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Nahdlatul Ulama's Strategic Role in Shaping Indonesian Foreign Policy

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Abstract

This article analyses the strategic influence of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) on Indonesian foreign policy using constructivist theory and social identity theory as frameworks. It contends that NU's contributions are motivated by its intrinsic identity and principles, including the promotion of moderate Islam, rather than by external influences. This research utilizes the G20 Religion Forum (R20) and the ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference (IIDC) as case studies to illustrate how NU capitalizes on its religious identity and principles to support Indonesia's diplomatic objectives of promoting peace, tolerance, and international collaboration. This study emphasizes the relationship between identity formation and policy results, illustrating NU as a crucial non-state participant in Indonesia's religious diplomacy.

Keywords: Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesian Foreign Policy, Religious Diplomacy

Introduction

This article discusses the role of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Indonesia's foreign policy. NU is Indonesia's largest religious organization, and one of the largest Muslim organizations in the world, giving it vast social and political capital that it can employ to shape Indonesia's foreign policy. Indonesia's Muslim population in 2024 is 245,973,915, representing 87% of the country's total population¹. Since its establishment in 1926, NU has matured as a social and political organization. It has a vast network of Islamic boarding schools, and it has been involved in politics since day one. NU sympathizers and members have joined various government cabinets as ministers since Indonesia declared independence in 1945, with the position of Minister of Religious Affairs usually reserved for an NU representative. In the presidential election of 2019, NU held a pivotal role in mobilizing its members and sympathizers to vote for then-presidential candidate Joko Widodo². Widodo was successful, defeating his rival candidate, Prabowo Subianto.

NU has a vast network overseas that it can utilize to shape Indonesia's foreign policy. Discussing the role of NU in foreign policy also comes at the right time because, in the global political arena, religion began to gain prominence in the mid-1990s, following the end of the Cold War. The dissolution of the Soviet Union created an ideological void subsequently filled by religion as a source of inspiration in individuals' lives. Religion originated as a significant component among the fundamental social institutions that humans require. The revival of religion in the public domain is ascribed to demographic changes, urbanization, and the worldwide evolution of religion.³ Religion has emerged as a

¹ Muhamad, "Mayoritas Penduduk Indonesia Beragama Islam pada Semester I 2024", Accessed October 6, 2024, [https:// databoks.katadata.co.id/ demografi/ statistik/ 66b45dd8e5dd0/ mayoritas-penduduk-indonesia-beragama-islam-pada-semester-i-2024](https://databoks.katadata.co.id/demografi/statistik/66b45dd8e5dd0/mayoritas-penduduk-indonesia-beragama-islam-pada-semester-i-2024)

² Fatchuriza 2020: p. 20.

³ Thomas 2005:, p. 94.

significant social and political influence in contemporary society, and will continue to hold this role into the future.

Global shifts resulting in heightened religiosity create significant opportunities for religion to support a nation's foreign policy. Religion can reinforce group identity and influence foreign policy. Examples include German Catholics advocating for state recognition of Catholic Croatia's separation from Yugoslavia, Saudi Arabia's cultural diplomacy promoting traditional Islam, and Iran's support for sectarian movements in Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq.⁴

The United States (US) is one of the nations that has started to incorporate religion into its foreign policy agenda. The 9/11 attacks in 2001, executed by non-state terrorist organizations, prompted the US administration to reevaluate its diplomatic approach to religious matters. Since then, the US has advocated for religious moderation and zero tolerance for terrorism. Nonetheless, religious diplomacy is significant in broader matters, including health, education, and climate change.⁵

Simultaneously, the Republic of Indonesia, as the largest Muslim nation globally, incorporates religion as a source of inspiration in its foreign policy agenda. Islam, as the country's predominant faith, significantly influences this goal. Indonesia portrays itself as the nucleus of the tranquil Islamic world. This is influenced by the intricate interplay of internal and international politics following 9/11.⁶ Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who was president from 2004 to 2014, articulated that Indonesia should promote Islam's active participation in globalization and modernization while fostering collaboration with non-Muslims to combat terrorism.⁷ Incorporating these elements not only portrays Islam as a religion of peace but also demonstrates that it is a religion of progress.⁸

⁴ Thomas 2010: p. 99-100.

⁵ Barbato 2022; p. 173.

⁶ Seeth 2023: p. 4.

⁷ Murphy 2020: p.2.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Indonesia's reputation for religious moderation and tranquility is rooted in its historically established ideology and constitution. Although Indonesia has a predominantly Muslim population, it is not a theocratic state; rather, it is founded on the Pancasila philosophy, which espouses the principle of 'Unity in Diversity'. This reflects the objective of fostering harmonious relations among diverse religious and ethnic groupings at the inception of the Republic of Indonesia.⁹

This dedication to the vision of peace within the context of diversity corresponds with multiple foreign policy objectives of the Republic of Indonesia. For instance, as an official agenda of the Group of Twenty (G20), Indonesia established the G20 Religion Forum (R20) in 2022. This event, which included religious leaders from across the globe, seeks to affirm that religion acts as a legitimate and dynamic source of solutions rather than a contributor to 21st century challenges.¹⁰

Examining contemporary religious intolerance reveals the significant relevance of this activity's objective. This is due to the escalating prevalence of bigotry resulting in interfaith conflict. In 2021, the Pew Research Institute reported that governments in 183 countries engaged in harassment, which is defined as intentional actions to torment or obstruct religious groups in their practice of beliefs. This figure represents an increase from the prior period, which recorded 178 countries¹¹.

Religious freedom is anchored in the R20 event, requiring Indonesia to promote tolerance and peace. This commitment, as previously observed, stems from the national philosophy of Unity in Diversity and the ideology of Pancasila. Both implicitly advocate for harmonious coexistence amidst religious and ethnic diversity, aiming to achieve global peace.

⁹ Seeth 2023: p. 4.

¹¹ Majumdar and Crawford 2024: p.6.

Alongside R20, Indonesia launched the ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference (IIDC) in 2023. The conference seeks to unify a diverse constituency founded on common civilizational values that foster peace, tolerance, and harmony throughout ASEAN. Initiatives to establish peace, tolerance, and harmony in Southeast Asia may inspire or enlighten the global community. Accordingly, the 2023 conference was titled 'ASEAN as an Epicenter of Harmony'.

