

## BRIDGING PEACE AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE THROUGH RELIGION TWENTY (R20) FORUM IN INDONESIA 2022

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**Abstract:** This study examines the Religion Twenty (R21) Forum in Indonesia as a case of interfaith dialogue for peacebuilding. Interfaith dialogue represents a facet of religious inclusion in international relations that has historically been ignored due to the preponderance of secular foundations in realist traditions. Since 11 September 2001, interfaith dialogue has increasingly served as a framework for addressing global religious challenges, including in Indonesia. This study is concerned with exploring the narrative of R20 regarding the emergence, initiation, activities, continuation and criticism of the R20 Forum. The study adopts a qualitative approach. The main question guiding the study is whether the R20 is succeeding in its peacebuilding mission. To solve this puzzle, the study uses the paradigm of interfaith dialogue for change as an analytical framework. This paper argues that the R20 has succeeded in bringing the paradigm of interfaith dialogue for peacebuilding to the fore. However, the continuation of R20 in the future is still in doubt.

However, it offers a broader understanding of interfaith dialogue for peacebuilding in Indonesia, enriching knowledge that can inform public policy improvements within the country and serve as a reference for the advancement of interfaith dialogue globally.

**Keywords:** Religion Twenty (R21); Nahdlatul Ulama; Interfaith Dialogue; Peace.

## Introduction

On November 15 and 16, 2022, Indonesia as the G20 presidency conducted the G20 Summit in Bali. The G20 is a high-level global forum to discuss crises plaguing Asia, Russia, and Latin America, as well as to achieve strong, balanced, and inclusive global growth. One of the parallel activities, that the Religion Forum (R20), as a side event, which had taken place on November 2-3 in Bali.<sup>1</sup>

The involvement of non-state actors in promoting world peace began to be carried out by Islamic mass organizations in Indonesia. One of them is Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world's largest Islamic mass organization, which had initiated R20 to promote religion as a solution to global humanitarian problems. NU's efforts have begun in this field over the past decade, both alone and in collaboration with civil society organizations at home and abroad. For example, in 2019 at the *Majelis Alim Ulama* and the NU Grand Conference in Banjar, West Java, NU had recommended that the category of infidel has no legal basis in a modern nation-state.<sup>2</sup> This is important to emphasize that in Indonesia there is equality between citizens regardless of religion, ethnicity, race, and language. In 2021, The World Evangelical Alliance, which represents 600 million Protestants in 143 countries, joined NU and the Imam W. Deen Mohammed Community to sign the Mosque of the Nation Statement in Washington, DC.

Various strategic efforts by displaying the two examples above are the foundation for NU to take advantage of Indonesia's presidency at this year's G20 in implementing R20. In addition, R20 was fully supported by the Indonesian government, as well as several domestic and foreign religious organizations. Indonesia's Minister of

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Najib Azca, et al., *Proceedings of the R20 International Summit of Religious Leaders* (Yogyakarta: UGM Press, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> "Political Communiqué: NU Rejects the Relevance of "Infidel" as a Legal Category within Modern Nation States." (Banjar: Baytarrahmah, 2019): [https://baytarrahmah.org/2019\\_10\\_16\\_world-first-nahdlatul-ulama-abolishes-the-legal-category-of-infidel-within-islamic-law/](https://baytarrahmah.org/2019_10_16_world-first-nahdlatul-ulama-abolishes-the-legal-category-of-infidel-within-islamic-law/). (Accessed February 10, 2023).

Foreign Affairs, Retno Marsudi, fully supported R20, as well as other important ministries in the government. In its implementation, NU had collaborated with the Muslim World League (MWL), headquartered in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Shaykh Mohammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa, Secretary General of the MWL, served as co-chair of R20.

Yahya Cholil Staquf, as a chairman of PBNU (2022-2027), stated that R20 as a vehicle for international meetings for religious leaders from the G20, as well as several related invitations as an effort to stem radical religious ideas and extremism and promote moderatism. Gus Yahya continued that R20 aims to ensure that religion in the 21st century can function as a dynamic and pure solution rather than as a problem. As a global platform, R20 invites religious and national leaders from the G20 to express their concerns and participate in voicing moral values and finding common solutions to global and local humanitarian problems in their respective countries.<sup>3</sup>

Previous Studies on the role of NU in peace in Indonesia are limited. A few studies have been conducted by several scholars. For example, Azca<sup>4</sup> examines the importance of NU and Muhammadiyah in the field of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Al-Makassary<sup>5</sup> elucidates the role of NU for peace at the local level in Papua, Indonesia. Several theses discussing NU's role in the field of peace have been conducted. However, specific studies on R20 are still limited. Indeed, preliminary studies on R20 have been published in one book, which is a compilation of writings.<sup>6</sup> In addition, PB NU published R20 proceedings.<sup>7</sup> In general, R20 has not been studied much, so this paper will enrich the discussion about R20 as well as fill the puzzle of NU's role in building global peace related to R20.

