

Interreligious Coexistence and the State: The Problem of the Use of the Word *Kāfir* in Indonesia¹

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Abstract

One of the problems of a nation state is how to address religious minorities, because such addresses often imply negative images of “others.” To that end, Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, decided in the 2019 annual conference that the term *kāfir* (Arabic for “nonbeliever”) should not be used to denote non-Muslim Indonesian citizens in the public space. The subsequent debate on the matter highlights the relationship between Islam and the nation state: while nobody had questioned the equality of all citizens, the decision needed to be justified from a religious point of view. The implementation of such a decision in other Muslim-majority nation states may lead to followers of different religions coexisting together.

Introduction

If one considers the issue of coexistence among believers of different religions, one problem is how to address the believers of other religions because such terms of address often imply negative images of “others.” “Infidels” and “pagans” are among the words often used in English to mean “non-believers,” but it is not appropriate to use them in contemporary society because of their negative connotations. In Islam, the word *kāfir* (in Arabic, “non-believers”) is such a word. The use of words in daily life or in public spaces to address non-Muslims may cause a problem. In what situations can the use of such words be justified or criticized within a Muslim-majority nation-state? This article discusses the interreligious coexistence in a nation-state, focusing on the recommendation of Nahdlatul Ulama (henceforth NU), the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, not to use the word *kāfir* when addressing non-Muslims.

The Term *Kāfir* and the Problems of its Use

Kāfir is an Arabic term that originally meant “obliterating,” “covering,” or “ungrateful.” In the

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Qur'an, the term *kāfir* is used to mean “concealing God’s blessings” and “ungrateful to God.”² These days, it is used to designate “infidels,” “unbelievers,” or more generally “non-Muslims.” Since it appears many times in the Qur'an, the word is used frequently in religious sciences such as theology, Islamic jurisprudence, and others to denote “non-Muslim.” In this context, the word *kāfir* is a technical term that need not imply a sense of contempt.

However, careless use of the word in the real world can result in serious problems. For example, it was found out in early 2020 that a boy scout coach instructed the students yell “Islam yes, kafir-kafir no,” in the Timuran primary school, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. A mother of a student was surprised to learn this and protested it. The matter went viral on social media and was finally covered by national media. This has become a major issue because it is related to SARA (Suku, Agama, Ras, Antargolongan, or ethnic, religious, racial, and intergroup relations), a very delicate issue in Indonesia. The governor of Yogyakarta, Sri Sultan Hamengkubuwono X, expressed regret regarding the matter, saying, “There is no kafir in Indonesia.”³ The word *kāfir* is not deemed a neutral word, at least in contemporary Indonesian society.

The Recommendation by NU at the National Congress 2019

It is likely that the “Yogyakarta case” was covered widely by the media because the use of *kāfir* had been under debate in the previous year. It started with the decision by NU at the National Congress 2019, held from 27 February to 1 March, 2019, at Pesantren Miftahul Huda Al Azhar, the City of Banjar, West Java, where after discussions, NU issued official recommendations, one of which was on the use of the word *kāfir*, such that in the system of the nation-state and citizenship there is no term such as *kāfir* (*tidak dikenal istilah kafir*): Every citizen has the same position and rights under the Constitution.⁴ Abdul Moqsith Ghazali, the chair of the Bahtsul Masail Maudluiyyah (discussion of thematic issue) session in which the matter was discussed, said that some Kiais (Muslim religious scholars) expressed the opinion that the use of the term *kāfir* may hurt the feeling of non-Muslim residents in Indonesia. Since the use of word may contain an element of “theological violence,” Kiais recommended that the term *kāfir* not be used, and instead the words *Muwaththinun* (a loan word from Arabic meaning “citizens”) or *warga negara* (“citizens” in Indonesian) be used, indicating that their status is equal to that of Muslim citizens. This does not mean, however, that NU will erase the word *kāfir* from the Qur'an or *hadiths*; the decision applies only to non-Muslim Indonesian citizens.⁵

2 “Kāfir,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam 2nd Edition*.

