the delegates three times a day.

10) The agenda of the NU Congress were as follows: (a) first day: registration and provincial meetings; (b) second day: plenary sessions for opening ceremony and the reports of the Central Executive Council; (c) third and fourth days: plenary sessions for the speeches of the local delegates and the replies from the Central Executive Council; (d) fifth and sixth days: commissions and committee meetings; (e) seventh day: plenary sessions for the adoption of resolutions and statements, the election of new leadership, and closing ceremony. The scope of the debates in the NU Congress can be appreciated by looking at the discussion material prepared for the participants in the Congress, *Rancangan Materi Mukhtamar N.U. Ke-XXVI* [Nahdlatul Ulama 1979a], which contained "The Rules for the Order of the Congress (*Peraturan Tata Tertib Mukhtamar*)," "Draft Constitution of the Nahdlatul Ulama (*Rancangan Anggaran Dasar Nahdlatul Ulama*)," "Basic Program for the Development of the Nahdlatul Ulama, 1979-1983 (*Program Dasar Pengembangan Nahdlatul Ulama, 1979-1983*)," "Draft Resolutions and Statements to be adopted by the 26th Congress of the Nahdlatul Ulama (*Rancangan Pernyataan/Sikap Nahdlatul Ulama yang diputuskan Mukhtamar N.U. Ke-XXVI*)" and some other items. The official version of the "Basic Program..." amended and adopted by the Congress, is now available separately [Nahdlatul Ulama 1979b].

11) Of the Indonesian mass media which covered this NU Congress in Semarang, *SUARA MERDEKA*, a local daily of Semarang, and *TEMPO*, a weekly magazine in Jakarta, seem to have produced the most detailed reportage of the Congress. Other newspapers in Jakarta, such as *KOMPAS*, *SINAR HARAPAN*, and Islamic *PELITA*, and nationalist *MERDEKA*, also devoted many articles to it. For the official report of the Congress by the Nahdlatul Ulama itself, see its organ, *RISALAH NAHDLATUL ULAMA*.

the NU as a whole. Therefore, I have focussed on this aspect of the Congress, at the expense of others, in presenting a brief account of my observations in this section.<sup>12)</sup>

#### 1. The Reports of the Central Executive Council

The first half of the seven-day Congress was spent in what may be termed a grand dialogue between the Central Executive Council and the local delegates of the NU in discussing the former's performance since the last National Congress held in Surabaya eight years earlier. First, the Congress heard the 'reports of responsibility' (*laporan pertanggung-jawaban*) presented by Idham Chalid, the general chairman, and Achmad Sjaichu, a chairman of the Central Executive Council, Tanfidziyah.<sup>13)</sup> They were followed by the presentation of responses and views from the local delegates, in geographic order with a set limit of time for each speaker. Then the Central Executive

Council took its turn again and replied to the local delegates. Finally, the Congress made a decision on whether to accept the reports of the Central Executive Council.

In reviewing the past performance of the Central Executive Council, Idham Chalid covered general, external, and political aspects, while Achmad Sjaichu covered internal, organizational, and business aspects. In their respective reports, both Idham Chalid and Achmad Sjaichu emphasized the fact that the period of eight years since the last Congress had been full of challenges, difficulties, and even threats to the very existence of the NU. There had been a major modification in the organization, i.e., the relinquishment of its political activities to the newly formed Development Unity Party, or PPP, and the reaffirmation of its status as a religious association. This change had caused a lot of sadness, disappointment, and even anger from within and without the organization. But, in the end, the NU had survived the ordeal. "Alhamdulillah, we thank God, the Compassionate," exclaimed Idham Chalid, "that we have survived and we have returned to the status of the NU prior to 1952 in original quality but in much larger quantities (*dalam kualitas yang asli tetapi dalam kuantitas yang lebih besar*). We are to consolidate ourselves through this Congress. After the phase of consolidation, we will be able to hope for continuous growth in the future" [Idham Chalid 1979].