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<sup>3</sup> The Muslim World League Journal, (October 2022): [https://themwl.org/sites/default/files/MWL\\_Journal\\_VOL51](https://themwl.org/sites/default/files/MWL_Journal_VOL51)

<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Najib Azca, et al., *Dua Menyemai Damai: Peran dan Kontribusi Muhammadiyah dan Nabdlatul Ulama dalam Perdamaian dan Demokrasi* (Yogyakarta: UGM Press, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> <http://jnus.lakpesdamsalatiga.or.id/index.php/jnus/article/download/2/3>.

<sup>6</sup> Ridwan, "Religion Forum (R-20): Mempromosikan Moderatisme Global," *Media Indonesia*, September 24, (2022). <https://mediaindonesia.com/opini/524935/religion-forum-r-20-mempromosikan-moderatisme-global> Accessed January 12, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Muhammad Najib Azca, Timothy Samuel Shah, and C. Holland Taylor, *Proceedings of the R20 International Summit of Religious Leaders* (Yogyakarta: UGM Press, 2023).

## Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology, which involves the systematic examination of social phenomena within their natural context. Qualitative research encompasses the investigation of various aspects of human experience, behaviour, organizational dynamics, and relational interactions. In this study, researchers serve as instruments in data collection, aiming to understand the reasons behind events, their occurrences, and the significance they hold through participant observation.<sup>8</sup> Qualitative research endeavours to unveil reality as it exists.

This research aims to delineate the narrative surrounding the politics of the interfaith dialogue movement. Moreover, according to Neuman, the qualitative approach underscores the significance of social context in comprehending the social landscape. Thus, qualitative researchers are attentive to the social and political backdrop, gathering data on the context surrounding interfaith politics within the country. This entails examining how the socio-political milieu influences participation in peace movements within the globalized world.

In this study, in-depth and semi-structured interviews served as the primary method for gathering data on the politics of interfaith dialogue within the country. To ensure the selection of suitable and pertinent informants, we employed the snowball sampling technique. However, to mitigate the limitations inherent in this method—specifically, the potential for the initial informants to define the entire sample and thereby restrict the inclusion of other significant individuals—we augmented snowball sampling with the respondent-driven survey approach. This involved delineating the criteria for relevant informants when soliciting recommendations for additional contacts.<sup>9</sup> Our aim was twofold: to focus on potential key themes or issues arising from the interviews, while also striving to encompass a representative range of religious and political perspectives among the actors involved in interfaith movements. We continued to contact informants until data saturation was achieved. Furthermore, we conducted a comprehensive desk-based review of documents on interfaith dialogue in Indonesia.

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<sup>8</sup> W.L. Neuman, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (Boston: Pearson, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## Theoretical Framework.

Interfaith dialogue is often expressed as a form of special interaction between religious groups that aims to bridge understanding between religious groups. Interfaith dialogue can take place at various levels of communication, from individual to institutional that appoint spokespersons for adherents of a particular faith. As the number of groups involved in interreligious dialogue increases, there is a risk of the presence of political motivations that have the potential to hinder understanding of the other side's position.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, interreligious dialogue is an effort to foster respect, cooperation, and collaboration between groups of different faiths. However, in practice, interfaith dialogue is a more complicated process<sup>11</sup> because it involves organizations with different intentions that can cause the objectives of dialogue not to be achieved.

According to Neufeldt,<sup>12</sup> three dominant approaches to change theory, namely theological, political, and peacebuilding perspectives. Each perspective has different characteristics, goals, and reach for companies in interfaith dialogue forums. Theological dialogue develops in the study of religion or theology, while political dialogue develops in political science and international relations, and peacebuilding dialogue is closely related to conflict transformation and reconciliation. Simply put, theology-based interreligious dialogue aims at mutual understanding between religious leaders, grassroots religious leaders, and theologians, generally through the exchange of papers, discussions, thematic panels, and training. The goal is to understand others.

Political dialogue aims to generate social coexistence or harmony and increase the legitimacy of political actors and processes to achieve the goal of peaceful living. On the other hand, peacebuilding dialogue is an interreligious dialogue that relies on the model of previous dialogues (theology and politics) but relies on conflict resolution and transformation. Religious dialogue for

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<sup>10</sup> Louis Hoffman & Matt Thelen, "Interfaith Dialog," in *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion* edited by D. A. Leeming (Berlin: Springer, 2014). [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-27771-9\\_809-2](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-27771-9_809-2).