The implementation of R20 and ASEAN IIDC exemplifies the Indonesian government's robust commitment to utilizing religion as a catalyst for peace. Nevertheless, the government must collaborate with others. The preeminent Islamic community organization supporting this initiative in Indonesia and globally is Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). As a community organization, NU has significantly influenced the trajectory of the Indonesian nation since prior to its 1945 independence. Established on January 31, 1926, by KH Hasyim Asy'ari, the organization promotes a moderate interpretation of Islam rooted in *Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama'ah* (Sunni Islam). The principles of tolerance and peace among individuals, founded on fraternity and compassion, are manifest in NU's basic rules: "Enter with love, affection, harmony, unity, and with the bond of body and soul. This is a *Jam'iyyah* that is direct, restorative, and supportive."¹²

In social relations, NU adheres to principles that direct the conduct of its members. Firstly, the attitudes of *tawasuth* (moderation) and *i'tidal* (justice) advocate for moderation, fairness, and straightforwardness in interactions while eschewing extreme tendencies that prioritize group egoism. Secondly, the principle of *tasamuh* (tolerance) underscores the importance of tolerance amidst the diversity of Indonesian society. Thirdly, *tawazun* (equity) is often interpreted as a call for balance, emphasizing the equilibrium between the relationship with the divine and interpersonal relationships. Lastly, the principle of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (enjoining others to do good and preventing others from doing evil) serves as a directive for NU members to perpetually promote

¹² Albani 2021: p.28.

goodness and reject actions that undermine the values of national and state life.¹³

The framework established in NU's basic rules and the organization's principles underpin NU's engagement in Indonesia's foreign policy, given its social capital as the largest religious organization globally. Furthermore, NU possesses collective values of tolerance and peace intrinsic to the organization, which serve as cultural capital in its faith-based diplomatic initiatives. NU contributed significantly to R20 and ASEAN IIDC¹⁴, arguably positioning itself as a principal actor.

Based on this background, this research will examine R20 and ASEAN IIDC as illustrative case studies to demonstrate the role of NU's religious diplomacy in shaping Indonesia's foreign policy. This study will also examine the implications of religious diplomacy.

Literature Review

Research on NU's strategic influence in foreign policy has been extensively examined, particularly concerning NU's contribution to the promotion of moderate Islam and the advancement of interfaith dialogue. A study was undertaken by Irvan Aladip Mahfudin and Dwi Ardhanariswari Sundrijo¹⁵. The article examines NU's function in facilitating communication among the parties engaged in the Afghan conflict. The Government of Indonesia entrusts NU to facilitate communication with religious leaders in Afghanistan. This mandate aligns with NU's global purpose to disseminate the Islamic value of *rahmatan lil alamin* (mercy for all nature), founded on the principles of *tawasuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (equity), *i'tidal* (justice), and *tasyawur* (deliberative consensus).¹⁶

¹³ Albani 2021: p. 41-42.

¹⁴ Syakir 2023, "Robert W Hefner Nilai 1 Abad NU Tunjukkan Peran Penting di Pentas Global", Accessed December 12, 2024, <https://www.nu.or.id/internasional/robert-w-hefner-nilai-1-abad-nu-tunjukkan-peran-penting-di-pentas-global-jff8U>

¹⁵ Mahfudin and Sundrijo 2021: p. 26-50

¹⁶ Mahfudin and Sundrijo 2021: p.38

A comparable discourse is also articulated in the article authored by Emharis Gigih Pratama and Ferdiyan,¹⁷ which examines the role of NU in fostering peace in Afghanistan. NU has made three significant contributions to the Indonesian government as a non-state actor. Initially, it presents the fundamental beliefs of Islam in Indonesia. Secondly, NU aids the government in formulating cooperative initiatives within the state agenda. Third, NU created an autonomous program designed to enhance the government's agenda.¹⁸

The two articles above examine the same case of NU's involvement in supporting the Indonesian government's peace endeavor in Afghanistan. Both articles characterize NU as a non-state entity that supports the Indonesian government's goal. In this context, NU is not seen as an entity that creates peace efforts but rather as a party authorized by the Indonesian government to assist the diplomatic agenda.

Another item concerning NU's strategic position in foreign policy is its initiatives to foster interfaith dialogue. This is exemplified in a paper by Imron Rosyadi Hamid.¹⁹ This article examines the execution of the International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) convened in Jakarta in 2016. This initiative constitutes an interfaith discourse aimed at achieving global peace. This project seeks to combat the burgeoning extremist Islamic movement.²⁰ Hamid's research examines NU's involvement in fostering interfaith dialogue to achieve global peace. Nevertheless, the article must thoroughly examine NU's overarching strategic influence on Indonesia's foreign policy. Furthermore, there needs to be more discourse on the identities and interests that motivate NU to commence interfaith dialogue.

This research expands previous scholarships on the topic. It is among the first studies to discuss NU's role in Indonesia's foreign policy by using a constructivist approach and social identity theory (SIT)

¹⁷ Pratama and Ferdiyan 2021: p. 1-12

¹⁸ Pratama and Ferdiyan 2021: p.10

¹⁹ Hamid 2017: p. 1-13

²⁰ Hamid 2017: p.5

theoretical framework in the sense that this article demonstrates that in shaping Indonesia's foreign policy, for example, in its pursuit of global peace, is motivated by NU's internal identity and values (such as norms) and objectives rather than by external factors such as significant Islamic extremist groups. This study also examines the alignment of NU's objectives with the fundamentals of Indonesia's foreign policy.

