

Back to Situbondo?

Nahdlatul Ulama attitudes towards Abdurrahman Wahid's presidency and his fall

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Within weeks after he had been brought down from the presidency, Abdurrahman Wahid made a tour to East Java, the province where he has strongest grassroots support, to present himself in his new role as human rights activist and opposition leader. The formal occasion for this tour was the *khaul* (death anniversary) of Kyai As'ad Syamsul Arifin, one of the last great charismatic kyais, in As'ad's pesantren in Asembagus, Situbondo — probably the largest pesantren of all East Java. Abdurrahman could hardly have chosen a more fitting place and event to stage his comeback; the numerous symbolic associations were not lost on his followers — and no doubt of vital significance to himself.[\[1\]](#)

Khauls are social events of major significance in the pesantren tradition. They constitute the chief occasions for kyais to meet and informally discuss important matters. Visiting or not visiting a particular *khaul* is a way of showing the degree of respect one feels for the pesantren concerned, for the deceased kyai, or for his living descendants. A lavishly organised and well-attended *khaul* marks the rise of a pesantren in the hierarchy; a poorly attended one is a sure sign of its descent. *Khauls* moreover constitute an important identity marker distinguishing “Traditionalist” from “Modernist” Muslims, for the latter condemn the *khaul* as unIslamic.[\[2\]](#) At a *khaul*, some form of contact is established with the deceased; as in all *ziarah kubur* (visiting of graves), invocations and parts of the Qur'an are recited and the religious merit this generates is transferred to the deceased (people literally say that the recitations are *dihadiahkan*, “given” to the deceased). At this particular *khaul*,

thousands of *santris* jointly performed two million recitations of the chapter *Al-Ikhlās* and several hundred of the entire Qur'an, generating a great amount of merit. A gift of merit may not only entitle the beneficiary to a better place in the Hereafter but add to the spiritual powers he is capable of exerting from the grave. Taking part in a *khaul*, moreover, is also believed to impart blessing and merit on each individual participant. If the deceased is believed to be a spiritually powerful person (as Kyai As'ad was), people may pray for his intercession and help in mundane as well as spiritual matters. All this commerce with the dead is anathema to "Modernists," in whose view death is the end of all communication and all attempts to contact spiritual beings other than God are no less than sinful *syirk*, "polytheism." To the Traditionalists, it is at the heart of their belief system: for religious knowledge to be legitimate, it has to be handed down from teacher to disciple orally. A chain of transmission links the student, through previous generations of teachers, to the Prophet and ultimately to God. Living religious knowledge requires the entire chain to be somehow alive and accessible.^[3] The *khaul* emphasises this central tenet of Traditionalism.

Situbondo had marked two earlier turning points in Abdurrahman Wahid's career. It was here, in Kyai As'ad's pesantren, that he had been elected seventeen years earlier as the general chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) — with more than a little help from the old kyai, who had been a student of Abdurrahman's grandfather and who told the assembled delegates of a dream in which he had seen the grandfather hand over authority to the grandson. The grandfather, Hasyim Asy'ari, had been the founder and the chief spiritual leader of the Nahdlatul Ulama. In 1984, Kyai As'ad was the most senior man who could still claim proximity to the organisation's founding fathers; he had moreover the reputation of being a man of extraordinary spiritual powers, so that his dream was taken seriously by his younger colleagues.^[4]

Abdurrahman had never been close to Kyai As'ad and appeared at the time to take the story of the dream with a grain of salt. Within a few years he was in open conflict with Kyai As'ad over his departures from established NU practices. The kyai attributed his anger primarily to some controversial remarks by Abdurrahman that raised doubts about his Islamic orthodoxy

and piety, but Abdurrahman claimed the kyai was dismayed because he had refused to use his position in Jakarta to arrange a business deal for one of the kyai's local supporters, whereas he was determined to cleanse the NU of that sort of patronage politics. Although As'ad had powerful external support (none less than Bennie Moerdani put his weight behind him), the power struggle ended with As'ad's lasting alienation and marginalisation within the organisation. He died a frustrated and angry man. In spite of Abdurrahman's professed scepticism regarding some of Kyai As'ad's convenient dreams and visions, he did believe that the kyai was supernaturally gifted, and some of the stories he told me about As'ad in the 1980s must have become more important to him in later years, when he became increasingly engrossed in the spirit world of Java. Kyai As'ad was said never to take part in the Friday prayer in the mosque of his pesantren but to lock himself in his room every week. His *santris* (students) believed that he performed the prayer in Mecca every week, as some of the greatest saints of Java were believed to have done.^[5] As evidence of this feat it was said that Friday afternoon visitors often were offered fresh Arabian dates (that the kyai had clearly just brought back from Mecca). Kyai As'ad, Abdurrahman told me several times, was the last of a long line of Madurese kyais who understood a (syncretistic) mystical text in archaic Javanese, *Padmarasa Padmaraga*, which was kept hidden from the uninitiated. Abdurrahman did not rest until he had acquired a photostat copy of a rare manuscript of this text, through the efforts of another Madurese kyai. In those days he was driven by academic curiosity, but later he strove himself for the synthesis of Javanese and Islamic learning that he believed Kyai As'ad to represent.

The other event in Situbondo that had a great impact on Abdurrahman Wahid's public role was the October 1996 anti-Chinese and anti-Christian riots, when in a single day some twenty-five churches and schools were destroyed.^[6] This happened at a time when his relations with Soeharto had reached their nadir, on account of Abdurrahman's establishing, with some well-known regime critics, the Forum Demokrasi and his making some very critical and even scornful comments. From an accommodating Muslim leader he had gradually become one of the most vocal regime critics. Soeharto had in vain attempted to prevent Abdurrahman from being re-elected in 1994, but he withheld recognition of the new NU board.^[7] Various factions

close to Soeharto appeared to be conspiring to weaken Abdurrahman and the NU politically (as they were doing towards Megawati and the factions of the PDI loyal to her). Convinced that the riots, in a NU-dominated region, had been deliberately provoked and were part of a larger plot to politically destroy him and the NU, Abdurrahman immediately apologised to the victims on behalf of the NU. He succeeded in calming down the situation and bringing representatives of both religions together, and thereby probably prevented the riots from spreading to other parts of East Java.

