

Indonesia's National Research and Innovation Agency

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【Subject of Research Project】

Nahdlatul Ulama in Japan: Identities, Activities, and The Global Networks

With the growing number of Indonesian Muslim diaspora in the global world over the past three decades, Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, has established its special branches in several countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, the United States, and Japan. The organization is well-known for its traditional interpretations of Islam, along with its strong commitment to the promotion of religious pluralism, tolerance, and moderation (*washatiyya*) to the global world. This study analyses the current condition of the special branch of Nahdlatul Ulama in Japan, or PCI-NU Japan, focusing on its historical establishment, religious aspirations, dakwah (Islamic proselytizing) activities, and global networks. The PCI-NU Japan was established in 2007, with membership mostly coming from a big chunk of the Indonesian Muslim diaspora in Japan, which mainly consists of migrant workers and university students who started their migration to the country in the 1980s and 1990s. The study aims to examine how members of the PCI-NU Japan engage with their fellow Muslims in Japan, understand their everyday activities, and explore their aspirations to maintain traditionalist Islamic practices among the Indonesian Muslim diaspora in Japan. Additionally, it provides insights into the strategies they employ to adapt and integrate with the social settings, secular conditions, and local traditions of Japanese societies.

This study employs ethnographic methods for data collection, mainly through participant observation in various mosques and Muslim communities affiliated with PCI-NU Japan, located in Tokyo, Kyoto, Koga, Osaka, and Nagoya. The research additionally includes in-depth interviews with key members of PCI-NU Japan, who are both currently living in Japan and have returned to Indonesia. It also features discussions with representatives of the Indonesian government in Japan, Japanese Muslim scholars connected to Indonesian Muslim communities, Japanese researchers working on subjects related to Indonesian Islam, and key representatives from the central board of Nahdlatul Ulama in Jakarta.

The establishment of PCI-NU Japan was led by select graduates of NU-affiliated Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) who have lived in Japan as students and, notably, as migrant workers. However, the sustainability of the organization is largely supported by a few NU-affiliated political elites who have been (repeatedly) posted at the Indonesian embassy in Tokyo. With its primary goal to support and live traditional practices and interpretations of Islam characteristic of NU in a Japanese secular setting, PCI-NU Japan has developed a distinct identity, which is defined through its unique approach of dakwah. Instead of adhering to an Islamic legal framework that focuses on what is halal (lawful) and haram (forbidden), PCI-NU Japan employs cultural methods for its dakwah initiatives. These include Islamic musical performances and social gatherings, among many others. According to Japanese Muslim scholar Ahmad Maeno, the cultural method is more compatible with Japanese society, which is generally more open to notions like arts, tradition, and performance. However, most NU-affiliated mosques in Japan have yet to develop more activities that allow active participation of non-Indonesian Muslim groups, including local Muslims. This is indicated by the gatherings at their mosques that predominantly reflect an Indonesian perspective. Additionally, since Indonesian Muslim communities in Japan are diverse, competition between Indonesian mosques of different ideological affiliations is noticeable. This competition often centres on organizing religious programs to attract potential membership and secure funding, mirroring the contested nature of public Islam in Indonesia, which is highly contested between groups like NU, Muhammadiyah, and various Salafy-friendly organizations.

Publication of the Results of Research Project:

Verbal Presentation (Date, Venue, Name of Conference, Title of Presentation, Presenter, etc.) Presented by Syahril Siddik on National Digital Newspaper, NU Online, titled “Matcha and Nahdlatul Ulama in Japan” at https://www.nu.or.id/opini/matcha-dan-nahdlatul-ulama-di-jepang-Q68vt, released on Friday, November 24, 2023
Thesis (Name of Journal and its Date, Title and Author of Thesis, etc.) Title: “From Local to Global Agendas: Mingling Indonesian Culture with Islam in Dakwah Initiatives by Nahdlatul Ulama in Japan” Authors: Syahril Siddik, Ahmad Nuril Huda, and Prima Nurahmi Mulyasari Status: Paper is in progress and planned to be submitted to Ulumuna, an Indonesian Scopus-indexed journal focusing on Islamic studies.
Book (Publisher and Date of the Book, Title and Author of the Book, etc.) Title: Gender, social media, and the emergent mobility: the use of Instagram among Indonesian female Muslim migrants in Japan Authors: Ahmad Nuril Huda, Prima Nurahmi Mulyasari, and Upik Sarjiati Status: Paper is in progress (first draft submission is May 2025). Its abstract has been accepted for an edited book volume “Mobility Among Southeast Asia and Japan, edited by Fadjar Ibnu Thufail and Yuri Sato, and to be published by Springer. Note: This paper focuses on a topic larger than NU Muslims in Japan, but it has a section on NU-affiliated female Muslim migrants, hence drawing some of its data from our ‘Sumitomo’ fieldwork in Japan.