Research Methodology

This study uses an exploratory, qualitative method to boost our understanding of NU's role in shaping Indonesia's foreign policy. By using the exploratory method, this article will not claim to pursue a final truth; rather, this article is merely seeking reasonable ways to explain the phenomenon in question, namely NU's role in shaping Indonesia's foreign policy. This research also employs the case study technique, a qualitative methodology that examines actual life through comprehensive and meticulous data collection from diverse information sources. The information for this study was derived from direct interviews, including in-depth interviews with top ranking officers at the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as NU senior leaders; secondary documents such as academic journal articles and media reports; and personal observations of the involvement of NU staff and leaders in the R20 and IIDC. A qualitative approach is research that yields results not through statistical approaches or quantitative methods but through textual and visual data. Consequently, a qualitative method can more effectively elucidate the subject's experience and significance.²¹

Given these attributes, a qualitative approach is suitable for exploring the impact of NU's religious diplomacy on Indonesia's foreign policy. This approach elucidates the ways in which religious diplomacy intertwines with and bolsters Indonesia's foreign policy objectives. This

²¹ Yilmaz 2013: p. 315.

study is confined to an examination of two specific religious diplomacy initiatives undertaken by NU: the R20 and IIDC.

Theoretical Framework

This research employs a constructivist lens to explore the influence of NU's identity as a moderate Islamic organization on Indonesia's diplomatic image. The constructivist perspective in international relations offers a significant lens through which to analyze NU's strategic role in Indonesia's foreign policy. The constructivist approach emphasizes cultivating interests that are deeply intertwined with identity, which is of paramount importance. Within the framework of NU, its position as a prominent Islamic organization characterized by moderate principles underpins its dedication to fostering global peace, enhancing interfaith dialogue, and securing regional stability. Alongside constructivism, this research utilizes social identity theory to examine how NU harnesses social identity to galvanize support for its initiatives in both global and regional diplomacy. This theory examines the formation of NU's identity by considering historical contexts, cultural influences, and particular social circumstances.

Constructivism in International Relations

Constructivism in international relations is both an alternative and a critique of the first established dominant doctrines, including neorealism and neoliberalism. This critique primarily addresses the overlooked aspects, including the nature and sources of interest and the social structure of global politics.²² The core assertion of constructivism is that the global political arena is influenced by social construction. Constructivism, consequently, bases its theory on two primary assertions: firstly, the fundamental structure of international politics is predominantly social rather than material, and secondly, these social structures influence

²² Checkel 1998: p. 326.

the identities and interests of actors, transcending mere behavior.²³ This perspective enables nations to comprehend the nature, intentions, interests, potential behaviors, attitudes, and roles of other states within a certain political context.

Constructivism's critique of neorealism's excessive focus on material resources does not imply a complete dismissal of their significance. Material resources constitute a component of the social structure. Constructivism posits that material resources have significance for human activity solely through collective knowledge frameworks.²⁴ One example is the ownership of nuclear armaments. The US does not perceive a threat from the United Kingdom's 500 nuclear weapons, viewing the nation as an ally. Simultaneously, the US perceives a threat from North Korea's possession of five nuclear bombs due to their adversarial relationship. This viewpoint corresponds with the fundamental principles of social constructivism theory, which posits that individuals and groups react to entities, including other actors, according to the significance attributed to those items.²⁵

In addition to material resources, two more significant components exist in the discussion of social structure. Firstly, social structure is defined by collective understandings, anticipations, or knowledge.²⁶ This influences perceptions of oneself and others. This collective self-awareness, or identity, is the foundation for cultivating interests by delineating circumstances. Secondly, social structures do not exist within material capabilities and activities. The constructivist approach possesses strengths in social practice. This strength resides in its ability to replicate the intersubjective meanings that form social structures and agents.²⁷

Norms play a significant role in the constructivist approach, in contrast to neorealism, which perceives norms as lacking causal influence,

²³ Wendt 1995: p. 73.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Wendt 1992: p. 396.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Hopf 1998: p. 176.

and neoliberalism, which regards norms as regulations established by states or agents. Constructivism perceives norms as common understandings that necessitate actors to govern conduct and influence their identities and interests. Constructivists assert that agents (states) and structures (global norms) interact and mutually influence one another.²⁸

Constructivism's emphasis on identity and interest development has effectively broadened the theoretical boundaries of international relations. Constructivist approaches examine identities and interests in conjunction with the interactions between agents and structures, offering insights into the interplay of national identities, cultural backgrounds, racial identities, sexual orientations, spiritual beliefs, and gender identities within the global political arena.²⁹

The focus of constructivism on identity as a crucial factor influencing inter-state relations holds significant relevance in the examination of religious diplomacy. Within the framework of this study, NU's religious identity is a significant embodiment of Indonesia's moderate Islam, profoundly shaping the nation's engagements with other countries, particularly within the Muslim sphere. Furthermore, NU's commitment to promoting a peaceful interpretation of Islam, *rahmatan lil-'alamin*, can be effectively integrated into Indonesia's foreign policy initiatives.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory presents a novel framework within the discourse of international relations. This theory posits that an individual's identity is influenced by their historical context, cultural factors, and social surroundings. Consequently, social identity theory necessitates that researchers incorporate group ideas, expectations, and status disparities

²⁸ Checkel 1998: p. 326.

²⁹ Hopf 1998: p. 192.

in their conclusions.³⁰ Social identity theory aims to augment constructivist understanding of the genesis of identity and the function of the state.

Constructivism posits that identity reinforcement transpires through the mutual shaping of state and non-state actors, whose motivations remain ambiguous. Hopf, as referenced by Deborah Welch Larson,³¹ asserts that constructivists have not persuasively demonstrated the rationale for the preference of one identity over another.³¹ Social identity theorists provide an alternative perspective to constructivism's deadlock in understanding identity formation by predicting identity based on social structures and group perceptions regarding the permeability of elite clubs and the legitimacy and stability of status hierarchies.

The collective creativity of a community is a core concept in social identity theory. Social creativity encompasses two primary components: firstly, the re-assessment of undesirable traits as positive features, and secondly, the recognition of novel value dimensions that augment the group's benefits. Social identity theory posits that social innovation in international relations can augment soft power through diplomatic mediation, leadership roles in international institutions, or the promotion of new international standards. This aspect of creativity influences a group's standing in diplomacy and teamwork.