3 Wijaya Kusuma, “Pembina Pramuka Ajarkan Siswa SD Yogyakarta Yel Berbau SARA, Sri Sultan: Di Indonesia Tak Ada Kafir,” Kompas.com 2020/1/14 <<https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/01/14/17442791/pembina-pramuka-ajarkan-siswa-sd-yogyakarta-yel-berbau-sara-sri-sultan-di?page=all>> (accessed 22 October 2020).

4 “Ketum PBNU Serahkan Rekomendasi Hasil Munas pada JK,” nu.or.id 2019/3/1 <<https://www.nu.or.id/post/read/103198/ketum-pbnu-serahkan-rekomendasi-hasil-munas-pada-jk>> (accessed 24 August 2020).

5 M Rosseno Aji. “5 Hasil Munas Alim Ulama NU: Soal Sebutan Kafir sampai Bisnis MLM,” Tempo.co 2019/3/2 <<https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1181081/5-hasil-munas-alim-ulama-nu-soal-sebutan-kafir-sampai>>

This kind of decision is not new to the NU. At the National Congress in 1984 in Situbondo, it was decided that there were three kinds of brotherhood in nation-states that had to be knit together: they were 1. brotherhood among believers of the same faith (*persaudaraan seiman*), 2. brotherhood among citizens (*ukhuwah wathaniyah*), and 3. brotherhood among mankind (*ukhuwah insaniyah*). The decision in this instance concerns national brotherhood.⁶ Earlier, the term *kāfir* was discussed from the perspective of theology at the NU Congress in 1930. This time, however, the discussion was from the perspective of the nation-state (Indonesia). Nahdlatul Ulama Executive Board (PBNU) chairman, Sulton Fathoni, said that after 89 years, the discussion of the term had become complete.⁷

Responses from Various Parties

The recommendation by NU prompted various groups to express their opinions on this matter. Reactions from other religious organizations (besides Islamic ones) are basically positive, or at least not negative. Gomar Gultom, the general secretary of the Association of Indonesian Churches (Persekutuan Gereja Indonesia), says, “we do not want to accuse the term *kāfir* in the Holy Scripture if there is such a word in it. However, in a plural society, and from the perspective of true humanity, it is appropriate that we spread understanding in order to appreciate each other more.”⁸ The Supreme Council of Indonesian Hinduism (Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia) also supports the recommendation of the NU because it strengthens the sense of unity of the nation.⁹ The Representative of Indonesian Buddhists (Perwakilan Umat Buddha Indonesia) seems uninterested in the matter, saying that it had not considered the term problematic in the first place. According to Rusli Tan, the spokesman of the organization, it is not pertinent for Buddhists to demand that others respect them, for whether they are respected or not, it is karma.¹⁰ Uung Sendana L Linggaraja, the chairman of the High Council of Indonesian Confucianism (Majelis Tinggi Agama Konghucu Indonesia) welcomed the recommendation, saying that he feels uncomfortable when he hears the word *kāfir* even after his Muslim friends explained the meaning of *kāfir*.¹¹ Thus, the organizations of various

bisnis-mlm> (accessed 22 August 2020).

6 Jabbar Ramdhani. “Penjelasan PBNU soal Rekomendasi ‘Jangan Sebut Kafir ke Non-muslim’,” *detiknews* 2019/3/2 <<https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4451174/penjelasan-pbnu-soal-rekomendasi-jangan-sebut-kafir-ke-non-muslim>> (accessed 23 August 2020).

7 Andri Saubani. “Hari Hargai Keputusan NU dan Hentikan Polemik Istilah Kafir,” *republika.co.id* 2019/3/5 <<https://republika.co.id/berita/pnvdqg409/mari-hargai-keputusan-nu-dan-hentikan-polemik-istilah-kafir>> (accessed 4 October 2020).

8 Ahmad Faiz Ibnu Sani. “Ragam Tanggapan Soal Usul NU Menghapus Istilah Kafir,” *Tempo.co* 2019/3/3 <<https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1181282/ragam-tanggapan-soal-usul-nu-menghapus-istilah-kafir>> (accessed 22 August 2020).