<sup>11</sup> Juyan Zhang, "Putting Interfaith Dialogue on the Public Diplomacy Radar: Goals, Power, Strategies, and the Influence of Worldviews," *Cross Currents*, 72(3), (2022): 216–246.

<sup>12</sup> R. C. Neufeldt, "Interfaith Dialogue: Assessing Theories of Change," *Peace & Change*, 36(3), (2011): 344–372. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0130.2011.00702>.

peacebuilding has four objectives: changing the attitudes and perceptions of others; building respect and mutual understanding; expanding participation in peacebuilding activities; and establishing a common framework for action that addresses the roots of conflict.

Neufeldt notes that studies of interfaith dialogue show that interfaith dialogue is effectively capable of transforming individuals because of the series of interactions within it. In addition, he also mentioned how and why the effects of dialogue can be felt by larger constituents and contribute to socio-political change. First, participants are strategically selected based on an analysis of groups identified as important groups in the conflict. In addition, interfaith dialogue uses the media as a tool for disseminating ideas to build broad support for change. Second, external individuals or religious bodies are often engaged in supporting local efforts by increasing pressure on political or religious leaders and providing resources to expand the range of activities.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, interfaith dialogue forums will create a network basis that acts to mitigate conflict or address the root causes of conflict.

This approach, referring to Luc Reychler,<sup>14</sup> carries different names such as track II, parallel, multitrack, additional, unofficial, citizen diplomacy, or interactive problem-solving diplomacy reflecting a new culture of conflict resolution (peacebuilding). This new culture of conflict resolution is of course different from the traditional culture of interfaith dialogue with only a focus on understanding others. Another theoretical framework, social movement theory, will be used in a limited way, because the author views R20 as part of a symbolic repertoire and the presence of political opportunities, as will be explained in the discussion.

### **Religion Twenty (R20): The Emergence, Initiation, and Uniqueness**

On November 2, 2022, in Nusa Dua, Bali, the Religious Forum (R20) was officially launched which was enlivened by several figures playing tambourines. More than 400 guests both from home and abroad attended the event. Religious groups and their leaders with millions of adherents from different countries were invitees to

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>14</sup> Luc Reychler, "Religion and Conflict," *International Journal of Peace Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (January, 1997): 19-38. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/45037971>.

participate. According to Safira Machrusah,<sup>15</sup> the Deputy Chief Executive of the Twenty Religious Forum, Nusa Dua Bali was chosen as the location for the R20 meeting because Bali met the criteria for representation to convey ideas in the R20 forum. Although Bali is a small province with a large Hindu population and is surrounded by provinces with a large Muslim population, there have not been many religious confrontations there. In line with this, the selection of the R20 venue in Bali also illustrated that Indonesia has religious diversity, not just Islam, and all religions have the same role and position. The selection of the venue was a symbol to show the delegation from India what harmony between Hinduism and Islam looks like in Indonesia while strengthening relations between the two countries.

The choice of Bali is also intended to introduce the Islamic atmosphere of the archipelago and make it a lesson for the Saudi Arabian delegation who are carrying out socio-cultural reforms. Concretely, the delegates from Saudi Arabia were stationed in a hotel where mobility from one place to another was reached by golf cars driven by women who did not wear headscarves. They were also allowed to visit the Puja Mandala Worship Center, which contains five places of worship of five major religions in Indonesia. With this experience, they get provisions to improve themselves in their country.

Participants from inside and outside Indonesia attended the event which presented 40 speakers from five different continents as well as seven local speakers from Indonesia. This international event was attended by 160 religious' figures of different beliefs and ideologies from various countries. Leaders from different religions and countries gathered at the R20 Forum to express their concerns and promote the principles of a common civilization. The special purpose of this forum is to support efforts to ensure that sacred religions can serve as a source of effective and dynamic global solutions, not as a source of problems. The religious forum brings together interfaith leaders from around the world, particularly those from G20 countries, to prevent the use of identity as a political tool, limit the spread of hate speech among people, promote unity and respect among diverse peoples, cultures, and nations in several parts

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with SM, July 24, 2023.

of the world, and foster the emergence of a just and peaceful global order based on respect for the equal rights and dignity of all people.

The theme of the R20 forum was “Revealing and Nurturing Religion as a Source of Global Solutions: A Global Movement for Shared Moral and Spiritual Values”. The theme of “religion as a solution” is a theme that is considered paradoxical amid various violent conflicts that erupt in the modern global world involving religious factors.