Within the framework of NU, the collective identity of moderate Muslims in Indonesia significantly influences the organization's and the state's engagement with other foreign entities, especially within the Muslim sphere. Through NU, Indonesia can emphasize an inclusive Islamic identity that embraces variety as a counter-narrative to extremist factions. Fortifying this identity enhances Indonesia's endeavors to cultivate cordial diplomatic relations with other Muslim nations susceptible to sectarian divisions. Consequently, NU's religious diplomacy seeks to enhance the

³⁰ Turner 1999: p. 6 – 34.

³¹ Larson 2022: p. 7

identity of Indonesian Muslims as a collective capable of providing peaceful and inclusive solutions globally.

Case Studies: Religion Twenty (R20) and ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference (IIDC)

R20 represents a nascent initiative in interfaith interaction within the G20 forum. The forum serves as a replacement for the frequently held Interfaith (20 event. The core assertion is that religion ought to address the matter independently.³² The primary emphasis of the event is 'Revealing and Caring for Religion as a Source of Global Solutions: A Global Movement for Shared Moral and Spiritual Values'.³³

Jonathan Benthall identified three significant characteristics of the R20 forum: firstly, its innovative method of directly confronting challenging religious texts; secondly, its judicious timing and venue in Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population and a center of moderate Islam; and thirdly, the proactive initiatives of Muslim organizations such as NU to promote extensive interfaith cooperation with other religions.³⁴

The R20 gathering in Bali culminated in the formulation of seven communiqué points. These themes generally relate to the use of religion as a method for addressing various societal challenges. The points include devising strategies to mitigate global regional disparities, fostering genuine engagement and dialogue among and between faith adherents, integrating moral and spiritual values into influential global systems, curtailing the politicization of identity, diminishing inter-group animosity, implementing safeguards to shield humanity from the detrimental

³² Personal Interview with Ani Nigeriawati (Director of Public Diplomacy. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia), on January 24, 2024 in Jakarta.

³³ Syakir, "R20 sebagai Gerakan Global untuk Bangun Konsensus Moral dan Spiritual Kemanusiaan", Accessed October 6, 2024, <https://www.nu.or.id/nasional/r20-sebagai-gerakan-global-untuk-bangun-konsensus-moral-dan-spiritual-kemanusiaan-DONlv>

³⁴ Personal Interview with Ani Nigeriawati (Director of Public Diplomacy. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia), on January 24, 2024 in Jakarta.

impacts of warfare, assisting conflict victims, utilizing religious ecological wisdom for environmental stewardship, and advocating for a conducive and prosperous global environment that benefits all individuals under shariah law. Moreover, it is acknowledged that the R20 has been designated as an official G20 Engagement Group.

NU's religious renewal initiative via the R20 advanced with the 2nd IIDC, held in 2023. The seminar, entitled 'ASEAN Shared Civilization Values: Building a Centre of Harmony to Promote Peace, Security, and Prosperity', aligned with the central subject of the ASEAN Summit, 'Centre of Growth'.³⁵

NU collaborated with Indonesia's Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Religious Affairs to organize the event. In his inaugural address, Chairman of NU Central Board, KH Yahya Cholil Staquf, underscored the conference's aim of fostering global harmony. The ASEAN IIDC invited 150 religious leaders from ASEAN member states, Timor Leste, and additional ASEAN-plus countries, including the US, India, and China. IIDC participants were divided into three categories: 27 international delegates, 15 speakers, and 11 representatives from the host nation, Indonesia. Ahmad Suaedy, the event chairman, specified that at least two speakers from the 11 ASEAN nations, including Timor Leste, possessed religious affiliations.

The ASEAN IIDC was segmented into three distinct panel sessions. The initial panel – 'Analyzing and Reinvigorating the Concept of Unity in ASEAN and the Broader Indo-Pacific Region' – addressed various topics, including the principles of unity and Pancasila, historical factors contributing to the fragmentation of the region's traditionally cohesive civilizational structure, and ASEAN's initiatives to reestablish the concept of unity within the diverse Southeast Asian context. The panel sought to

³⁵ Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, "With the theme ASEAN Matters: Epicenter of Growth, Indonesia Encourages the Resolution of Various Regional Issues for the Advancement of ASEAN", Accessed October 6, 2024, [https:// ekon.go.id/ publikasi/ detail/ 4797/ usung- tema- asean- matters- epicentrum- of- growth- indonesia- dorong- penyelesaian- berbagai-isu-kawasan-bagi-kemajuan-asean](https://ekon.go.id/publikasi/detail/4797/usung-tema-asean-matters-epicentrum-of-growth-indonesia-dorong-penyelesaian-berbagai-isu-kawasan-bagi-kemajuan-asean)

augment and cultivate moral and spiritual principles via religious education, cultural engagement, and character development initiatives. This is crucial for understanding the fundamental principles of unity, peace, progress, and environmental conservation in the ASEAN region. Then, the second panel discussed 'Building Societal consensus regarding shared moral and spiritual values through religion, culture, and character education, in order to foster social harmony, peace, prosperity, and environmental flourishing throughout'. A dialogue with religious leaders addressed the third inquiry, 'The Movement for Shared Civilizational Values: Preserving and Strengthening the Foundation of International Discourse on Universal Ethics and a Humanitarian Approach'.

Participants resolved that the ASEAN IIDC 2023 religious leaders' meeting would formulate a five-point resolution. Objectives include implementing actions and policies that promote and deepen understanding and respect among ASEAN, Indo-Pacific, and global nations and cultures. Additionally, it urges governments and civic organizations to actively advance ASEAN's cultural and religious initiatives. In this context, it must also strive to secure the support and involvement of the international community to fortify a global framework grounded in ethical and humanitarian principles.

In addition, the declaration supported Indonesia in its role as ASEAN chair for 2023. It stressed enhancing the global cohesion, significance, and worth of ASEAN and its individual member states in the context of promoting regional development and welfare. The document acknowledges the Indonesian government's assistance in facilitating the IIDC. The declaration emphasizes the importance of establishing an inclusive institutional framework for engaging with many cultures and religions in Southeast Asia. The mechanism will explore avenues within ASEAN frameworks to establish the IIDC as an annual event, thereby fostering collaborative networks among individuals, religious groups,

communities, the media, and governments from ASEAN and its member nations.³⁶

NU's participation in initiating R20 and ASEAN IIDC 2023 positions the organization as a non-state entity influencing Indonesia's foreign policy. This aligns with employing religion as an instrument in public diplomacy. NU's foreign initiatives correspond with Indonesia's increasingly assertive and globally engaged position following the *Reformasi* (Reform) era. This corresponds with the nationalist foreign policy and diplomatic strategy of then-President Joko Widodo's administration, characterized by a proactive approach.