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 Nashih Nashrullah. “Soal Istilah Kafir, Matakini: Kurang Nyaman Mendengarnya,” *republika*.

religions basically appreciate the NU's recommendation because it facilitates the brotherhood (*persaudaraan*) among the people.

The reactions from the Muslim side varied. The Indonesian Ulama Council (Majelis Islam Indonesia, henceforth MUI) does not seem to consider this matter a major issue, calling for Muslims not to be caught up strongly in polemics. According to KH Zainut Tauhid Sa'adi, the Vice General Chairman (Wakil Ketua Umum) of the MUI, the decision of the NU must be respected because it is a result of Collective Ijtihad, based on evidence and consideration for the welfare of the people. He also said that the result of the Ijtihad at this time is within the domain of the difference of particulars (*furū'iyā*) and not that of the knowledge of the basic tenets of Islam (*uṣūl al-dīn*). Difference of opinion within the Muslim community is inevitable and must be accepted as the result of the institution of Ijtihad. It (i.e., the difference) is not forbidden, but on the contrary is encouraged.¹² Although the idea of not using the word *kāfir* in the public space seems at first glance to be the result of liberal thinking, the MUI, an organization known for anti-liberal stances, accepts the decision of the NU as the result of the interpretation of the faith.

On the other hand, the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, henceforth FPI), usually recognized as a radical Islamist group, is critical of the recommendation. Munarman, the spokesman of FPI, says that it is not pertinent to compare the concept of *kāfir* with that of citizenship. The concept of *kāfir*, according to him, was born more than one thousand years ago, before the independence of Indonesia. The word and the concept of *kāfir* do not constitute hate speech or discrimination, but is a technical word given by Allah, which means one who shuts his/her eyes to the righteousness of Islam brought to us by way of the Prophet.¹³

In addition, Fahri Hamza, the Vice Speaker of the House of Representatives (wakil ketua DPR), says that as the word *kāfir* is from the Qur'an, it is not a letter of the law that can be amended. It is difficult, according to him, if Muslims feel inferior about their own faith.¹⁴ The reaction by FPI and Fahri Hamza indicates that some critics misunderstood the intention of NU and expressed their opinion as if NU had tried to change the words in the Qur'an, *hadiths*, and theological discussions.

On this matter, Yunahar Ilyas, the leader of Muhammadiyah, one of the two major

co.id 2019/3/4 <<https://republika.co.id/berita/pnungw320/soal-istilah-kafir-matakin-kurang-nyaman-mendengarnya>> (accessed 4 October 2020).

12 Ichwan/Anam. "MUI Imbau Umat Tak Berpolemik Soal Penyebutan 'Kafir'," mui.or.id 2019/3/4 <<https://mui.or.id/berita/25409/mui-imbau-umat-tak-berpolemik-soal-penyebutan-kafir/>> (accessed 22 August 2020).

13 Fikri Arigi. "FPI Kritik Cara Berpikir NU yang Usul Sebutan Kafir Dihapus," Tempo.co 2019/3/3 <<https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1181190/fpi-kritik-cara-berpikir-nu-yang-usul-sebutan-kafir-dihapus>> (accessed 22 July 2020).

14 Pebriansyah Ariefana / Bhayangkara, Chyntia Sami. "Pro Kontra Penghapusan Panggilan Kafir untuk Non Muslim," suara.com 2019/3/7 <<https://www.suara.com/news/2019/03/07/073000/pro-kontra-penghapusan-panggilan-kafir-untuk-non-muslim>> (accessed 17 July 2020).