We often hear that religion is part of the problem, because throughout the history of humanity it has been more present as a source of violent conflict. For example, during Europe there was 30 years religious war in Germany, which resulted in Germans population shrinking dramatically and some migrating to North America to live a more peaceful life without war. In addition, there is a grand narrative in Enlightenment historiography, represented by Edward Gibbon and Voltaire, that views religious wars as the last breath of medieval barbarism and fanaticism before darkness turns light. To date, European society generally had a negative view of the position of religion in the public sphere. In this case, religion is seen as a source of conflict and violence in the form of acts of violence and terrorism.<sup>16</sup>

Gerrie ter Haar<sup>17</sup> states that the tendency to associate religion with violent conflict is very real in the West because historical conditions have shown the dominance of secularism and the diminishing role of religion in the public sphere. The ideological change that took place has hacked a new space of opportunity for the introduction of religious ideologies. If previously the world was riven by secular ideologies between capitalism and Marxism, today violent conflicts occur because of religious ideologies. A vivid example is the fundamental antagonism between Christianity and Islam.

According to Juan Cole,<sup>18</sup> Christian writers of European descent have long positioned Islam as a sign of violence. Although there are other scholars who hold the opposite view. Yvonne

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<sup>16</sup> William T Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Gerrie Ter Haar and James J. Busuttil, *Bridge or Barrier: Religion, Violence, and Visions for Peace* (Leiden: Brill, 2005)

<sup>18</sup> Juan Cole, *Peace Movements in Islam History, Religion, and Politics* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2022).



Friedman<sup>19</sup> argues that three monotheistic religions have bequeathed peace as one ideal and one goal at once. Also, David Little and Scott Appleby<sup>20</sup> state that religion can serve as a source of peace and a source of conflict. In a similar vein, Thomas G. Walsh<sup>21</sup> recognizes that religion in certain contexts can be a source of conflict and violence. However, he also held the view that religion could be a source of peace. It is evident that some religions provide postulates of peace, such as the exhortation of not being greedy, not using violence in social and individual matters, forgiveness, post-conflict reconciliation, and just warfare. With the postulate of these great peace values, Wals sees the importance of religion as one of the solutions to conflicts in society.

Juergensmeyer<sup>22</sup> states that traditional religious values, including honesty, fairness and honest play, tolerance, respect for others, are indispensable in a global society where no one cultural tradition is dominant. In a global culture that exchanging values, different religious traditions can provide a collective sense of benevolent action in public life. The tension between religious parochialism and its potential global reach in rejecting religious ambivalence in a global society. Religion often plays a prophetic role in rejecting the oppressive picture of global society. In some cases, religion can support not only movements for justice but also forgiveness. When religion is conceived as an interchangeable spiritual sensibility and moral responsibility, it is compatible with the idea of civil society in a broader sense, the idea of global citizenship, and as such, it plays a constructive role in resolving social division and polarization and plays a role of reconciliation in a divided society. The role of religion as the Solution to global peace was the theme of R20.

The initiation of R20 forum initiated by PBNU together with the Indonesia Government was one of the efforts to reconstruct

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<sup>19</sup> Yvonne Friedman, "Miracle, Meaning and Narrative in the Latin East," *Studies in Church History*, 41, (2005): 123–134. DOI:10.1017/S0424208400000176

<sup>20</sup> David H. Little and Scott Appleby, "A Moment of Opportunity? The Promise of Religious Peacebuilding in an Era of Religious and Ethnic Conflict," (Conference Proceeding, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Thomas G Walsh, "Religion, Peace and The Post-Secular Public Sphere," *International Journal on World Peace*, 29 (2), (2012): 35–61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23266664>

<sup>22</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, "Religious Violence," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* edited by Peter B. Clarke (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2009).

religious identities that are vulnerable to violence<sup>23</sup>. Religion 20 has strategic value for Indonesia and the world in promoting religious moderation, including in the fight against symptomatic identity politics<sup>24</sup>. If we refer to Manuel Castell, the R20 forum can be seen as a forum for forming a new project identity related to the face of a peaceful and plural religion.<sup>25</sup>

This identity project becomes a shared legitimacy among religions, which is shown through the role of religious actors in influencing world development, so that the R20 forum is considered capable of becoming a bridge and new hope in reconstructing the face of religion itself. This encounter between religious actors opens space to acknowledge each other and have sensitivity to violent acts committed by their respective religions. Hence, religion, especially through the R20 forum, will be seen as a bridge as well as a forum for Indonesia to conduct diplomacy with other countries.