Analysis of Constructivism in R20 and ASEAN IIDC Initiatives

NU is an institution that is independent of funding from governmental entities. It addresses the most intricate domains of international diplomacy, particularly the nuances of religious diplomacy. NU upholds the tradition of interfaith conversation and demonstrates a novel approach through R20, which seeks to utilize religion to address issues. This spirit exemplifies how NU may adapt and engage in social diplomacy, fostering the creation of new ideas and the transformation of knowledge. The R20 agenda, led by NU, facilitates support in foreign policy matters and establishes a framework for Indonesia's external perception.

NU employs triangulation to integrate moderate Islamic ideals inside broader social networks, enhancing its social outreach to the international population. NU accommodates the Muslim World League (MWL) as a strategic partner to support the R20 agenda. There is significant potential for recruiting additional organizations in the Middle East.

Furthermore, one may recognize the influence of religion on the development of national identity, the conservation of cultural heritage, the creation of common values, and the fostering of an all-encompassing

³⁶ Nuriel Indirapasha, retrieved from https://www.nu.or.id/nasional/5-poin-deklarasi-asean-iidc-tentang-kerja-sama-antar-pemerintah-fp7k6#google_vignette,

worldview. This aligns with the constructivist perspective, as NU's identity as the largest global Muslim organization devoted to moderate Islam influences its dedication to the goal of global peace.

Constructivism enables non-state entities, such as NU, to engage actively in global politics. Consequently, global variables enable a nation to express its stance and possess the capacity to influence its identity and role in international relations. This has facilitated interactions between two significant entities involved in foreign diplomatic endeavors on behalf of Indonesia: the government and NU. The collaboration between the two actors, encompassing the transmission and reception of signals and their subsequent responses, evolves into the interpretative activity of the partnership. Collaborations facilitate the creation of social networks that alter expectations, therefore transforming individual identities.³⁷

The R20 conference makes plain why Indonesia opted for moderate Islam; it wants to engage the world from the position of the most Muslim nation. Indonesia chooses to use its positioning as the largest Muslim country to interact (or connect) with the world, and NU has a very important role in this endeavor. This aligns with the Indonesian government's ambition to show its Muslim citizens as moderate and inclusive people who can accept and embrace every group. It also strengthens Indonesia's mission of sustaining world peace through the spirit of humanitarian Islam, as reflected in the R20.

The involvement of NU in shaping Indonesia's global identity as a proponent of moderate Islam exemplifies the principles of constructivism. NU employs a methodology grounded in social identity theory principles that fosters the development of a shared identity among religious leaders from various backgrounds, particularly in response to global challenges like religious intolerance. By prioritizing inter-religious dialogue, respect, and cooperation, NU has successfully fostered an environment conducive to meaningful collaboration in tackling shared challenges. This endeavor not only enhances Indonesia's reputation as a hub of Islamic moderation,

³⁷ Wendt 1992: p. 400.

but also fosters an international network that advocates for harmony and understanding. Indonesia hosts a variety of religious and social organizations and communities. Faith-based communities are a type of social capital because their core tenets require them to have schools, clinics, and charities. They are involved in development projects, promote human rights, set up community media, build peace, and serve the people who face marginalization.³⁸

In the midst of international political dynamics that accentuate the differences between secular and conservative groups, Indonesia needs to distinguish itself with a strong identity in order to protect its interests moving forward. Perhaps, mainly because of history, Indonesia and NU are eager to promote an ASEAN IIRC image out of religion and religious tolerance. Constructivism derives its strength from understanding identity and interests being shaped through inter-state relationships.³⁹ This perspective enables countries to understand the essential characteristics, motivations, interests, potential actions, tendencies, and functions of other nations within a defined political context.⁴⁰

NU, as Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, advocates the growth of Indonesia's diversity and oneness as a moderate-dominated and pluralistic society in this country that is still maturing. However, the area of religious diplomacy is developed with relevant actors: religious communities and organizations. Faith-based diplomacy, the use of religious diplomacy by non-state actors, is often characterized by engagement with deliberative approaches between unions to preach further and systematically work to resolve conflicts across international lines. The purpose behind the initiatives is to scrutinize matters concerning faith in a globalized world and continue enhancing knowledge pertaining to the role of religion in foreign policy.⁴¹

³⁸ McDonagh 2020: p. 13.

³⁹ Wendt 1992: p. 400.

⁴⁰ Hopf 1998: p. 180.

⁴¹ Purwono 2013.

At the ASEAN IIDC, NU advocates for the principle of Unity in Diversity as a fundamental basis for fostering regional harmony. This methodology embodies the principles of constructivism by highlighting the importance of creating collective norms that foster peace and tolerance within the ASEAN region. By applying the tenets of social identity theory, NU promotes the development of a unified ASEAN identity dedicated to embracing cultural and religious diversity within the bloc. This initiative fortifies regional unity and establishes a strategic framework for collaboration in tackling transnational issues such as religious conflict and extremism.

Analysis of NU Religious Diplomacy

The Significant Role of Religious Leaders in International Diplomacy

Religious leaders occupy a key role in Indonesian society's social structure. This is intricately linked to Indonesian society's religious condition, profoundly influenced by divine ideas and values. Indeed, as diplomatic activities have transitioned from being primarily conducted by state players to non-state actors, opportunities have emerged for religious leaders to advocate for peace principles on the global stage.

Religious communities across the world have significant social capital born out of their calling to create schools, hospitals, and other charities. They carry out development works, advocate for human rights, and establish media outlets to serve the community as well as generate social cohesion and alleviate marginalized groups. This has been echoed by NU and Muhammadiyah, the two largest Muslim community organizations in Indonesia. Both have hosted international forums focused on promoting religious tolerance and moderation. Indonesia wholeheartedly supports and promotes their initiatives.