Muslim organizations in Indonesia, says that the word *kāfir* is not to be used for non-Muslims at the level of society or nation, but it is accepted in the context of theology. Nevertheless, he continued, the Nahdlatul Ulama Executive Board must explain its intention to society to avoid misunderstandings.¹⁵

Political figures generally welcomed the decision. For example, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) says that the attitude of the NU is in harmony with theirs: The equality among citizens is the principle of the unity of Indonesia, and the NU's recommendation is its manifestation.¹⁶ The presidential election campaign team of Jokowi, the incumbent and a candidate for re-election, states that the recommendation of the NU could decrease political tensions with the election closing in because people often called others *kāfirs*. Maman Imanulhaq, the director of his campaign team, says that there is no second-class citizen regardless of religion.¹⁷ At that time, the campaign for the presidential election was going on, and different parties attacked each other. Moreover, the chaos of the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial campaign, in which many Muslims urged people not to vote for Ahok, an ethnic Chinese Christian candidate, saying “tolak pemimpin kafir” (*reject the kāfir leader*), was still fresh in people's minds.¹⁸ Thus, the recommendation by the NU was expected to mitigate political chaos.

An article by Azis Anwar Fachrudin, a staff member of the Center for Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies, Gajah Mada University, seems to represent the opinion of Muslim intellectuals with liberal views. According to him, the decision by the NU is just a confirmation of what has been practiced by nation-states, including Indonesia. He also says that although this matter appears trivial to some Muslims, the call by the NU should be taken more seriously because of the increasing importance of Islam in public discourse.¹⁹

Explanations by the NU Side

The NU side explained the intention of the recommendation in various media to justify its position. KH. Afifuddin Muhajir, a member of the team who was present at the discussion,

15 Andi Nur Aminah. “PP Muhammadiyah: Istilah Kafir Itu Lihat Konteksnya,” [republika.co.id 2019/3/3](http://republika.co.id/2019/3/3/berita/pnsusd384/pp-muhammadiyah-istilah-kafir-itu-lihat-konteksnya) <<https://republika.co.id/berita/pnsusd384/pp-muhammadiyah-istilah-kafir-itu-lihat-konteksnya>> (accessed 4 October 2020).

16 Jay Akbar. “PDIP Klaim Punya Sikap Sejalan dengan NU,” [tirto.id 2019/3/2](http://tirto.id/pdip-klaim-punya-sikap-sejalan-dengan-nu-dgLD) <<https://tirto.id/pdip-klaim-punya-sikap-sejalan-dengan-nu-dgLD>> (accessed 2020 August 2020).

17 Dewi Nurita. “Tim Jokowi Sebut Usul NU Hapus Istilah Kafir Bisa Hindari Konflik,” [Tempo.co](http://tempo.co) 2019/3/2 <<https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1181210/tim-jokowi-sebut-usul-nu-hapus-istilah-kafir-bisa-hindari-konflik>> (accessed 22 August 2020).

18 This view is shared by the media and intellectuals. An example is Wahid, Abdul. “Persepsi “Kafir” pada Muslim dan Non-Muslim: Konteks, Penggunaan, dan Komunikasi Partisipatif,” *Tuturlogi: Journal of Southeast Asian Communication*, 1 (2020), pp. 79–92.

19 Azis Anwar Fachrudin. 2019. “NU's policy on ‘kafir’: Not new, but important,” <<https://cres.ugm.ac.id/nus-policy-on-kafir-not-new-but-important/>> (accessed 26 November 2020). The article was originally published in the *Jakarta Post* on 15 March 2019.

spoke on the matter on the NU Online channel on YouTube. According to him, the discussion at the session was not whether non-Muslims in Indonesia were *kāfirs* or not, but how they should be categorized. They are not (*kāfir*) *ḥarbī*, *mu'āhad*, *musta'min*, or *dhimmī*, because such definition cannot be applied to non-Muslims in Indonesia. The question then was what to do with phrases like “you are *kāfir*” or other phrases that non-Muslims do not like. It is necessary to differentiate beliefs (*keyakinan*) from statements (*pernyataan*). If a group of people are called *kāfirs* in the Qur'an, we have to believe that they are *kāfirs*. However, if you say, “you are *kāfir*” or “he is *kāfir*,” that will create a disturbance in the middle of the plural society that our predecessors had such difficulties in building. Afifuddin Muhajir then provided a basis for his opinion in a classical text of Islam. A book of the Hanafi school of law titled “al-Qinyah” or “al-Qunyah,”²⁰ states that if a Muslim says to a Jewish or a Zoroastrian (Majusi) “hey *kāfir*” and caused pain thereby, that Muslim committed a sin and deserves to be punished.²¹ This explanation by one of the NU's influential members has two aspects. On the one hand, he justified the NU's decision from the demands of contemporary society, where the principle of the nation-state has overriding priority. On the other hand, he did not forget to quote a classical text of Islamic law, strengthening his case.²²