12) The reader should, therefore, be warned of the limitations of this paper. It only deals with one aspect of the Congress, which certainly had many other aspects not reported in this paper. Furthermore, I must make it clear that I still lack first-hand information on the NU in local social contexts, an aspect which has to be studied in any serious attempt at understanding the NU at its grass-roots. A full-scale research of the NU is yet to be done.

13) The report by Idham Chalid is available in mimeograph, *Pidato Ketua Umum PB Nahdlatul Ulama K.H. Dr. Idham Chalid pada Muk-tamar NU Ke-XXVI di Semarang*. For the report by Achmad Sjaichu, no printed version was distributed and I have relied on my own field notes.

## 2. The Response of the Local Delegates

To an outside observer like myself, the reports by the two leaders sounded reasonable. Therefore, I was surprised to observe that their reports were severely criticized by the overwhelming majority of the local delegates who occupied the podium for the following two full days to present their responses. Altogether, about 40 speakers presented the views of the local branches. Some common points of criticism which emerged from their speeches included the following: (a) the Central Executive Council was not active in representing and defending local branches which had been faced with extreme pressures from the outside, pressures which in some cases had led to the point of physical extinction, especially during the two general election periods of 1971 and 1977; (b) the Central Executive Council was secretive about its own activities vis-à-vis the local branches, especially with regard to aid and grants received from Muslim countries overseas; and (c) the format of the reports of the Central Executive Council was inadequate in that the program adopted at the 25th Surabaya Congress was not used to evaluate its performance.

Besides these points of substance, more characteristic still was the tone of outright defiance of the authority of the Central Executive Council expressed in the speeches of a number of the local delegates. They asserted that the NU's survival owed very little to the Central Executive Council but a great deal to the efforts of the local branches. The local branches

were entitled to exercise their sovereignty: "If there are no local branches, the central leadership will not exist (*Kalau tidak ada cabang, tidak akan ada PB* [Pengurus Besar, lit. Big Management])"—a delegate from Jakarta shouted in the face of the Central Executive Council. "The sovereignty of the local branches (*kedaulatan cabang*) should be the order of the day"—many other delegates echoed the slogan of the Jakarta delegate. Some of them asserted determinedly: "We should make a clean sweep of those irresponsible and irresponsible elements when we have the election of a new leadership in this Congress." "Rats called politicians (*tikus-tikus yang disebut politikus*) must get out of the NU leadership from now on," a delegate from West Sumatra boldly proclaimed, and received sympathetic applause from many of his colleagues on the floor.

All but a few speakers expressed some degree of criticism of the Central Executive Council. Speakers from East, West and Central Java, the areas providing the largest numbers of delegates, were the most vocal in denouncing the performance of the Central Executive Council over the past eight years.<sup>14)</sup> They simply and clearly stated that they were not able to accept the reports of the Central Executive Council: *tidak dapat menerima sama sekali laporan pertanggung-jawaban PB*.

## 3. The Reply of the Central Executive Council

When the speeches by the local delegates were finally over, towards the end

of the fourth day, it was then the turn of Idham Chalid and Achmad Sjaichu to respond to these storms of criticism. In giving their replies, the two leaders again spoke separately. And in responding to the local delegates' criticisms, they performed remarkably differently.

Idham Chalid did not attempt to defend himself or the Central Executive Council. Instead, he completely surrendered to the critics. He stated that he was responsible for all the mistakes the Central Executive Council had committed and he could only beg for the forgiveness of the delegates (*minta ma'af sebesar-besarnya*). He praised the militancy of the local delegates in criticizing the central leadership. He said that he was very proud to see that democracy was vigorously alive in the NU, a genuine kind of democracy which would be hard to find anywhere else in Indonesia. In concluding his reply, he expressed the hope that the new leadership would learn from the old leadership's mistakes, in-

cluding his own, and be able to avoid any repetition of similar errors. I felt as if I had been watching a show of magic, for Idham Chalid's straightforward 'forgive me' (*minta ma'af*) speech received long enthusiastic applause from the floor, and thus his authority was obviously re-established.