One consequence of this successful intervention was a reconciliation with Soeharto, who indicated that he would accept an invitation to any public NU event. A celebration in a pesantren in Probolinggo, only a few hours from Situbondo, provided the occasion for Soeharto to shake Abdurrahman's hand and give him his warmest smile. After this highly publicised meeting, the efforts to weaken or destroy Abdurrahman subsided, and Soeharto appeared to be shifting his favours from the "Modernist"-dominated ICMI towards the NU. There was a prize, however: in the months prior to the 1997 elections, Abdurrahman accompanied Soeharto's eldest daughter Tutut, whom Soeharto was believed to be grooming as his successor and who was campaigning for Golkar, to several major pesantrens, thereby strengthening her Islamic legitimacy and disappointing his pro-democracy friends.

The riots in Situbondo had apparently been started by people brought in from outside, but the locals had needed little provocation to take part in the looting and arson. Situbondo was in this respect too a significant place to visit, for it exemplified the explosive conflict potential within Abdurrahman's constituency: socio-economic, ethnic and religious conflict (poor Madurese fishermen, peasants and under-employed townsmen versus Chinese traders, landless poor versus landlords, Javanese versus Madurese, strict Muslims versus syncretists, kyai nobility versus commoners). Situbondo has also a history of society-state conflict: the Armed Forces have expropriated vast stretches of land here for training grounds, and the peasants who were expelled have never received what they consider as appropriate indemnities.

The Nahdlatul Ulama under Abdurrahman Wahid's leadership

The 27th congress of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Situbondo in 1984, which elected Abdurrahman Wahid as the organisation's general chairman, marked also in other respects an important watershed in its history. After having been a political party since 1952 and, following the forced merger with other Muslim parties into the PPP, the strongest component of the latter, the NU decided to withdraw from "practical politics" and concentrate henceforth on religious, educational, and social welfare activities. The exclusive relationship with the PPP was terminated; NU members were declared free to vote for, and be active in, any party of their liking, but no one was allowed to simultaneously hold leading positions in both the NU and a political party. The NU moreover was the first large Muslim organisation to acquiesce in Soeharto's imposition of the state ideology of Pancasila as its *azas tunggal*, or sole ideological underpinning — the culmination of the New Order's depoliticisation of Islam.^[8]

On one level, the Situbondo decisions represented a capitulation for Soeharto's policy of depoliticising Islam. NU had been the last remaining political force with strong grassroots support, and the only serious challenges to Soeharto's rule in the 1970s had come from the NU. Not everyone in NU was happy about the deliberate destruction of the organisation's political muscle by its withdrawal from the political arena or at least from the PPP. Some even spoke of betrayal, and these voices became louder when in the period leading up to the general elections of 1987 Abdurrahman Wahid did not so much abstain from politics as appear to be campaigning *against* the PPP and implicitly *for* Golkar. He was moreover appointed a member of the 1988 MPR (People's Consultative Assembly) and reluctantly joined the Golkar group in this body, belying the political neutrality proclaimed in Situbondo. Both actions appeared to indicate a willingness to sacrifice principle to accommodation with the regime — but in traditional Sunni Muslim political thought, accommodation with the powers that be in order to avoid conflict is itself a leading principle, to which Abdurrahman often referred.

The withdrawal from "practical politics" and the break with the

PPP resulted, however, in greater freedom for the NU to engage in other activities, many of which also had political implications. The move was presented as a return to the NU's original non-political objectives, the *Khittah* of 1926 (the year it was founded), but it may just as well be interpreted as a shift to another, and potentially more effective, form of politics.^[9] It diverted energies towards other socially relevant activities and towards a rethinking of received religious ideas and the development of a socially relevant, non-fundamentalist Islamic discourse. Under Abdurrahman Wahid's protection, young people of NU background were active in various NGOs (non-government organisations), or established their own NGOs, that aimed at educating and empowering the powerless and at complementing the government's top-down *pembangunan* with bottom-up development efforts. Young NU intellectuals became acquainted with ideas from outside the tradition and incorporated them creatively into a contemporary "Traditionalist" religious discourse, much more progressive and intellectually challenging than that of most of Indonesia's "Modernist" Muslims. Abdurrahman Wahid himself performed poorly as a manager of the NU but developed great political skills. Within a decade he became the country's most prominent public personality, who set the terms of much of public debate and thereby gave the NU a new political significance. During the 1990s, when "Modernist" Islam became more closely associated with the Soeharto regime, Abdurrahman's NU — especially its young generation — was involved in strengthening civil society and programs of awareness-raising, and defending pluralism, human rights and the rule of law.

Not all NU members were happy with the new course adopted in 1984, and some of those who did initially support it were to turn against Abdurrahman later for other reasons (as Kyai As'ad Syamsul Arifin did). Some prominent NU members preferred to remain active in the PPP, others called for the establishment of a new political vehicle for the NU — something that Abdurrahman vehemently opposed.^[10] The vast majority, however, appeared to consider the "return to the *Khittah* of 1926" as a positive step, that worked out well both for the NU as an organisation and for its individual members. It was not simply, they felt, a wise concession to Soeharto in order to evade further reprisals (of which NU members had certainly had their share), but a move that was beneficial in itself.

Against this background, it is at least remarkable that within months after the fall of Soeharto, Abdurrahman Wahid established a new political party seeking the NU vote, the PKB (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, Party of National Awakening), and that by early 1999 he was campaigning for his own presidency (thereby contradicting his earlier verbal support for Megawati). [11] Both moves were initially strongly opposed by many of the leading kyai in the NU, but Abdurrahman overruled them by threatening to go on alone and make them irrelevant. The response among the rank-and-file of the NU appeared to show that Abdurrahman had either an uncanny instinct for their wishes or commanded the uncritical support of the grassroots for any move he decided to make.