The main idea of holding the R20 forum was viewed as a common thread that the existence of the R20 forum is one of the neat methods used by Gus Yahya, over the anxiety of a Muslim when he sees that the escalation of violence throughout the world in the name of religion is high. Today there is more and more violence in the face of religion. Religion has no right to be blamed for violence committed by believers. Violence or conflict between religious communities is caused by misunderstanding the interpretation of a human being and starting to blame religion. Errors in interpretation that occur are caused by many irresponsible parties or individuals who distract from the essence of religious values. Therefore, when there is a dispute in the name of religion, there must be anxiety that arises in the minds of religious leaders or leaders.

The idea of equating a perception to discuss and exchange ideas to overcome religious or belief problems always seems to be accommodated by world governments, including Indonesia. One of the reactions to the anxiety of religious leaders is to think about how

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<sup>23</sup> Ginting Eikel, "R-20 dan Ambivalensi Agama Tantangan dalam Merekonstruksi Identitas Agama," *BONAFIDE: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristen*, 4 (1): 2 (2023): 21-42.

<sup>24</sup> Ridwan, "Religion Forum (R-20): Mempromosikan Moderatisme Global," *Media Indonesia*, September 24 (2022). <https://mediaindonesia.com/opini/524935/religion-forum-r-20-mempromosikan-moderatisme-global> Accessed January 12, 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (New York: Wiley, 2009).

these religious leaders can meet, discuss, and exchange stories and experiences, especially to build good relations between religious leaders and provide solutions to tensions that occur in society. Starting from here, the idea of holding the R20 forum as a G20 side event began. R20 was conceived as one of the ways or strategies or tactics used to resolve or calm the anxiety that occurs. According to Smithey<sup>26</sup> tactics are the essence of collective action. The R20 Forum can be seen as a symbolic repertoire that serves as a resource for structuring the goals and activities of the movement by demonstrating that unity among religious communities can be upheld.

From a social movement perspective, the R20 Forum can be held in Indonesia because of the political opportunities possessed by its initiator – PBNU – with the Indonesian government and religious leaders in the world. Together with the Indonesian government, PBNU has enormous political opportunities.<sup>27</sup> As one of the Islamic community organizations with the largest number of followers in Indonesia, PBNU has a special affinity with the government. Not to forget, Vice President KH. Ma'rif Amin has a strong affiliation with NU. In line with this, good relations between the personal chairman of PBNU and several religious figures around the world. This is what makes the R20 forum take place without significant obstacles in Indonesia, together with the G20 world-level presidency forum.

The success of R20 organizers can also be viewed from various social and political points of view that occur. One of them is the involvement of the Muslim World League (MWL) in funding R20 activities. MWL officially became the sole sponsor of the R20. The involvement of the MWL was also identified as one of the best ways for Saudi Arabia to start opening to a more moderate direction. As we know Saudi Arabia, or MWL itself is the basis of Wahhabi, which often has views that are contrary to the views of NU. The alignment and application to be the sole sponsor in organizing R20 is also intended to seek the world's attention so that the region around the United Arab Emirates sees harmony, comfort, and a sense of security to travel, invest, and cooperate, with this Middle Eastern country.

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<sup>26</sup> Lee A. Smithey, *Social Movement Strategy, Tactics, and Collective Identity* (New York: Wiley, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 36–59.

R20 activities are different from the format of interfaith dialogue activities that have been held anywhere. R20 Forum was structured in such a way as to provide an opportunity for all religious leaders who came to convey their pent-up anxieties honestly. The format of conveying anxiety is done like a speech. So that other participants can only listen to what is conveyed by the speakers. After that, the next session would be a discussion between religious leaders. So religious leaders are grouped into discussion groups per their scholarship and expertise in discussing matters related to maintaining harmonization between communities. After conducting the group discussion, each group leader will share the results of the discussion. The idea of the results of this discussion was then mutually agreed upon in a declaration of agreement sheet.

Furthermore, the religious leaders of the R20 participants were invited to visit several locations to illustrate what the real manifestation of the implementation of interreligious tolerance in Indonesia looks like. One of the locations chosen is Yogyakarta, there is an Islamic University of Indonesia (*Universitas Islam Indonesia*, UII) building that has statues of Hindu and Buddhist relics in the university. At the beginning when the construction of the university was carried out, the statue was found still in a pile of soil. This ancient site is buried about five meters underground. Like Sambisari Temple, Morangan Temple, and Kedulan Temple, this site is thought to be buried together due to the eruption of nearby Mount Merapi which erupted about a thousand years ago.