In contrast, Achmad Sjaichu tried to fight back against the criticisms of the local delegates by explaining in detail particular actions of the Central Executive Council. For example, he said that the scholarship aid from Saudi Arabia had indeed arrived and had already been distributed to a number of pesantren which met the academic standards and qualifications specified by the donor; however, a public announcement about this scholarship program had not been made for fear of an indiscriminate rush of applications from a large number of unqualified pesantren.<sup>15)</sup> When Achmad Sjaichu ended his speech of self-defence,

14) Although the delegates from East, West, and Central Java were by far the most numerous, one feature of this Congress which surprised me was that the NU branches are now well spread throughout all parts of the country. They are no longer confined to the islands of Java and Madura, the traditional bases of the NU. A large number of delegates came to this NU Congress from Aceh, North, South, and West Sumatra, South Kalimantan, South and Central Sulawesi, and Eastern Indonesia. The conventional view still held by many Western observers that there is an inherent affinity between the NU and certain cultural traits of the Javanese, Madurese, and Sundanese seems now to require critical re-examination.

15) As one of the criteria for assessing the qualifications of a pesantren for the scholarship program, Achmad Sjaichu mentions the level of teaching in Arabic. Certainly the command of Arabic seems to be a basic prerequisite for a student to be considered eligible for advanced study in the institutions of higher learning in the Middle East, and the local delegates agreed with that. However, many of them seem to have been disturbed by the arbitrariness of the way in which a student's level of competence in Arabic was equated with the size or the fame of the pesantren to which the student belonged. Many delegates obviously wanted to have a more open competition and to give equal chances and encouragement to all students aspiring to study in the Middle East.



only weak applause was heard.<sup>16)</sup>

#### 4. The Election of the New Leadership

The contrast between Idham Chalid and Achmad Sjaichu in terms of their respective performance in response to the criticisms from the local delegates during the first half of the Congress was very obvious and seemed to forecast their later performance in the election of the new leadership which became the climax of the second half of the Congress. In the election held on the seventh and last day of the Congress, those two leaders competed for the position of general chairman of the Central Executive Council, Tanfidziyah. Idham Chalid, who had begged for the forgiveness of the local delegates, defeated Achmad Sjaichu by a two to one majority in popular ballots from the floor. Achmad Sjaichu thereafter completely withdrew from the national leadership of the NU.

### III Analysis and Interpretation of Field Information

In this section, I would like to delineate, first of all, some structural features of the NU organization as background

16) The reports by the Central Executive Council were finally accepted by the floor with a 'footnote' (*catatan kaki*) by the chairman of the plenary session who stated that the reports themselves were far from perfect; that all criticisms and suggestions for improvements should be added to the reports; and that the new leadership should heed the criticisms presented by the local delegates. With this critical 'footnote,' the reports were approved by voice vote.

information for the interpretation of my field observation presented in the previous section. Then I shall proceed to analyze and interpret my field information in three sub-sections as follows: (a) the significance of the reports by the Central Executive Council; (b) 'central' vs. 'local' in the NU organization; and (c) the implications of personal rivalry between Idham Chalid and Achmad Sjaichu and the outcome of their electoral contest. Finally, I shall conclude this section with a general discussion of what I call the radical traditionalism of the Nahdlatul Ulama.

#### 1. The Structural Features of the NU Organization

In the Introduction to this paper I stated that the Nahdlatul Ulama adheres to the orthodoxy of Sunni which, according to its followers, goes back to the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad himself and has been transmitted through unbroken chains of ulama to this day (*sanad*). In the NU circles the ulama are regarded and respected as the most learned and most reliable interpreters of the Qur'ān, the Message of God, and of the Sunna, the records of the deeds and words of the Prophet Muhammad. The ulama are the most authentic guides for the faithful to follow in pursuing a religiously righteous way of life. The ulama are, therefore, called the primary pillar, *tiang utama*, of the community of the faithful, *ummat* [Achmad Siddiq 1979: 13].