When the NU's 30th congress convened in Kediri in November 1999, it was formally opened by Abdurrahman Wahid in his capacity as the President of the Republic of Indonesia. It was obvious that the local-level leaders of the NU assembled there were even happier with their leader's return to "practical politics" than they had been fifteen years earlier with his denunciation of it. The overwhelming impression one got was that of a widespread desire to return to the patronage politics of the 1950s and 1960s, if necessary at the expense of the "*Khittah* of 1926." Many delegates wished to establish a formal link between the NU and the PKB, or alternatively to turn the NU into a political party again. Abdurrahman's presidency was primarily discussed in terms of its potential benefits to NU and the *Nahdliyyin* (those affiliated with NU). Many suspected that Abdurrahman Wahid was not going to complete a full five-year term as president. Those who wished to secure patronage and other benefits knew that they had to move quickly.

Only a relatively small minority spoke of the possibilities their leader's presidency might offer for putting long-coveted ideals of a more just society into practice. Most young NGO activists had ambivalent feelings about the return to "practical politics" and feared it might seriously damage the efforts of strengthening civil society that they had embarked upon. They were acutely aware of the morally dubious temptations of patronage and the danger of corruption. In discussion platforms that they organised in the margin of the Kediri congress, some of the major issues discussed were how to prevent the new situation from diverting

all energy away from intellectual debate and NGO efforts towards politics, and how to find a balance between loyalty and criticism of Abdurrahman Wahid's government.[\[12\]](#) The gap between most of the local-level leadership and the socially committed members of the younger generation appeared enormous.

Patronage and critique were not the only themes of discussion in the first weeks of Abdurrahman Wahid's presidency; the one perhaps most hotly debated was, how to protect him against his numerous enemies. The youth movement Ansor and its paramilitary wing Banser were ready to defend him physically; Banser was already providing a second security cordon because the palace guard — part of, and controlled by the military — was suspected of remaining loyal to the *ancien régime* and the state intelligence organisation was still headed by a Habibie loyalist, Z.A. Maulani. There were unsubstantiated rumours of a PDI-P plot to poison Abdurrahman, and the various military factions were attempting to cut off or interfere in all his lines of command, using his reluctance to admit his complete loss of eyesight to sabotage his policies and impose their own.[\[13\]](#) When speaking of his enemies, NU activists did not so much think of Soeharto loyalists, ambitious generals or frustrated political rivals (notably Megawati's PDI-P), as of their most significant "Other", the Muslim "Modernists" and their most prominent leader, Amien Rais — to whom Abdurrahman owed the presidency, but who was soon to begin undermining it.

The revival of Traditionalist-Modernist rivalry

The immediate reason why the Nahdlatul Ulama was established in 1926 was to defend the Islamic tradition of the pesantren world against the tide of reformism that was sweeping across the Muslim world and that in Indonesia was represented by such organisations as Muhammadiyah, Al Irsyad and Persatuan Islam. Although only a part of the reform movement could be qualified as modernist, it has been common in Indonesia to refer to the entire reformist spectrum as Modernist and to refer to the lasting dichotomy of Indonesian Islam as one between Modernism and tradition or Traditionalism.[\[14\]](#) In the early 20th

century, fierce polemics were carried on between the two sides concerning matters of ritual and belief: especially all rituals relating to the dead, but also minute details of the correct form of worship could divide entire communities into hostile camps. Modernists were scornful of the ulama's scholastic knowledge of medieval texts and their blind following of earlier generations; they called for a return to the earliest sources (Qur'an and *hadith*) and a degree of rational interpretation (*ijtihad*). These conflicts did not last, however, and by the mid-1930s leading scholars of both sides had withdrawn from the most extreme positions and agreed on the legitimacy of each other's positions. Social and political differences between Modernists and Traditionalists were more lasting, however, and whenever tension between them rose, ritual and doctrinal differences would resurface as boundary markers.

Modernism first took root among the relatively educated, especially those with a modern school education; Traditionalism was centred around the pesantren, where the *santris* studied primarily Arabic religious textbooks. For a long time, Modernists tended to be urban and Traditionalists rural. This has now changed, as a result of increased geographical mobility, whereas the pesantrens now include in their curriculum the same subjects that are taught in public schools. One difference has remained, and this has been the reason of much bitterness between Traditionalists and Modernists. The latter have in their ranks numerous university graduates, technicians, managers, businessmen and experts in all areas need for running a modern administration, and the Traditionalists less than a handful. Since the 1970s, increasing numbers of NU youth have also passed through higher education, but their diplomas are typically from the State Institutes for Islamic Studies and give them only limited career opportunities. (Until recently a pesantren education did not give access to other universities.) As consequence, Traditionalists have never had an institutional presence in the state apparatus corresponding to their numerical strength.

In 1952, the NU left the Muslim umbrella organisation Masyumi (which until then incorporated Traditionalists as well as Modernists) because virtually all government positions it acquired were given to Modernists — including the position of Minister of Religious Affairs, the only one for which they had

qualified personnel. As an independent party, the NU regained control of the Department of Religious Affairs and was to keep it in all following cabinets until 1967, filling the Department with its own people. They lost it to Modernists through most of the New Order — one reason for their frustration with Soeharto. When the NU was obliged to merge with all other Muslim parties into the PPP, they found again that this party was dominated by Modernists, although the NU provided it with the largest number of votes. One of the major reasons for the NU to break formally with the PPP was that the party leadership struck the names of too many NU politicians critical of Soeharto from the list of candidates. In the 1990s, Abdurrahman Wahid's refusal to join, and continued opposition to ICMI (the Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals) — which organisation was hailed by Modernists as a breakthrough for Islam — was at least in part inspired by similar considerations. Through ICMI, committed Muslims gained greater influence in the state but even in the most favourable circumstances this would have worked disproportionately in favour of the Modernists. ICMI's objective of *proporsionalitas* meant affirmative action on behalf of Indonesia's under-represented 88 percent Muslims, but ICMI leaders refused to recognise that they themselves represented only a minority of those 88 percent. [\[15\]](#)