Then the ancient site was given honour, cared for, made one of the historical relics of Hindus perched on one of the Islamic Universities, and named Candi Kimpulan in Umbulmartani, Ngemplak, Sleman, Yogyakarta. The location of UII was chosen as a strategic location to show how inter-religious harmonization is established in Indonesia. Through the existence of the Candi Kimpulan, religious people in Indonesia have shown how to respect and respect religious people by appreciating what they respect.

The visit of these religious leaders was closed by visiting Sunan Pandanaran Islamic Boarding School. There, the students showed how they were able to welcome religious leaders in the world by singing English songs. If usually the students are known only with Islamic songs, *murattal*, or chanting *salawat*, now it is accompanied by singing the song "We Are the World". The welcoming by the *santri*

(students) at Sunan Pandanaran Islamic Boarding School made all these religious leaders amazed and almost couldn't believe that the stereotype of *pesantren* (Islamic Boarding School) that had always been considered conservative, radical, and immoderate was not true. Even the welcoming of religious figures was closed with classical Arabic songs performed by students carrying candles.

The most fundamental key difference between R20 and other Interfaith dialogues is the theme of the discussion and its participants. If in interfaith dialogue forums, usually, those invited are academics, observers, or activists. The topics discussed are also very broad. Covering the issue of political Islam in the world, usually concerns how religion is a solution to global problems, such as religion dealing with climate change issues, religion in technology adaptation, etc. So that the core issue of religion itself is not touched at all.

The R20 forum provides fresh ideas to overcome all the core problems of religious people, namely talking about religion as a core topic. Discussing with a cool head expressed honestly how the condition of religion and religious people, especially in the 21st century. After telling truthfully about religious matters, R20 participants were willing to open their hearts, and because they already knew each other, forgiveness became inevitable. Understand the views of each religion, increase the value of respect, and of course foster a high sense of tolerance.

The R20 Forum facilitated all religious leaders, in this case, those invited were figures who are in direct contact with religion and the life of religious communities, such as *Kiai*, Priests, Monks, Priests, and Habib Islamic leaders in the Middle East. The main basis for directly inviting religious figures was with the purpose and purpose when we discuss religious issues, then those who understand religion best are the ones who deserve to discuss it. In addition, the role of religious leaders in society and the state is inevitable.

Responding to the global phenomenon above, the R20 event is part of an effort to strengthen the cultivation of religious values and share religious spirituality, which can be developed to build peaceful coexistence in a pluralistic society. Indeed, the implementation of this activity is also constrained by several things. Some are sceptical of R20 because there is already a similar forum such as the G20 Interfaith Forum (IF), as well as the involvement of the Indian state,

where Muslims still experience discrimination and religious dominance over radical interpretations of Hindu teachings.

However, there are differences between R20 and IF. R20 exists as a critique and not to deny or annihilate similar interfaith dialogue forums. For example, the G20 Interfaith Forum (IF). Maybe some of us are curious about the difference and equality between R20 and IF G20. In this case, the authors maintain that R20 focuses more on influential religious leaders in the world, while IF 20 often presents world-class practitioners, activists, and academics. The issues studied by R20 concentrate more on efforts to place religion globally as a solution rather than a problem, by raising internal problems in religion and interfaith relations and issuing solutions to humanitarian problems, while IF 20 revolves around the issue of religious intersection in overcoming various humanitarian problems, as well as other secondary issues such as climate change, poverty, environment, justice, and so on. However, both are supposed to strengthen each other to present religion as a solution. Both do not deny each other<sup>28</sup>.

This R20 forum is unique, because the topic of discussion addresses religious issues that have never been discussed openly so it is hoped that this forum went beyond traditional religious dialogue efforts, which only build mutual understanding between adherents of different religions, but further how it leads to social change towards positive peace. In addition, it is important to understand that R20 also does not seek to eliminate similar interfaith dialogue activities, but rather its presence to strengthen and give different emphasis to the achievement of religious goals as a solution, including suppressing efforts to arm religion for identity politics.

### **The Activities of R20**

The format of the R20 Forum activities is divided into two, namely in the form of intensive conferences and discussions in Bali and cultural visits and designing follow-up plans in Yogyakarta. This conference has involved several speakers such as Kiai Mustofa Bisri (former Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama), Bishop Thomas Schirrmacher (Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance),

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<sup>28</sup> Ridwan, "Religion Forum (R-20): Mempromosikan Moderatisme Global". Media Indonesia, September 24, 2022 <https://mediaindonesia.com/opini/524935/religion-forum-r-20-mempromosikan-moderatisme-global> Accessed January 12, 2024.

and Mary Ann Glendon (Professor of Law at Harvard Law School, and former U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See).