The ulama are thus the spiritual leaders

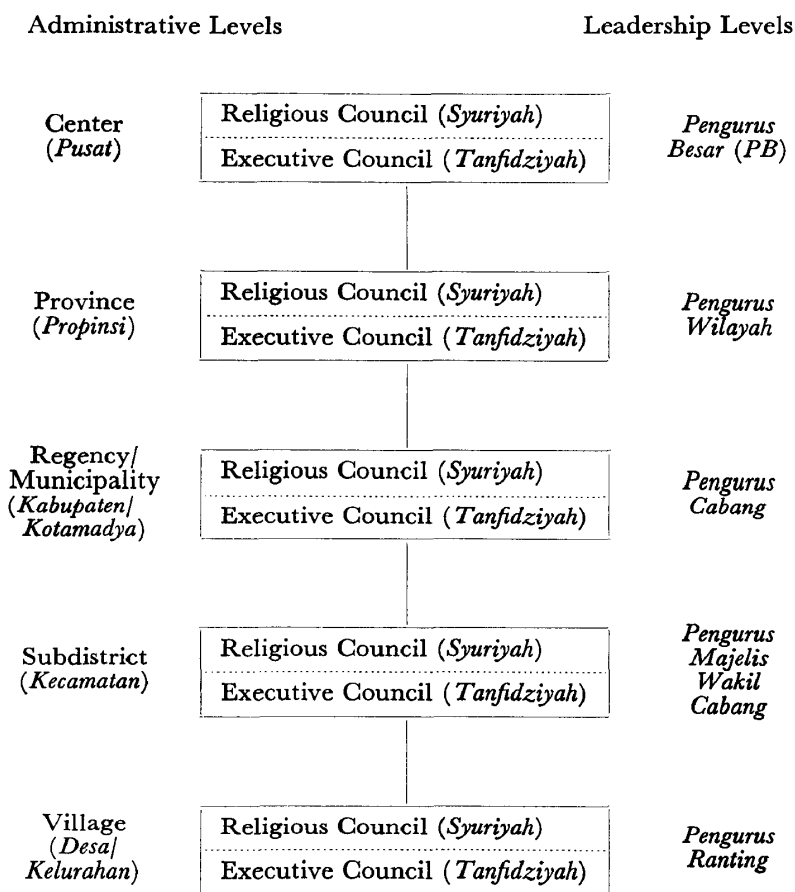
of the faithful. But they are not clergymen, for Islam does not know ecclesiastical orders. The social standing of an ulama depends on the respect he commands from his local community as well as on the consensual recognition he receives from among a wide network of his ulama colleagues. He is, therefore, himself the ultimate unit of authority and autonomy. The NU is essentially a horizontal confederation or collegial alliance of such autonomous ulama, not a monolithic, centralized hierarchy.

The organizational structure of the Nahdlatul Ulama seems to embody well those two aspects of the Sunni tradition described above, i.e., (a) the spiritual leadership of the ulama vis-à-vis the community of the faithful, and (b) the collegial solidarity among the ulama. From the central to the local levels of the NU organization, the structure of the leadership at each level is characterized by the presence of the two tiers of councils, i.e., the religious council, Syuriah, and the executive council, Tanfidziah (see Fig. 1). The religious councils consist exclusively of the ulama and occupy a superior position of legislative and supervisory function over

the executive councils, which consist of both the ulama and 'lay-activists' and are in charge of day-to-day affairs. An official document of the NU defines the two councils as follows:

Syuriah is the highest leadership (*pimpinan tertinggi*) which functions to develop (*membina*), guide (*mem-bimbing*), direct (*mengarah*), and supervise (*mengawasi*) the activities of the Nahdlatul Ulama. Tanfidziah is the daily executor (*pelaksana sehari-hari*) [Nahdlatul Ulama 1979a: 17].