Following the NU's withdrawal from "practical politics", there was a period of increasingly cordial relations between it and the leading Modernist organisation, Muhammadiyah — partly, no doubt, due to the moderation of their leading religious spokespersons, Kyai Achmad Siddiq and "Pak A.R." Fachruddin, who favoured dialogue and appeared to agree upon a gradual convergence. The establishment of ICMI did not at once result in a resurfacing of the old controversies either — at the local level, many leading NU personalities in fact joined ICMI. During the last years of Soeharto's reign, however, the relations became increasingly tense. The Muslim generals who rose to top positions (Faisal Tanjung, Syarwan Hamid, and their clients) were Modernists, and it was they who, together with civilian Modernist allies, were suspected of conspiring to destroy Abdurrahman Wahid and the NU politically (the "Naga Hijau" conspiracy). [\[16\]](#) In Muhammadiyah, the radical Amien Rais became increasingly influential and was in 1995 elected as the general chairman. Amien and Abdurrahman Wahid were

known to dislike and distrust one another intensely. Amien was obsessed with Christian, Zionist and Orientalist conspiracies against Islam, whereas Abdurrahman was deeply committed to the protection of non-Muslim minorities and was the first Indonesian public personality to visit Israel (to witness the signing of a peace agreement with Jordan). Abdurrahman's spiritual inclinations (about which more shortly) tended to draw the NU away from assimilation to Modernism, and the Muhammadiyah veered under Amien away from the earlier convergence towards moderate Traditionalism to a more fundamentalist position.

Many were surprised when it was precisely Amien Rais who first nominated Abdurrahman Wahid for president. Amien had, it is true, acquired a statesmanlike quality as the leader of the anti-Soeharto movement in early 1998 and attempted to recast himself as a leader of the entire nation rather than of the Muslim *ummah*. (He resigned from his position as the Muhammadiyah chairman, to be replaced by the more moderate Syafi'i Maarif.) His rainbow-coalition party PAN performed poorly in the 1999 elections, however, after which he reverted to a more sectarian position, welding an alliance with the modernist Muslim parties and the PPP, the "Central Axis" (*Poros Tengah*). Megawati's PDI-P was the great winner of the elections, and PKB leader Matori Abdul Djalil had all along announced his support for Megawati as president. The large number of Christians in influential positions in the PDI-P and doubts about Megawati's commitment to Islam made her unacceptable to many Modernists. Habibie, the other presidential candidate, was acceptable to Modernists but too closely associated with the New Order and it was not clear on how much other support he could count. From Amien's point of view, Abdurrahman Wahid appeared to represent the best option for stopping Megawati.

Abdurrahman himself was willing to be nominated but the NU elite was extremely reluctant, not so much because this would negate his earlier promises to support Megawati but because they were suspicious of Amien's motives. Many kyais were apprehensive lest Abdurrahman, and with him the NU, be humiliated. Kyai Abdullah Faqih of Langitan, a man who held no formal position in the NU but who had recently surfaced as a leading spiritual and moral authority, demanded guarantees from *Poros Tengah*. Amien and some key allies visited the kyai in

Langitan and promised solemnly that their motives were pure. Only then did the leading kyais reconcile themselves with Abdurrahman's candidacy.

Abdurrahman's election as the president was largely due to his own expert political manoeuvring, but *Poros Tengah* support was essential.^[17] Amien became the speaker of the MPR, and it did not take him long to begin undermining Abdurrahman's presidency. He was no doubt disappointed by Abdurrahman's performance and by the poor representation the *Poros Tengah* was given in the cabinet. Most NU members, however, felt that Amien was breaking his earlier promises and had betrayed the venerable Kyai Abdullah Faqih. At the grassroots level, especially in East Java, this was often translated into strong resentment against the *Poros Tengah* and Muhammadiyah. Amien Rais and other Modernist leaders were prevented from speaking in NU strongholds, and at moments when Abdurrahman's position was endangered, there were frequent threats of violence against Muhammadiyah. Some PKB politicians became quite paranoid about Modernist plans to gain monopolist control of the state and perceived a Modernist behind every corner.

A few weeks after Abdurrahman had been brought down and Megawati sworn in as president, a provincial PKB chairman told me of his serious apprehensions about the real strongman behind her, retired general Hendropriyono (whom she had appointed as the national intelligence chief). Hendropriyono has the reputation of being a highly intelligent, shrewd and dangerous man, and I thought my interlocutor meant the danger of a return of the military to political power. He denied it, and explained that Hendropriyono was a member of Muhammadiyah — in his view a more concrete danger than that of military rule.^[18]

Among students, there had been little convergence between those of NU background and Modernists anyway. The NU-affiliated student association PMII, which, understandably, was much stronger at IAINs than at the leading secular universities, had in the 1990s been more frequently involved in protest actions than Modernist associations. More than their Modernist peers, they were attracted to social issues such as land conflicts,

which brought them in contact with secular, leftist activists and stimulated an interest in Marxist literature — whereas the Modernists remained staunchly anti-communist. In 1998, the year of massive student protest, PMII activists tended to cooperate with leftist and Christian students rather than joining the newly established Muslim student's action front, KAMMI. They were active in such movements as Jakarta's Forkot and Famred, that demanded the overthrow rather than reform of the New Order.[\[19\]](#)

The return of the “unseen world” in the NU[\[20\]](#)

Kyai Abdullah Faqih, from whom Amien Rais had had to request permission to nominate Abdurrahman Wahid for president, belonged to a type of kyai that became more prominent in the NU than they had been before, the paranormally gifted, sometimes known as *kyai khas*.[\[21\]](#) (Some kyais even claimed that it was only under Abdurrahman that such people became very conspicuous in NU.) He never took part in discussions, never wrote even the most modest treatise, never took administrative responsibility in the organisation, but gradually became a leading kyai, and nobody could exactly tell me how this happened. Suddenly he was always invited to be present in important meetings to say the concluding prayer. (It is common for the prayer to be said by someone reputed to have spiritual powers, for that increases the likelihood of its being answered. The prayer, always in Arabic, is improvised, which gives the officiating kyai the opportunity to make oblique comments, criticisms or suggestions, only understood by those with sufficient Arabic.) By 1999 he had become the leading moral and spiritual authority, and few of his colleagues understood how precisely this had come about. No doubt Abdurrahman Wahid played a part in his rise, he may have promoted him as an alternative to the formal spiritual leader of the NU, the *Rois Aam*, who heads the *Syuriah* or ulama council, formally the supreme body in the NU.