R20 Forum Steering Committee, Ahmad Suaedy,<sup>29</sup> revealed that the format of the R20 forum was deliberately made in the form of recognition of religion by all religious leaders in the world. Every religious figure from every part of the world is allowed to convey the essence of his religious teachings, and how the religion professed views other religions. In addition, interfaith dialogue forums have been carried out frequently, for example, through the Interfaith Dialogue forum, which is often carried out everywhere, both at the local and international levels.

Meanwhile, the R20 Forum focused on issues that depart from the wounds and pains of religion and how to carry out the process of healing, and reconciliation, and offer religion as a global and local solution. The main topics and issues discussed at the R20 Summit were: Spiritual Abuse, Revealing the Truth, Reconciliation, and Forgiveness; identifying and embracing the values shared by the world's major religions and civilizations; recontextualization of outdated and problematic religious teachings; identifying the values we need to develop to ensure peaceful cooperation; and Spiritual Ecology.

There were 35 speeches from selected religious leaders and academics to be presented. In general, the content of the speech included acknowledgment of past mistakes that have used religion as a basis for human distinction with implications for discrimination, violence, and war. However, on the other hand also the presentation displays the experience of both the search for togetherness and equality in many historical experiences; and creates a new tradition based on the complete equality of humans and citizens based on religion for the future order.

The R20 speakers have delivered their speeches according to the guidelines set by the R20 committee. For example, Jacqueline C. Rivers, Executive Director of the Seymour Institute for Black Church and Policy Studies (Jamaica) "From Truth to Reconciliation, Forgiveness, and Peaceful Co-Existence," emphasized that we can produce a world in which religious people can coexist peacefully by acknowledging that religion once committed oppressive acts based on religion. She said "That is a very heavy charge in a world suffering

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with AS, July 22, 2023.

from ubiquitous evil. There is much to confess. But confession is the first step to living in peace. So, in the spirit of confession, I would like to mention just one of the many examples of oppressive behavior carried out under the banner of Christianity. The conquest of the so-called New World by European powers starting in the fifteenth century was often justified in part by religious claims". For her, R20's role is to facilitate conversation. The final factor is forgiveness, where we need to forgive ourselves and forgive others because God has already forgiven us.

In the same vein, His Holiness Pope Francis, Bishop of Rome and Supreme Pontiff of The Roman Catholic Church, revealed that today's world is marked by God's neglect and the numerous violations of humanity that bear his name. He reminded that "We must affirm that extremism, radicalism, terrorism and all other incentives to hatred, hostility, violence, and war, whatever their motivations or goals, have nothing to do with the authentic spirit of religion and must be rejected in the most decisive terms possible. Instead, it is our responsibility, as individual believers and as leaders of our respective communities, to foster the paths of mutual dialogue, love, and reconciliation that lead to peace and conformity with the plan of the Almighty. In this regard, religion, far from being a cause of the various crises we face today, is instead part of their solution". The point is that religion is not the culprit of various crises in this global world, even religion can be a solution.

In addition, Ram Madhav, a representative of RSS which is known as a radical Hindu group in India, also expressed the same with the previous two speakers. He stated "R20 has, or should have, a much larger vision and objective. As an extension of the G20, the R20 must address the diverse crises humanity is facing. In that sense, it is not just a religion-centric event. It is a humanity-centric event". Other speakers also voiced the same thing.

At the end of the R20 Forum activities was born a communiqué that agreed on seven points of agreement that generally ensured religion played a role as a source of global solutions. Among the key points are religious leaders, who come from the G20 and other countries around the world, who have great concerns about global challenges, such as environmental destruction, man-made natural disasters, unemployment, and other social problems. In addition, those present agreed to build a culture of peace, mutual



understanding, and co-existence amid a tapestry of plurality. To achieve that goal, R20 mobilizes religious leaders socially, economically, and politically from around the world to ensure religion is a solution, not part of the problem.

Based on the findings above, R20 can be categorized as peacebuilding-oriented interreligious dialogue, if it follows Neufeudt's framework, where it no longer follows the traditional interreligious dialogue pattern that only meets each other to understand each other. Furthermore, the R20 Forum promotes moderatism, humanity, and global peace, including within and between communities of the same and different faiths. In other words, R20 seeks to encourage peaceful coexistence between adherents of different religions and unite against other forms of secular extremism. Hence, through R20 religions are encouraged to play a constructive and vital role in building a peaceful and just society, by promoting noble values inspired by religion.