NU fosters its international diplomatic persona by promoting moderate Islam and Islamic humanitarian values. This insight comes from NU and is transmitted through generations of social reproduction. NU has four core pillars: *tawasuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun*

(balance or proportionality), and *tasyawur* (deliberation). These basic abstractions serve as the foundations for the core of NU's social identity.

NU embodies *tawasuth* in every aspect. It seeks to align regional identity with Islamic beliefs and prevent extremism,⁴² emphasizing pluralism and committed to cultivating difference, encouraging dialogue, and enhancing collaboration among nations.⁴³ NU strongly prioritizes community involvement in decision-making and advocates for a democratic methodology in the governance of the organization and society, grounded in the philosophy of *tasyawur*.

Evaluating NU's Religious Diplomacy: Aligned or Divergent?

Indonesia's foreign policy is mostly based on the concept of free-active politics. This guideline was implemented to prevent a conflict of interest between the Soviet Union, representing the Eastern Bloc, and the US, representing the Western Bloc. The free-active ideology advanced by Indonesia aims to uphold world peace and address global issues.

The free-active policy comprises four basics. Pancasila is the source of values in Indonesia's execution of foreign policy, which has a function to protect and maintain national interests. In addition, national interest can only take place with autonomy and initiative. Indonesia's foreign policy is pragmatically constructed based on an assessment of national interest, zeitgeist, and hard data.

In addition, the free-active policy must be realized in practice through the principles of a national movement defined by the poles of freedom, humanity, social justice, and brotherhood of nations. Four principles — anti-colonialism, sovereignty as an absolute norm, total centrality of domestic politics, and pragmatism — further shape Indonesia's foreign policy.⁴⁴

⁴² Masaaki 2020: p. 23.

⁴³ Alexander R. Arifianto, retrieved from <https://eastasiaforum.org/2021/11/02/indonesian-democracy-needs-a-moderate-nahdlatul-ulama/>

⁴⁴ Sukma 1995: p. 308.

Moreover, NU plays a substantial role in the advancement of global peace. Its actions align with the values articulated in the 1945 Constitution, which underscore the significance of fostering a world order based on autonomy, lasting peace, and social equality. This NU project seeks to promote global peace by advocating moderate Islamic ideals while protecting Indonesia's interests and sovereignty from the threat of religious extremism.⁴⁵

NU and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs collaborated on the R20 agenda to initiate a movement to transform religion from a cause of conflict into a solution grounded on the ideals of peace and justice. NU transformed the R20 forum into a platform for spreading the concept of Islamic humanitarianism. This aligns perfectly with Indonesia's open and active international relations concept, showcasing NU's autonomy and proactive role in promoting global peace.

NU played a crucial role in strengthening international networks during both meetings. NU serves as a manifestation of Islam in Indonesia, showcasing the virtue of tolerance in embracing variety. Furthermore, the cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave NU credibility for its activities and positions in the R20 and ASEA IIDC agendas.

Implications of NU's Religious Diplomacy on Indonesia's Foreign Policy

The name NU has a solid and recognizable mark domestically and abroad. Approximately 150 million Muslims in Indonesia identify as *Nahdliyin*⁴⁶. Due to its dominance, NU significantly influences Indonesian society and government. The effort to enhance the perception of moderate Islam on a worldwide scale gained traction following the September 11 attacks in the US. This positioned Indonesia as a prominent

⁴⁵ Personal Interview with Ani Nigeriawati (Director of Public Diplomacy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia), on January 24, 2024 in Jakarta.

⁴⁶ CNN Indonesia, "Gus Yahya Klaim 59,2 Persen Pemeluk Islam di Indonesia Mengaku NU", Accessed December 12, 2024. <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20221026021709-32-865346/gus-yahya-klaim-592-persen-pemeluk-islam-di-indonesia-mengaku-nu>

advocate of moderate Islam abroad. To enhance its global reputation, the Indonesian government supports non-state entities in arranging interfaith discussion events, such as the inaugural 2004 International Conference of Islamic Scholars. The conference, orchestrated by NU, centered on advancing Islamic human dignity and equality tenets to foster harmonious interfaith and international relations.⁴⁷

Moderate Islam was a core focus of foreign policy under the administration of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014). Yudhoyono carefully positioned Indonesia as home to the largest Muslim population in the world, encapsulating the intricate Islam-democracy nexus. Until the Joko Widodo (2014-2024) administration, the government, in collaboration with NU, adhered to a historical pattern of participation in inter-religious dialogue. On November 2, 2022, the Religion Twenty (R20) was established, followed by the ASEAN IIDC 2023, significantly expanding NU's global influence. At R20, NU, in collaboration with the World Muslim League, transitioned from Interfaith to R20 on NU's initiative, asserting that interfaith dialogue, while exemplifying positive relations among faith leaders, fails to engage female faith leaders in substantive discussions. The fundamental aim of the R20 event was centered on earnest dialogues in which faith leaders acknowledged the internal conflicts and challenges faced by their respective religions.⁴⁸

The R20 further proves NU's role in elevating the Indonesian image at the international level. NU, as the party hosting this event, was working on diplomatic efforts to network with similar religions and organizations outside Indonesia. Using triangulation strategies, the group first brought Islam to the West, then to the Middle Eastern realms, and finally to Indonesia. The policy came after failed efforts to penetrate the Middle East since Islam in Indonesia was seen to have required a deeper engagement.

⁴⁷ *Jakarta Declaration: Upholding Islam as Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin*, Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Australia, 2004.

⁴⁸ Personal Interview with Yahya Cholil Staquf (Chairman of the Executive Board of Nahdlatul 'Ulama), on June 27, 2023 in Jakarta.

A strong and effective NU international network has to be built before the R20 in Bali 2022 is achieved. NU Central Board Chairman Yahya Cholil Staquf stated that NU is working on several international programs supported by the Indonesian government. Programs like R20, the International Congress of Civilizations, and ASEAN IIDC have dramatically increased Indonesia's standing in the global arena. The role played by the Indonesian government in this respect is to greatly maximize NU's contributions to public diplomacy on a global scale.