Abdurrahman surrounded himself from the late 1980s on increasingly with a colourful entourage of reputedly paranormally gifted persons, some of whom became nationally

prominent. There was Mbah Lim (Kyai Muslim Rifa'i Imampura of Klaten), a fearless visitor of the spirit world, whose speech was unintelligible for anyone but his children and an assistant, and who in other cultures might have ended up in a mental asylum. Mbah Lim could in 1989 write to Soeharto that he should hand over power to Try Sutrisno and Abdurrahman Wahid without suffering reprisals. He was long one of Abdurrahman's living talismans — which probably helped him expand his clientele among the rich and powerful, who visited him for counsel and supernatural support. Gus Miek (Kyai Hamim Djazuli) of Kediri, who died in 1993, was if anything even more colourful. The press made much of his partiality to Guinness beer and frequent though allegedly chaste visits to night clubs in Surabaya, but to the rank-and-file he became known through his organising collective recitals of the Qur'an, that attracted thousands or even tens of thousands of participants and listeners, who expected not only to acquire merit but also to gain spiritual as well as more mundane benefits from their participation. Gus Miek was believed to be a living *wali* (saint) of great powers, had some of the most powerful men of the country among his clientele, as well as simple peasants and traders and prostitutes. Even Kyai Achmad Siddiq, the NU's *Rois Aam* from 1984 until his death in 1991, considered himself as a student of Gus Miek in a Sufi discipline.

During the 1990s, Abdurrahman himself gave more and more importance to the “unseen” world, and appeared convinced of its exerting a powerful influence on the “seen” world — although he could be very sceptical about some reputed psychics and often surprised me with rationalistic explanations of psychic phenomena. Beneath the surface of Indonesia's shadowplay politics he perceived battles of spiritual forces whose support was enlisted by the key players — or who moved them about like puppets. He had become a serious visitor of graves, attempting to communicate with the spiritual forces they represent. *Ziarah kubur*, the visiting of graves of saints or ancestors, is part and parcel of NU culture, as noted in the introduction to this paper. But Abdurrahman visited more than the shrines of great kyais of the recent past and the canonised saints of Java, that constitute the legitimate objects of Muslim pilgrimage.^[22] He perceived an ongoing struggle in the spirit world between the spirits of *santri* Islam, associated with the north coast, and the indigenous spiritual forces, of whom the

most powerful is the Queen of the Southern Ocean, Ratu Kidul. [23] This struggle, clearly, was the “unseen” dimension of the conflict between *santri* and *abangan*, that had expressed itself so violently in the 1965-66 mass killings (and that presently took the form of ICMI’s efforts to replace *abangan* and Christians in the state apparatus with Modernist Muslims, and fundamentalist efforts to purge Indonesian Islam of all local elements). Abdurrahman’s *ziarah* practices matched his overt efforts to protect religious minorities and bring about a reconciliation between *santri* and *abangan*. His quest brought him in contact with the whole range of Java’s spiritual universe and strengthened his conviction that he was destined to play a major role in holding the nation together.

After he had become president, he made no secret of his visits to sites of sometimes dubious orthodoxy, which included saints that no one had heard of before and non-Islamic sacred spots, besides respectable Muslim shrines and the grave of Sukarno. No doubt these visits served also to increase his legitimacy in the eyes of part of his constituency and to help bringing about a rapprochement between *abangan* and NU circles, even as they were severely disapproved of by many Muslim Modernists. Much though Abdurrahman believed in the real presence of spiritual forces, he was also acutely aware of the political uses of other people’s belief in them. And the more he was criticised by Modernists for his frequent visits to graves, the more his followers in the NU rallied to his defence. Not long before his election as president, both he and Megawati visited Sukarno’s grave. This visit could of course simply be interpreted as a way of showing respect to the country’s first president, but most Javanese would read much more into it: they would assume Abdurrahman and Megawati requested, and searched for a sign that one of them was given, Sukarno’s consent (*restu*) to succeed to his position. Some might wonder if the *wahyu*, the supernatural legitimisation of Javanese kingship, was passed from Sukarno to one of them. Abdurrahman made deliberately vague statements, leaving all interpretations open, but he appeared even more convinced that he would soon be president than he had been before.

Prior to his election, Abdurrahman also took part in a much less publicised ceremony in Parangtritis on Java’s southern coast, which is associated with the Queen of the Southern Ocean. He

was ritually bathed here, in a manner that brings to mind the special relationship of the rulers of Mataram (down to their present successors in Yogyakarta and Solo) with this powerful spirit.^[24] Just like these Javanese kings maintained a balance between the spiritual forces of the north and the south, Islam and indigenous forces, Abdurrahman appeared to be appealing for the Ratu Kidul's consent as he had for that of the *walis* and Sukarno. This was beyond what counts as acceptable practice in NU circles, and to Modernist Muslims it must have been an act of intolerable paganism — but it was quite in character with his professed interest in cultural reconciliation. After the first few months of his presidency, when many Modernists were already disaffected with him, political foes distributed video footage of the Ratu Kidul ceremony in an effort to undermine Muslim support for him.^[25] This appears not to have been very effective since it convinced only those who already had grave doubts about his orthodoxy. To many in his own constituency, the flirt with Ratu Kidul was only one of Abdurrahman's numerous eccentricities, reinforcing their perception that he was not an ordinary human being and therefore should not be judged by the same criteria.