The principle of collegial solidarity among the ulama is reflected in the ways



Source: Nahdlatul Ulama [1979a: 17-18].

Fig. 1 Leadership Structure of the Nahdlatul Ulama

by which the relationships among various levels of the religious councils are regulated. A decision taken by the religious council of a higher level in the NU organization does not automatically bind lower-level religious councils or individual ulama. In order to be effective, the decision must be persuasive and accepted voluntarily and wholeheartedly. Otherwise, lower-level religious councils and individual ulama may exercise the right to reserve their decision or the right to disagree and request further discussion, for there are no human beings, including the most learned and revered ulama, who can assume the position of ultimate authority on truth: that position is reserved only for God.

In this organizational structure it may also happen that an ulama of a local religious council is much higher in authority and prestige than a 'lay-activist' member of the Central Executive Council. In this case the latter must pay due respect to what the local ulama has to say and accommodate this properly in the organizational action.

The situation described above might look like a lack of discipline or an organization infested by factionalism. Indeed, to the secular observer, the internal politics of the NU often appear to be hopelessly disorganized and perennially ridden by factional strife. However, when viewed in reference to the religious values underlying the organizational structure of the NU, apparent disagreements within the organization present themselves not so much as a pathological state but rather as a healthy

state of the organization. With regard to this point, the ulama themselves often quote a *hadith*, a record of the Prophet's sayings, that disagreement among the ulama is the blessing of God for mankind. This being the case, therefore, when a consensus is reached on a particular issue among the ulama its morally binding force among the ulama, as well as over the community of the faithful, is extremely strong.<sup>17)</sup>

#### 2a. The Significance of the Reports of the Central Executive Council

In the light of the basic organization of the Nahdlatul Ulama described above, it seems possible now to appreciate better the significance of the major thrust of the reports delivered by Idham Chalid and Achmad Sjaichu. Both acknowledged that there had been many attempts to alter the fundamental character of the Nahdlatul Ulama. However, it had withstood these threats and dangers, and succeeded in adhering to its original character, the Islamic association of the Sunni tradition. That seemed to be the reason why Idham Chalid, as mentioned above, thanked God for the successful survival of the NU and implied that the direction which the NU had taken since its last Congress was basically correct.<sup>18)</sup>

#### 2b. 'Central' vs. 'Local' in the Nahdlatul Ulama

From the preceding analysis of the structural features of the NU organization, it should also be clear by now that the locational centrality of the Executive

Council situated in Jakarta does not necessarily mean that it has more power and higher authority vis-à-vis local

- 17) I attended a session of the Syuriah meeting held during the Congress in the huge prayer hall of the Baiturrahman Mosque, next to the GOR building. The meeting was carried on in a serious but informal manner. There was no furniture at all except for one simple low desk in front of the chairman and the secretary, around whom the participants sat directly on the carpeted floor in irregular concentric circles. There was no seating order except that the Central Syuriah members and local Syuriah delegates occupied the inner rings while ordinary delegates, observers and onlookers like myself sat in the outer rings. The chairman seemed to be making a conscious effort to canvass and exhaust different views among the participant ulama on the subject under discussion. Debate went on endlessly around some issues. It sounded as if, on average, one-third of the oral presentation by a speaker was made in Arabic, apparently direct quotations from the Qur'ān, the Hadith or a commentary, without being translated into Indonesian. Since I do not have a command of Arabic, I was not quite certain of what exactly was being discussed in the session. But it seemed to me that the meeting was, more often than not, agreeing to disagree over a number of issues and then deciding how to deal with the disagreements. Certainly there were a number of renowned and revered senior ulama in this Syuriah session as well as in other meetings of the Congress I observed. However, their seniority or 'charisma' did not at all stifle free and lively discussions. The absolute obedience of the *santri* (student) to the *kyai* (teacher), supposedly an ethos of the pesantren, did not seem to apply to the debate in the Syuriah or in any other meetings of the NU Congress. A statement made by Idham Chalid in the beginning of his report that "the NU had been pursuing its goals without being dictated to by anyone (*tampa dikomando*), internally or externally" sounded truthful to me. In observing the sessions of the NU Congress, I was sometimes irritated by an excess democracy rather than by any lack of it. The NU's way of deliberation brought home to me the true meaning of *musyawarah mufakat* (deliberation for consensus), which is often mistaken as compromise for convenience.