The R20 has been formally incorporated into the G20, guaranteeing that this event will occur in various nations and facilitate future meetings of member governments. Moreover, this reinforces the concept of sustainability that NU and other religious leaders involved in the R20 event seek to advocate. India, Brazil, and South Africa, significant centers of major global faiths, will host the upcoming G20 and R20 gatherings. Some interfaith dialogue programs with an international audience organized by NU should further enhance Indonesia's global image. As President Widodo, responding to their request, said, "We will not only support them but also the ideals of moderate Islam with its principle of peace in our foreign policy."⁴⁹ This speaks to the need for Indonesia's pluralistic and peaceful practices to be emulated by other nations. Ani Nigriawati of the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also argued, "The Government of Indonesia has been engaged in promoting solidarity, tolerance of religion, moderation, and democracy."⁵⁰

Indonesia is among several nations that have incorporated religion into their diplomatic and foreign policy goals. Other nations that have integrated religion within their separate nation-states include India, Turkey, and Malaysia. The narratives are nearly identical, promoting the nation's adherence to religious ideals and standards while endorsing tolerance and progress.

⁴⁹ Alvian and Ardhani 2023: p.44

⁵⁰ Personal Interview with Ani Nigriawati (Director of Public Diplomacy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia), on January 24, 2024 in Jakarta.

Although Indonesia pursues the same goal, its approach to religious diplomacy is distinctive. This pertains to the crucial assistance of non-state actors in engaging with religions and their advocacy efforts. In this context, NU is recognized as the preeminent Islamic NGO in Indonesia, advocating for the principle of *Islam Wasatiyah* and actively reinforcing its tenets. The founders of NU conceived the idea, which has evolved through several stages from 'Islam Nusantara' to 'Humanitarian Islam'. NU seeks to cultivate an image of Islam characterized by tolerance, moderation, and a comprehensive grasp of Indonesian society.⁵¹

Meanwhile, Malaysia's government seems more active in promoting faith-based public diplomacy related to Islam's position concerning politics in Malaysia. The culture and the people of Malaysia also have Islam as part of them; we cannot separate one from the other. Both contribute so much to nurturing the political environment in Malaysia and shaping the imaginations of the nation's people. Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) is one of the agencies under the government directly overseen by the Prime Minister, who also handles Islamic affairs for Malaysia.

A comparable situation is now unfolding in Turkey. The domestic political environment experienced significant changes with the establishment of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) by Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2001. The party employed Islam as a mechanism to unify various factions. Their endeavors to improve civilian supervision of the military resulted in the dissolution of the National Security Council in 2003. These events enabled the dissemination of Islamic values in Turkish public policy via the strategic employment of the Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs). This institution later significantly influenced Turkey's religious diplomacy throughout the AKP administration. The global opinion of Turkey significantly transformed with Abdullah Gül's election as president and a member of the AKP. He reimagined Turkey as a Muslim

⁵¹ Seeth 2023: p. 2.

nation that needed to liberate itself from the influences of Westernization.⁵²

In India, religious diplomacy was also used to navigate power struggles. In this case, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has the biggest piece of a far bigger pie. Narendra Modi has been serving as India's Prime Minister since 2014. Since coming to power, the BJP has characterized India's foreign relations with an increasingly Hindu nationalist makeup. The Indian government has taken the first steps to fulfill the vision of an open, inclusive, spiritual, and Hindu India. India's religious diplomacy was the endeavor of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs together with the Indian Affairs Council and Indian Council of Cultural Relations. Further, the BJP is an enthusiastic promoter of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, National Volunteer Organisation), which works nationally to educate, indoctrinate, and protect Hindus. The prior discussion underscores a significant contrast between Indonesia's approach to religious diplomacy and that of other countries, including Malaysia, Turkey, and India. In Indonesia, NU, a non-state actor, plays a significant role in developing and executing religious diplomacy tactics. It is important to note that NU is presently not a political party seeking national power. Its programs to promote moderate Islam are based solely on the Indonesian government's analysis of the world situation and the Islamic tradition and culture in Indonesia. The autonomy of NU is what sets it apart in its religious diplomacy.

This contrasts sharply with the events that have unfolded in Malaysia, Turkey, and India. In this context, power refers to the government and is a domain where political parties compete to spread religious concepts within the country and globally. Non-state actors mostly function as proponents of government goals. Consequently, religious diplomacy's significance and state representation depend on the prevailing political party.

⁵² Kaya and Drhimeur 2023: p. 317 – 337.

The Role of NU in Fostering Interfaith Dialogue and Advancing Global Peace

NU's participation in R20 and ASEAN IIDC 2023 demonstrates the organization's dedication to promoting a more progressive representation of Islam internationally. This linkage is inherently linked to the history of NU, which has engaged in foreign interactions since its inception. During an interview, Achmad Suaedy, the event chairman stated that such contracts have infiltrated the foundations of NU. NU has participated in the dialogue of liberty or independence since its inception. Subsequent to independence, NU redirected its emphasis towards the Islamic realm concerning pilgrimage and anti-Western perspectives. The efforts of NU to integrate religion into public discourse began during the Indonesian presidency of long-time NU leader Abdurahman Wahid.⁵³

As mentioned, NU actively establishes networks and dialogue forums with religious and community leaders, such as in R20 and ASEAN IIDC, as a tangible measure to disseminate the organization's ideals. Within the framework of R20, matters like human equality must be universally agreed upon among different faiths, specifically Muslims, to establish collective ethical standards or shared values.⁵⁴

Societal conflicts due to religious tensions can lead the United Nations (UN) to intervene. For example, in 2011 the UN issued Resolution 16/18, 'Combating Intolerance, Negative Stereotyping and Stigmatization, Discrimination, Incitement to Violence and Violence Against Individuals Based on Religion or Belief'. Such a resolution is instrumental in addressing and tackling problems of religious intolerance. On July 22, 2021, the UN General Assembly also adopted a resolution on 'Promoting Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue and Tolerance in Countering Hate Speech'.⁵⁵ The aim of this resolution is to promote interreligious and

⁵³ Personal Interview with Ahmad Suaedy (Chairman of the Executive Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU) for International Relations, on June 27, 2023 in Jakarta.