Another figure explaining the NU's position is Said Aqil Siradj, the chairman of the Executive Council of the NU. He appeared on the TV show *Catatan Najwa* (Record of Najwa) and talked about the recommendation regarding the word *kāfir* as well as other matters related to Islam. In the discussion, he refers to various examples of the use and non-use of word *kāfir*. For example, he says that the address “O *kāfir*” appears twice in the Qur'an, but both are in Meccan chapters. There is no such address in the Medinan chapters. When the Prophet addressed Jewish people, he used the term “*ahl al-kitāb*” or People of the Book. Said Aqil then refers to the words of the Ulama of al-Azhar, Egypt, that Christians and Muslims are the same mankind, brothers, and Egyptian citizens with the same rights and responsibilities. This system in Egypt came from Islam, by which the Prophet treated the residents of Medina equally.

Said Aqil then jokingly refers to the situation in Saudi Arabia. The traffic boards near the check points of Makkah and Madinah say, “Muslims Only” and “For Non-Muslims” so that non-Muslims do not enter holy cities by mistake. The boards do say “Muslims Only” but not “For Kafirs.” Also, in passport control, immigration officers enter information on religion as “Muslim” or “non-Muslim,” not “Muslim” or “Kafir.” In addition, people do not say, “Could

20 This book is probably *Qunyat al-Munya li tatmīm al-Ghunya* by Najm al-Dīn Abū al-Rajā Mukhtār b. Maḥmūd al-Zāhidī al-Ghazmīnī (d. 658/1260). See Prods Oktor Skjærvø. “A New Edition of the Khwarezmian Phrases in the “Qunyat al-Munya,”” *BSOAS* 54:3, 1991, pp. 496–505. The present writer has not consulted this book yet.

21 “Viral Istilah Non Muslim dan Kafir di Munas NU, Ini Penjelasan KH. Afifuddin Muhajir,” NU Online YouTube channel <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWFpBgSoAGQ>> (accessed 16 August 2020).

22 It is interesting that he quoted from the book of the Ḥanafī school rather than the Shāfi'ī school, the dominant school in Southeast Asia, though it is not particularly strange.

you come here, *kāfir*?” in daily life or “Good evening, *kāfirs*” in speech.

He also says that the decision is not intended to change the terms that God used in revelation. He also warned against the current trend in which Muslims call each other *kāfir*, referring to the book by al-Ghazali, *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa bayna al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa* (Criterion of differentiation between Islam and Zandaqa), in which the author tells people not to lightly identify a person as *kāfir*.²³

While these explanations by the NU’s leading figures are for the general public and do not get into a full-fledged discussion, it shows an important aspect: They refer to Islam rather than the cause of the nation-state.

Some Thoughts

Although various groups have expressed their opinions, there has as yet been no serious discussion of this matter; even parties that opposed the decision only expressed a feeling of discomfort. What is the reason for this?

The key to understanding the whole picture of this issue is that the recommendation by the NU applies only to Indonesian nationals. Foreign non-Muslims inside and outside Indonesia are not within the scope of the discussion, nor are the recommendations intended for Muslims in foreign countries. Thus, the discussion and final recommendations are made within the framework of the nation-state, whose key concept is NKRI (Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia/Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia). In addition, the egalitarian idea among citizens regardless of religion is the reflection of the first principle, “belief in one and only God” of Pancasila, the five principles of national ideology of Indonesia, in which multiple official religions are recognized. Both are concepts that must be defended at all costs, and even “radical” Islamist groups do not dare to question them openly.