branches in the social geography of the Nahdlatul Ulama. Since the domiciles of nationally renowned ulama have been mostly in the pesantren of rural areas, often located deliberately remote from urban centers, it is a matter of natural order that 'local' usually connotes a higher place of esteem and authority than 'central' in the NU circles.<sup>19)</sup>

The militancy of the local delegates displayed in the NU Congress, therefore, should not be taken as a 'rebellion of local rank and files against the Central Executive Council.' That might be an appropriate picture for a modern bureaucratic organization in which the principles of centrality and hierarchy coincide, but not for the NU, with an organization based upon the collegial solidarity of autonomous ulama. The claim of a local delegate, which I mentioned in the previous section, that the existence of the Central Executive Council depended

- 18) I did not hear a single objection to the direction being taken since the Surabaya Congress, that is the relinquishing of political activities to the PPP and the reaffirmation of the NU's status as a religious association. The suggestion of the Vice President of the Republic, Adam Malik, made in his opening address to the Congress, that "the NU people do not need to be non-political (*tidak usah perlu tidak ber-politik*)," was lightheartedly appreciated but did not become a focus of serious discussion. Besides Adam Malik, a number of generals and government dignitaries came to address the Congress. The response from the floor was generally polite and cordial, but sometimes refreshingly open.
- 19) Ken Ward [1974: 94-95] and Ben Anderson [1977: 24] discuss this phenomenon from a slightly different angle than mine.

largely on the local branches but not vice versa, is not mere rhetoric but rather an accurate presentation of the structural features of the NU organization. Thus, beneath the surface phenomenon of the militancy of local delegates which I observed in the Congress, there seems to be the fundamental autonomy of the local branches of the NU under the leadership of the ulama.

2c. Idham Chalid vs. Achmad Sjaichu

This fundamental autonomy of the ulama and the concomitant militancy of the local branches in the NU organization vis-à-vis its Central Executive Council seems to have played a decisive role in shaping the outcome of an electoral contest between the two Council members, Idham Chalid and Achmad Sjaichu. I must admit that my interpretation of the proceedings is almost entirely based upon my own observation of the overt events and actions on the floor of the Congress. I must, therefore, have missed many events and actions concerning the electoral contest taking place behind the scenes. However, so far as observed facts are concerned, it seems that the difference in the two leaders' response to the criticisms from the local delegates determined the outcome of the election.

My impression is that Idham Chalid's total surrender to the criticisms of the local delegates was seen by many of them as his acknowledgment of the distinguishing feature of the NU organization, the sovereignty of the local branches and the ultimate autonomy of the ulama. Further-

more, it seems that many delegates felt it to be religiously commendable to forgive a man and give him another chance when he had honestly admitted and apologized for his mistakes, especially when the man is of obvious high caliber like Idham Chalid.

In contrast, Achmad Sjaichu's self-defence, technically flawless and well argued if he had been a secular politician, sounded in fact tremendously arrogant, showing disrespect towards the local ulama and lack of appreciation of the primary role the local branches played in the NU organization. It is my impression that Idham Chalid appeared to speak as a representative of the central service functionaries, while Achmad Sjaichu spoke as a representative of the central power holders. Idham Chalid affirmed the traditional ethos of the NU by expressing due respect towards the local ulama whereas Achmad Sjaichu defied the tradition and attempted to raise himself to the position of a supreme commander.<sup>20)</sup>

More generally, it can be observed that the fame of a leader in secular politics does not necessarily entail respect or trust in the NU circles. Rather, as indicated