### **Criticism and the Future of Religion Twenty**

The R20 has not escaped criticism. In this respect, there are three criticisms that were quite important to note. Here the author will describe the criticism and explain whether the criticism is reasonable or critical without strong evidence.

First, parties with an opposing view to the R20 theme of "religion as a solution" are seen as inappropriate themes. Critics also point to the failure of Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Iranian government to promote Islam as a solution that ends in violence and authoritarianism. The view of religion as a problem is criticised because religious values do not invite violent conflict. An extreme interpretation of religion as an understanding of religious teachings often leads to behaviour that is contrary to the noble values of the religion.<sup>30</sup>

Second, R20 was criticised for including a Hindu delegation from India, where Muslim minorities are often persecuted. The criticism related to the presence of Ram Madhav, the leader of the right-wing Indian Hindu group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sang (RSS). The Committee saw not only the persecution, but also the

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<sup>30</sup> Syafiq Hasyim, "Prospects and Weaknesses of the R20 Forum on Religion Launched at the G20 Summit in Bali," *ISEAS Articles and Commentary*, April 12, 2023. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2023-26-prospects-and-weaknesses-of-the-r20-forum-on-religion-launched-at-the-g20-summit-in-bali-by-syafiq-hasyim/> (Accessed January 12, 2024).

transformation of internal religion, and could not help but involve the perpetrators. For the committee, R20 was not just an event, but an ongoing transformative movement and effort. India will hold the G20 presidency in 2022 and will host the summit in 2023, thus hosting the R20. Furthermore, the presence of Hindu religious leaders is expected to enable open and non-dominant discussions and generate new understandings in building a world order that can promote peaceful coexistence.

Third, the involvement of the MWL as a Wahabi co-host, which is itself opposed to dialogue. However, as with the involvement of the Indian SSR as a participant, the committee saw a change in the political landscape in Saudi Arabia that was increasingly moderate, as well as a commitment to change within the religious groups and sects themselves in their views of the others.

However, there are important questions about the continuation of the R20 going forward. In addition, there is still a lot of homework that must be completed to harmonize people's lives supported by religion. After the R20 forum was held, a lot of media raised the issue of world peace. Also, the spirit of tolerance between religious communities continues to be echoed. For example, through several conferences with the theme of tolerance, *bahtsul matsail*, to try to establish cooperation with several foreign parties to help echo the spirit of R20.

Initially, the continuation of the R20 forum has been predicted to continue in India. This was shown by the closing ceremony of the R20 forum which was marked by the symbolic handing over of the flag by KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf (Chairman of PBNU) to the Indian delegation received by Sri Ram Madhav Varanasi and His Holiness, Mahamahopadhyaya Swami Bahdreshdas, and witnessed by all participants who packed the Grand Ballroom of the Grand Hyatt, Nusa Dua, Bali. The Indian delegation received the R20 flag because India will host the R20 next year as well as the G20 Presidency in 2023.

Ahmad Suaedy explained that R20, which has officially become the Engagement Group of Indonesia's G20 Presidency 2022, is a sustainable agenda. Not only will it be implemented in Indonesia this year, but he said the next R20 will also be implemented in India in 2023 and Brazil in 2024. The plan is that the R20 Forum will include not only world religious figures but also non-religious figures. The

follow-up to the sustainability of R20 is expected to be able to become a bridge of communication for religious people in the future. Unfortunately, R20 did not continue in India. However, based on information from the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Expert, Nur Salim, revealed that the spirit built in the *interfaith dialogue event* in India was the same as the spirit of the presence of R20, only it adopted a different name.

## Conclusion

The R20 Forum was the inaugural forum of the world's high-level religious leaders, which seeks to present religion as a solution and the mainstream of civilization. It was supposed to be a social movement, inviting religious leaders to realize that religion has contributed to violent conflict in the past, but today religious values exchanged for peacebuilding could be encouraged to make a more secure and peaceful world order. The R20 Forum covered the various problems of the world related to this religion in a forum that has been designed in such a way that it resembles the reconciliation process between the disputed groups. Each religious representation recounts the bad experiences of the past and how to solve them and reveals the various good traditions that need to be developed to later find common values and new contexts between religions. Equality between humans and citizens should be based on religious doctrine, so religion must change this doctrine now. The R20 Forum is seen as a theoretical framework of interfaith dialogue aimed at realizing peacebuilding with conflict transformation and reconciliation through religious leaders. It differs from the traditional and politically oriented model of interfaith dialogue.

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### **Interview**

- Interview with AS, July 22, 2023.
- Interview with SM, July 24, 2023.