As early as the late 1980s, some people had begun referring to Abdurrahman Wahid himself as a *wali*, a living saint — a term that does not necessarily signify great overt piety but closeness to God, which may be manifest itself in the performance of minor miracles and occasionally eccentric, even antinomian behaviour. Abdurrahman often surprised people by what appeared to be instances of clairvoyance and an uncanny ability to defeat critics and rivals. In combination with his growing obsession with spiritual matters and his unpredictable behaviour, this matched people's expectations of a *wali*. His public statements and behaviour often clashed with conservative NU views of appropriate behaviour. Some friends then defended him by saying NU needed a leader with the courage to bring the organisation into the modern age, other apologists tried to present them as proofs of his being a *wali*. Few of the leading kyais actually believed this (although several told me they were not sure), but increasing numbers among the rank-and-file did. Once he was the president, his often erratic and apparently irrational behaviour was often explained and forgiven with a reference to sainthood, superior knowledge and higher intentions not accessible to ordinary human beings.

Especially during the final months of his presidency, when the military and police were increasingly obstructing his orders, ethnic and religious conflicts proliferated and he was under attack in parliament for alleged corruption, Abdurrahman came to rely strongly on protection from the unseen world — which enraged some of his opponents. His visits to sacred sites and holy men increased even more, and he listened more to “spiritual advisors” than to his ministers. When a new ethnic conflict broke out in Central Kalimantan in February 2001, indigenous Dayaks slaughtering masses of Madurese immigrants, he refused to go there as requested but went on with a planned visit to Medina, where, with a group of “spiritual advisors,” he visited the grave of the Prophet (and was apparently reassured that he would survive all challenges).

All of NU was apparently affected by this obsession with the supernatural — partly, no doubt, because there was little concrete that NU people could do to improve the president’s performance and effectiveness, partly perhaps also because the confrontation with his Modernist opponents induced people to move further away from Modernist attitudes. One Golkar politician of NU background joined in the chorus of Modernist critics and said that the president should occupy himself with the business of government instead of visiting graves; angry readers’ letters in the NU press accused him of disavowing his origin and called him a renegade: had he forgotten that visiting graves is part of the NU tradition?[\[26\]](#) Discussions in NU circles of Abdurrahman’s performance as president and his chances of completing his five-year term were often peppered with references to *kyai khas* and their predictions. Even people whom I had always known as rather sceptical about paranormal phenomena repeated to me the consistently reassuring predictions coming from the unseen world.

Divergent responses in NU circles to Abdurrahman’s presidency

In the 1950s and 1960s, NU had earned a reputation for its strongly patronage-oriented policies and consequent cases of rampant corruption. Under Soeharto too, NU, in spite of its verbal insistence on self-reliance, had been quite eager to accept

handouts from the government. One reason why the withdrawal from “practical politics” and from the PPP in 1984 was popular, was that it allowed individual kyais to establish relations with Golkar in exchange for generous contributions to their pesantrens. It was to be expected that Abdurrahman’s ascent to the presidency would offer unprecedented opportunities for enrichment to at least some groups within NU. The perception, especially among Modernist Muslims, was that this is exactly what happened. “NU people used to travel by train or bus,” one leading Modernist told me in late 2000, “but if you take the plane from Jakarta to Surabaya nowadays you will find the first class filled up with NU people. Many of them have built new houses and own new expensive motorcars.” This observation has to be qualified, however. It is definitely true that some leading NU members — especially those actively involved in politics through the PKB — profited considerably from the situation, but this was resented as much by fellow NU members as by others. Many kyai with whom I spoke claimed that they had not benefited at all and believed it was more profitable for the NU to be outside the government. As one of them said, “when Soeharto or his generals visited a pesantren, they always gave lavish gifts of money; when Habibie came to a pesantren he also brought money; but when Gus Dur visits a pesantren he gives a didactic speech and leaves.”

Most of the material benefits gained by NU people did not come directly from Abdurrahman or government sources, but primarily from businessmen seeking the president’s favours. People perceived to be close to the president did not even have to do anything concrete to find money; money came to them by itself. Many of Abdurrahman’s most trusted old friends did not want to be involved in this and distanced themselves from him. He came to be surrounded by men of a different kind and fell back on often kin-based patronage networks. One of these networks was the PKB, which never became a real political party but remained based on personalised chains of command. Previously he had enjoyed the company of young critical thinkers and NGO activists; the young kyais who were often seen in his entourage in mid-2001 were not remarkable for their social or intellectual outlook but men capable of mobilising masses — among them Kyai As’ad’s son and successor Fawa’id, a man of limited intellectual achievements but one of the most powerful men of Java’s eastern salient.

When he was under attack in parliament — the occasion was provided by a case of alleged misappropriation of government funds, the “Buloggate” affair, and parliament demanded that the president render public account of his performance, which Abdurrahman insisted was only due at the end of his term — he repeatedly threatened that tens of thousands of militant supporters might come to Jakarta to intimidate his opponents. He also threatened that he might dissolve parliament by presidential decree and hold new elections. At two critical moments — when parliament presented the president with memoranda rather in the nature of ultimatums — large groups of strong young men, many of them trained in martial arts and invulnerability techniques — did in fact come from East Java to Jakarta for a show of force, on one occasion beleaguering the parliament building. When Amien Rais and other opponents announced a special session of the MPR for an impeachment procedure, groups of young men all over East Java announced their willingness to die in defence of their president – hence the name by which they became soon known, *Pasukan Berani Mati*, “Ready-to-Die Forces.” During a day of rioting in Pasuruan, both Golkar offices and a Muhammadiyah office were destroyed. (The local PKB leaders happened to be in Jakarta and could therefore deny involvement.)