20) A common image of Achmad Sjaichu outside the NU circles is that he is more 'modern,' 'progressive' and closer to the 'reformists' like the Muhammadiyah than to the mainstream of the NU, and that he has strong ties with the international Muslim world, especially with the Middle Eastern countries. My observation of his performance in the Congress leads me to question the appropriateness of this characterization.

by the statement of the West Sumatran delegate quoted in the previous section equating politicians with 'rats,' there seems to be a genuine distrust of secular politicians in the NU. An NU leader must, therefore, prove his leadership qualities primarily in religious terms whether he is sitting in the Religious or Executive Council.

### 3. The Radical Traditionalism of the NU

Let me conclude this section by discussing what I have called the radical traditionalism of the Nahdlatul Ulama. First of all, it is my observation that the NU is organizationally radical in the original sense of the term, i.e., 'of or pertaining to a root or to roots; fundamental, primary' (Webster). As we have seen above, the NU organization is structured on the basis of the principle of autonomy and independence of its primary component units, the ulama. The NU is not derivative of any other organizations. It stands on its own terms. *Watak mandiri*, the character of autonomy and independence, which constitutes the ethos of the pesantren, according to Abdurrahman Wahid, seems to run through the organization of the Nahdlatul Ulama as well.<sup>21)</sup>

21) On the concept of *watak mandiri*, see the important paper entitled, *Pesantren dan pengembangan watak mandiri* (Pesantren and the development of the character of autonomy), presented by Abdurrahman Wahid to the Second National Congress of the Indonesian Association for the Advancement of the Social Sciences (HIPIIS) held in Manado, North Sulawesi, November 1977 (now included in Abdurrahman Wahid [1979]).

Secondly, there seems no denying that the NU has displayed an increasingly radical stance in politics in recent years: radical in the sense of broad, open, fundamental criticisms of the status quo. This recent radicalization of the NU makes a stark contrast to its 'opportunistic' past. Has the NU changed its nature? It seems not. Rather, the basic religious nature of the NU remains constant. What has changed is its expression in the field of politics in response to national political developments. What concerns the NU all the time is whether it is striving to follow the Syari'at, i.e., the Way of God or the religiously righteous way of life, as a group of individuals and as a collectivity of the community of the faithful, the ummat.

In pursuing this goal, the NU works directly from within the ummat. The NU is committed to the well-being of the community of the faithful, and seeks divine guidance in the Qur'ān and the Sunna, as they are interpreted by the ulama, in order to find appropriate ways for the faithful to behave in response to changing external situations. In so doing, the ulama know no other authorities than God Himself. The ulama cannot be dictated to by the temporal political authorities. The ulama are independent of the 'establishment,' sometimes to the extent of open defiance. This gives a feature of fundamental 'people-ness' (*kerakyatan*), a sort of populism, to the NU. If the NU sees an external situation moving in the same direction as it is heading, it will take an adaptive or

'opportunistic' stance vis-à-vis the external situation. Equally, if it sees the external environment moving in a direction contrary to its own, it will become radically critical of the external environment. The NU's stance can thus be situationally selective. At present, it is undoubtedly entering a radical phase. Yet, in both phases, the religious ideal, the Syari'at, remains fundamental for the NU.<sup>22)</sup>

Thirdly, the NU is traditional in one vital area of religious life, the transmission of religious values through scholarship and education. It is traditional in the true sense of the word, i.e., 'adhering to the act of transmitting something from generation to generation' (Webster). This characteristic of the NU is self-evident and does not seem to require any further elaboration.<sup>23)</sup> One point, however, to be remarked here is the fact that the NU's traditionalism in the area of religious scholarship and education does not necessarily mean that the content of what is being learned and transmitted is traditional in the sense of being mere blind repetition of past things. Instead, what is learned and transmitted is an ideal system

to which individuals must adapt themselves and after which social reality must be remolded. The mode of transmission may be traditional but what is transmitted is radical. I believe that this is one of the reasons why the NU's religious traditionalism does not hinder but rather enhances its organizational radicalism and induces its politically radical stance in response to certain situations.