If that is the case, it would suffice to say that the recommendation was made in consideration of the cause of a nation-state in which every citizen must be treated equally. However, explanations by NU notables were also made from the perspective of religion or theology. They referred to the Qur’an, Sunnah, and classical texts of jurisprudence as well as the treatment of non-Muslims in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the central lands of the Islamic world. Another point to bear in mind is that the recommendation by the NU may have been intended to protect fellow Muslims from slander. The term *kāfir* tends to be used by some Muslims as a word of abuse not only for non-Muslims but also for Muslims who have a different understanding of Islam. The primary examples of the latter are Shia and Ahmadiyya adherents (although Ahmadiyya is generally recognized as outside the tenets of Islam inside and outside Indonesia). The NU’s decision was made during a heated period in an election

23 “Catatan Najwa bersama Said Aqil: Said Aqil Soal Kafir (Part 2),” <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTiylZt7ecA>> (accessed 17 August 2020).

campaign for the presidency. In these times when being religious or being Islamic plays an important role not only in elections but in every aspect of social life, the decision could be received by many as an implicit call to stop using negative words when addressing “others.” Considering that the use of word *kāfir* is on the rise in the real world, the recommendation by the NU must be viewed as timely.

Concluding Remarks

The discussion above indicates at least three aspects of the relationship between religion and state in Indonesia.

First, the structure of the state is firmer than that of Islam in Indonesia. The NU justified its recommendation with reference to the concept of the modern nation-state. There was no discussion of whether the current system of the state is valid according to Islam. In other words, nobody in the discussion questioned the validity of Pancasila and NKRI. It may appear in the eyes of some people that Islam in Indonesia is totally “tamed” by the state. However, that the NU explained its position from the viewpoint of religious principle indicates that a discussion from the viewpoint of religious principles was still needed, implying that the cause of the nation-state somehow needs to be justified or cemented by religious ideas.

Second, the Indonesian case has the potential for universal application. It is true that the scope of the discussion of the use of term *kāfir* is confined within the border of the secular state. The decision of the NU does not apply to non-Muslims living outside Indonesia or those of non-Indonesian nationality. It can thus be said that this seemingly religious matter is treated as a domestic issue. The recommendation of the NU does not seem to lead people to an interreligious harmony that transcends state borders. However, if other countries follow the Indonesian (or at the present stage the NU’s) way of treating non-Muslims, that is, not referring to the believers of other religions in a negative way within their own territories, the world as a whole will be a place where people live together peacefully. This may be one of the ways to attain the goal of peaceful coexistence among believers of various faiths in today’s world, divided by the borders of nation-states.

Finally, one should point out that Sufism does not play a major role in this discussion. This might seem puzzling because Sufism has a long history of calling for coexistence among the believers of different religions. One may think that such a call would have been the prerogative of Sufis. The explanations by major members of the NU mention the custom of the Prophet Muhammad, the opinions of scholars, and customs of Muslims in daily life, but not the ideas developed by Sufis such as Jalal al-Din al-Rumi. This may be because of recent trends not only in Indonesia but also in other parts of the Islamic world that emphasize the Qur’an and *hadiths*, rather than religious sciences dealing with inner thought. Is the “territory” of Sufism dominated by the idea of the nation-state and/or the reformist ideas of

Islam after the 18th century? It does not seem so. Speaking of the interpretation of Pancasila, some Indonesian intellectuals refer to Sufi thought to justify the first principle of dealing with different religions equally. Such discussions can be seen in academic journals published by Islamic higher educational institutions such as Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN, State Islamic University), Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN, the National Islamic Institution), and Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri (STAIN, National Islamic College).²⁴ Such articles are often written by the faculties of the institutions or those who received higher education of Islam but were not trained as ulama. In addition, the motives of writing these articles seem relatively free from what one may call “religious politics.” The analysis of the opinions of such figures has the potential to reveal the opinions of Indonesians, or at least average Indonesian intellectuals, concerning inter-religious harmony in society.

24 An example of such discussions is Sulaiman. “Membaca Pancasila: Perspektif Kearifan Sufi Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmi (Reading Pancasila: from the perspective of Sufi Jalal al-Din Rumi),” *Ibda’ : Jurnal Kebudayaan Islam*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 134–148.