Many of the kyais with whom I spoke had ambivalent feelings towards Abdurrahman’s presidency. Abdurrahman’s performance was in many respects a disappointment, but they understood the odds against him and were outraged by the way his enemies in parliament tried to bring him down. Some were openly proud of the young men who volunteered to go out on the streets to defend Abdurrahman. The new committee of the NU, led by Hasyim Muzadi (who was Abdurrahman’s preferred successor), was embarrassed both by Abdurrahman’s erratic behaviour and by the mobilisation of violence-prone youth. Hasyim and several of his colleagues, piqued about the ongoing mobilisation that bypassed the formal NU organisation, spent much time in June and July trying to calm down their constituency and persuading it to refrain from rash actions.

The various NU-affiliated NGOs kept a careful distance from the presidential palace and largely remained unaffected. Those NGO activists who were recruited by the PKB and became

intensely involved in practical politics were almost considered as renegades. A national conference of NU-affiliated local NGOs, in March 2001, while emphasising the urgent need for political and economic democratisation, called upon the board of the NU to stay out of “practical politics” and urged their own members to continue the extra-parliamentary struggle through the development of discourse and practical work at the grassroots. Noting that such potential for political reformation and liberalisation as Abdurrahman’s administration might have been sabotaged by a coalition of Islamic fundamentalists and stalwarts of the old regime, the conference nonetheless warned members not to become caught up in intra-elite factional politics.^[27] In the days following the riots in Pasuruan, the chairman of Lakpesdam, the one NGO that was officially established and endorsed by the NU, called upon the board of the NU to stick to the Situbondo decisions and not to identify itself with the PKB or president Abdurrahman Wahid (both of whom, he obliquely suggested, might have been involved in, or have connived in the violence).^[28] All were angered by the efforts to topple Abdurrahman, which they felt were meant to end the processes of reformation and democratisation, but they disagreed as much with the attempts by other NU circles to interfere in parliamentary procedures with mob violence.

All these NGO activists were university graduates, or at least advanced students, and most had been somewhat influenced by Marxist thought — at least to the extent of looking at society through the prism of class analysis and distinguishing economic base and ideological superstructure — and postmodernism’s celebration of pluralism and hybridity.^[29] The participants in the March conference praised “multiculturalism” — by which in this context they meant the acceptance of religious diversity and protection of minorities — and acknowledged the inspiration they had received from Abdurrahman Wahid the liberal thinker but were adamant that they should not remain under his shadow.

The estrangement between two types of youth organisation associated with the NU — the students’ union PMII on the one hand and the Ansor and its paramilitary wing Banser on the other — was deepened due to their different responses to Abdurrahman’s presidency. The students had always been somewhat dismissive of what they considered the “primitive” mentality of the Banser youth and remembered well the role of

Banser in the 1965-66 killings.[\[30\]](#) Following the demise of the New Order, the ideological differences between both groups were sharpened. Whereas the NGO activists were drawn towards the left and sought a dialogue with non-Muslims, leftists and the victims of the New Order's anti-communism, anti-communist discourse remained strong among at least some (though not all) of the paramilitary groups. Gus Makshum, a kyai from Kediri who was renowned as an expert of magical martial arts techniques and who had trained many anti-communist youth in 1965-66, went around training youth groups for action against the "enemies of Islam", Christians and communists (by which he much have meant the PDI-P and especially the leftist student activists).[\[31\]](#)

Related to, but not identical with this widening gap between these two youth groups was that between the young commoners and the upper "caste" in the NU, referred to as the "*Gus-Gus*." The NU has a strict hierarchy based on birth; the kyais constitute an endogamous caste, within which the families of the founding father hold the highest position. A man of common origin may be very learned but will never be recognised as a kyai, whereas a kyai's son will always enjoy respect even if he is an idiot. In the pesantren, the kyai's sons are addressed with the respectful title Gus and when speaking about them one might use the same title in front of their (often abbreviated) names: Gus Muhammad (or Gus Mad), Gus Abdullah (Gus Dullah), or Gus Abdurrahman (Gus Dur). Abdurrahman Wahid may have been the first who came to be widely known by his "caste" name outside the pesantren, and only in the late 1990s did people start using it in preference to his full name. Many others began using the title too, or accepted being addressed by it; it carried clear implications of claims to respect and privilege.[\[32\]](#) Suddenly there were numerous Gus, which made the caste division within the NU more visible and led to a certain resentment. The NU was established as an association of ulama, kyais, but it derived its strength from the large mass of commoner followers. Many of the "*Gus-Gus*" felt they were the rightful masters of the organisation, and they found it quite natural to mobilise masses of commoners. The NGO activists, on the other hand, became aware that the interests of the common people were not necessarily identical with those of the ulama elite and even less with those of kyais' offspring of little talent.

The final days

Twelve days before the special session of the MPR was due, Abdurrahman Wahid made a trip to East Java to meet the leading kyai. The prospects were dim: all major parties wished him to give public account of his performance and appeared determined to impeach him if he did not. The only pundits who did not predict his impending fall were the *kyai khas*; all over the country clairvoyants were predicting his political survival. He remained himself busy negotiating with the major players, still hoping he might persuade them to change their vote in exchange for concessions and promises — and he needed support from the unseen world to bring this about. He was going to visit the graves of his grandfather and mother in the family pesantren in Tebuireng, Jombang, after his meeting with the kyais in Kediri. His mother, an unusually strong woman, had been a major source of moral and spiritual support during her life, and she had recently appeared to several members of the family in dreams, suggesting she would neutralise evil influences.

The several hundred kyais who were assembled in the pesantren Lirboyo in Kediri on July 19 were much more nervous than Abdurrahman appeared to be. He addressed them in his usual relaxed style, with many jokes, and reassured them that he was still in control and that he could deal with the MPR single-handedly. He urged them not to send people to Jakarta to demonstrate, for street violence would only harm the image of the NU. Before the public address, there were more private meetings with selected, prominent kyais. Abdurrahman told them he expected a compromise and that he would not need to carry out his threat of dissolving parliament and the MPR; but if he needed to do so, he could still count on the loyalty of the special forces, the crucial factor in Jakarta politics, even if the general staff of the armed forces was opposed to him.^[33] He spent a half hour with about a dozen *kyai khas* in the private quarters of the host, Kyai Idris, no doubt communicating with the unseen world. A *kris*, wrapped in green cloth, apparently the repository of great supernatural force, lent by one of the kyai, was taken back to Jakarta.