⁵⁴ Personal Interview with Ahmad Suaedy (Chairman of the Executive Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU) for International Relations, on June 27, 2023 in Jakarta.

⁵⁵ United Nations 2021

intercultural dialogue, an integral component prerequisite for always promoting and strengthening social cohesion, peace between societies and cultures, and the development of human society. The resolution calls on UN member states to use interreligious and intercultural dialogue against hate speech when it is appropriate and when it is possible.⁵⁶

The UN's dedication and focus on the matter of religious-based conflict persisted as the UN Human Rights adopted a resolution titled 'Against religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence'.⁵⁷ Resolution 53/1 was enacted in response to the desecration of the Quran, the sacred scripture of the Muslim faith, which took place in multiple nations. Resolution 53/1 comprises seven crucial points that unequivocally denounce and repudiate any actions demonstrating hatred towards religion. Furthermore, the UN Human Rights Organization urges countries to implement domestic legislation, policies, and law enforcement measures that specifically target and punish acts and promote religious hatred that incites discrimination, hostility, or violence. It also emphasizes prompt action to establish responsibility and accountability.⁵⁸

NU's many interfaith dialogues, such as Religion Twenty (R20) and ASEAN IIDC, exhibit significant divergence from their previous iterations. These sessions provide a platform for religious leaders to engage in discussions about peace, encompassing more than simply their religious affiliations. However, at its core, R20 promotes the realization among religious leaders that every religion has been a catalyst for difficulties and conflicts.⁵⁹ Before religions assert their role in addressing global issues such as economic, developmental, and environmental difficulties, NU believes it is imperative for faiths to first address the internal problems inside their religious frameworks.

⁵⁶ United Nations 2021.

⁵⁷ United Nations 2023a.

⁵⁸ United Nations 2023b.

⁵⁹ Personal Interview with Yahya Cholil Staquf (Chairman of the Executive Board of Nahdlatul Ulama), on June 27, 2023 in Jakarta.

The R20 gathering has enhanced the role of religion in the realm of public diplomacy. It is believed to inspire religious leaders across the globe to engage proactively in the pursuit of global peace. After the R20, representatives of NU established the Centre for Shared Civilizational Values (CSCV), which functions as the permanent secretariat of the R20. Establishing the *Rahmah* principle is one of the universality of love and compassion, which is incorporated into the tenets of Islam that the CSCV seeks to reinstate. This project is viewed as a considerable quest within Islam to promote peace in the world. Establishing the CSCV as the permanent secretariat of the R20 was a major step forward in religious diplomacy. NU and the Indonesian government's religious diplomacy initiatives play a significant role in shaping the framework for global peace. NU's expanding network significantly amplifies the relevance of its ideas, particularly the notion of humanitarian Islam. Moreover, this undertaking is a crucial element of Indonesia's foreign policy aims.

Conclusion

As the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, NU is central to implementing Indonesia's foreign policy and religious diplomacy practices. The R20 forum and ASEAN IIDC provide evidence of this. This paper examines the influence of NU on the formulation of Indonesia's foreign policy, emphasizing the religious interpretations associated with this strategy. This study utilizes constructivism theory and social identity theory to achieve its objectives, and shows that NU's contribution to Indonesia's foreign policy is motivated by NU's internal identity, such as norms, rather than external factors.

The evidence supports the premise that these constructivism and SIT approaches have rendered Indonesian diplomacy, influenced by non-state entities such as NU, effective. The role of NU is congruent with the state's foreign policy in promoting Islam as a peaceful and tolerant faith internationally. The cooperation between NU and the government of Indonesia in designing and conducting religious diplomacy is one

significant aspect of the new public Diplomacy approach. NU, which is a non-state actor, has substantial power. This includes seeking an integrated approach to the problem, setting rational and practical objectives for foreign policy, developing plans and programs to be carried out in practice, and assessing the results of practicing diplomacy in cooperation with others.

Consequently, at the G20 summit, NU unveiled the R20 initiative as an alternative to the conventional Interfaith 20. The project received endorsement from the Indonesian government. The R20 forum exemplifies NU and the Indonesian government's collaborative efforts in advancing global religious harmony. It also demonstrates the tolerant and moderate nature of established religious practices, particularly Islam in Indonesia, in dealing with many disputes.

Furthermore, a comparable collaboration occurred at the Jakarta ASEAN IIRC 2023 gathering. This ceremony served as NU's endorsement of the 2023 ASEAN Summit Conference. At the ASEAN IIRC 2023, NU presented the concept of 'ASEAN as the Epicentre of Harmony', drawing upon the collective historical narrative of the ASEAN and Indo-Pacific communities.

NU's efforts in religious diplomacy bear a strong resemblance with the principles outlined in several UN documents, including those that advocate for the elimination of intolerance and hate speech, which are the most important ingredients in bringing about inter-faith violence. The UN actively seeks to improve its member countries by promoting inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue to establish a spirit of tolerance and, consequently, a stronger spirit of peace.

Based on this study, it is plausible for politicians today to maintain a working relationship with religious institutions like NU in the future of international diplomacy. This partnership is viewed as a way to tap into NU's soft power in promoting Indonesia's image by striving for a moderate version of Islam. Policymakers must integrate the constructivism and social identity theory viewpoints in their strategic thinking to equip professionals with the required tools for religious diplomacy efforts. This

analysis reveals that NU's impact on Indonesian foreign policy exemplifies a distinctive implementation of constructivism and social identity theory, highlighting religious diplomacy's significance in forming international norms and collective identity.

Further studies should determine whether the theories appreciated in this study are applicable more broadly, for instance, in cases where other actors, such as the church or general society, influence a state's foreign affairs. Many more comparative studies of states where religion is a principal component of diplomacy would enhance our understanding of the mechanics of religious diplomacy and its place in inter-state relations. In addition, exploring the influence of different religious communities in a single country or undertaking cross-national studies with different religious majorities could also help explain the patterns of religious diplomacy.

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