The relationships among the three aspects of the NU, i.e., organizational radicalism, political situationalism, and religious traditionalism, can be understood, in broad outlines, as follows: (a) the NU's adherence to the Sunni tradition buttresses the autonomy of the ulama and sanctions the institutionalization of this tradition in the structural features of the NU organization, as we have seen; (b) the religious traditionalism enhances its organizational radicalism and makes it behave in a situationally selective way, i.e., adaptive or radical, vis-à-vis its external political environment; and (c) in a politically adverse situation, its organizational radicalism induces the emergence of its role as articulator of political grievances of the underprivileged masses for, in the NU's self-perception, it has a religious obligation to speak up for the well-being of the people, i.e., the ummat. Thus, it seems quite understandable that the NU with its religious traditionalism is now taking a radical stance vis-à-vis the current political environment. Hence my notion of the radical traditionalism of the Nahdlatul Ulama is derived.

22) It seems necessary to take a fresh look at the history of the NU from the viewpoint of the NU's self-perception. For this, another recent work of Saifuddin Zuhri may provide a useful framework [Saifuddin Zuhri 1979].

23) Since my knowledge of traditional Islamic scholarship is very limited, I am incapable of appreciating whether there are any new developments which might challenge this tradition from within the NU circles. Even if there are any, my feeling is that they are more likely to be advanced in the name of tradition rather than in the name of reform. See Zamakhsyari [1981] on this matter.

**IV Concluding Remarks:  
The Study of Religion  
and Politics**

Admittedly, the ethnography for this paper is sketchy and the theoretical argument cryptic.<sup>24)</sup> Yet I feel that the first-hand observation I made of the Nahdlatul Ulama in action has enlightened me about at least one important point pertaining to the relationship between religion and politics in Indonesia today. When viewed from a secular viewpoint, the performance of the NU in Indonesian politics and the internal politics of the NU itself looks very puzzling: the aspects of radicalism and traditionalism in the NU appear mutually contradictory. However, when we take seriously the view that religion is supreme in values as well as in institutional devices of the NU organization, that is, the view of the NU member himself, the radicalism and traditionalism of the NU present themselves as the two sides of the same coin.

As an anthropologist, especially as an anthropologist working in Indonesia,

24) My effort to understand the NU, and to arrive at a more balanced perspective of Islam in Indonesia, has barely begun. I am aware that the present paper is too narrow in scope to do justice to the NU in its entirety and too simplistic in analysis to reveal the complexity of its dynamics. It is my sincere hope that my colleagues, especially those who are well qualified in Islamic studies, will pay serious attention to the study of the NU of Indonesia, a vital Islamic movement in the contemporary Muslim world. I will be very happy if my present effort stimulates their intellectual appetite.

I have long been accustomed to placing religion and politics on the same plane. This practice is, however, not only an act of disrespect to the faith of the individual whom we study but also a faulty research strategy, for, by so doing, we arbitrarily delimit the scope of our conceptualization, keeping it unrealistically underdeveloped and undifferentiated. Instead, we need a new, more sophisticated paradigm for the study of religion and politics in which the variable of religion is given a more distinctively autonomous place than has hitherto been the case. Religion cannot and should not be reduced to politics; nor, perhaps, to culture.

More generally, it seems increasingly obvious that neither political nor cultural reductionism is capable of accounting satisfactorily for the recent resurgence of religious consciousness and devotion in the Islamic world as well as in the rest of the world. It seems that the students engaged in the study of religion and politics, including anthropologists, are now faced with the intellectual and existential challenge of this new phenomenon. A serious rethinking of our conceptual framework is called for if we are to respond to this challenge. This paper, I hope, may be regarded as a small contribution, in my own terms, to this task of reappraisal.<sup>25)</sup>

25) For more on this point from different angles, see Nakamura [1980a; 1980b].



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