Three days later, around two thousand kyais from all over the country assembled in a pesantren in Tangerang, near Jakarta, to throw their weight behind Gus Dur and give him moral support. The situation was extremely tense, for in response to an attempt by Abdurrahman to replace the openly disobedient police chief Bimantoro by his deputy Chaerudin — a transparent attempt to tighten his control of security in Jakarta — the special session of the MPR had been moved forward to the following day, July 23. The meeting was hosted by Kyai Nur Iskandar, an old friend of Abdurrahman but an embarrassing ally, who had once publicly called for Amien Rais' blood, and it was organised by young kyais known for their involvement with the *Pasukan Berani Mati*. Several of the more sober senior kyais had declined to come, but surprisingly many were in fact present; all appeared to feel that the threat to Abdurrahman also concerned themselves. It was not only President Gus Dur who was being humiliated; it was the NU and its subculture, it was the kyais, it was the entire, relatively backward segment of the population represented by the NU who were being humiliated. With Abdurrahman's election to the presidency, the NU had for the first time known itself to be a fully accepted element of the nation, as worthy of leading it as any other. His imminent ousting was a blow to self-respect.

After listening to a few fiery sermons and edifying prayers, the kyais joined in a chaotic discussion on what should be done. By the end of the day, this resulted in a six-point resolution: judging the procedure to call a special session of the MPR unconstitutional and obedience to the legitimate head of state a religious duty, the kyais advised the President to “freeze” parliament and the MPR and organise early elections. They appealed to the armed forces and police to act as the protectors of the people and refrain from violations of human rights, and called upon their grassroots supporters to avoid violence. These recommendations were surprisingly radical, given that many senior kyais were known to have grave reservations about dissolving parliament; the moderate voices (among which that of the NU chairman, Hasyim Muzadi) were overruled. A delegation of kyais, led by Kyai Abdullah Faqih, took these recommendations to the palace — but not without first prudently stopping at the residence of the Chief of the General Staff.

That evening Abdurrahman made a final, unsuccessful attempt to replace the army leadership. When it was clear he had lost, he issued his decree dissolving parliament, the MPR and the Golkar party. Support of the kyais and NGO activists present in the palace probably hardly played a part in his decision; he had gambled and lost, but decided to play his last card. The following morning, the president of the Supreme Court declared the decree invalid, and the special session of the MPR deposed Abdurrahman; by noon Megawati was appointed as his successor and in the afternoon she was sworn in. The MPR, boycotted by the PKB, took care to avoid the impression of acting against the NU as such by giving people of NU background in other parties a prominent role in the proceedings. [34] The PPP had for the same reason chosen NU man Hamzah Haz as its leader instead of his Modernist rival A.M. Saefuddin. Hamzah, who hailed from West Kalimantan and had climbed through the ranks to national leadership, belonged to a faction that had been sidelined by Abdurrahman Wahid. He could count on support from Traditionalists in the Jakarta region and the outer islands but was also considered as a fundamentalist of sorts. He and Golkar's Akbar Tanjung competed for the position of vice-president. With Hamzah's election, many in the MPR no doubt hoped that this might prevent total disaffection and alienation on the part of the NU.

Back to Situbondo?

Against all expectations, there were no violent protests against Abdurrahman's dismissal, not even large demonstrations of solidarity on Merdeka Square. This was probably largely due to the central board of the NU, which had persuaded major actors that restraint was in the organisation's best interest. Even East Java remained quiet — though many simply refused to recognise the special session of the MPR and continued regarding Abdurrahman Wahid as the legitimate president. (Even as I am writing, in December 2001, I am told by friends there that in many shops and offices Abdurrahman's official portrait has not been taken down, but that of his vice president, Megawati, has.) In the pesantrens and branch offices that I visited in the following weeks, people showed surprise at their

own restraint; they claimed Gus Dur himself had ordered them to stay at home but some wondered whether these orders had really come from him or from NU administrators eager to prevent a clash with the new authorities. Most people, however, were less concerned with what had gone wrong than with the policies to be adopted in the new situation. Should the NU be involved in “practical politics” or only in social action? Should it designate the PKB as the one and only political vehicle for NU members or should it keep equal distance from all parties? In what way should the NU struggle for democratisation and the economic interests of its constituency? People looked forward to Abdurrahman’s first visit to the region, wondering what he would tell them to do.

Many intellectuals and NGO activists in Jakarta welcomed Abdurrahman’s return “from the state to civil society” and hoped he would resume the sort of role that he had played in the early 1990s. He announced his intention to work as a sort of ombudsman defending ordinary people’s rights through a new foundation, the Yayasan Manusia Merdeka. His house in Ciganjur became once again, as in the old days, a centre where human rights activists, ulama, people from the arts and the media, students, and ordinary people mixed and announced they would continue the struggle for *reformasi* and for strengthening civil society. I was curious what sort of welcome Gus Dur would be given in his other home, East Java, and how he would address his followers there.

In the morning of 7 August, Surabaya’s airport was packed with people who had come to get a glance of Abdurrahman Wahid; the VIP rooms were crowded with dignitaries. Many more had come to welcome him than at the time of his last visit as the president. The roads by which he was to pass on the way to Situbondo were lined with rows and rows of schoolchildren singing patriotic songs and waving flags. Banners along the way welcomed him as the “president of the Indonesian people” (*Presiden Rakyat Indonesia*, playing on his previous formal title of *Presiden Republik Indonesia*), father and teacher of the nation. In Kyai As’ad’s pesantren in Situbondo, tens of thousands were already waiting for him. As his dusty old Mercedes moved slowly forward through the crowd, *santris* fought to come closer and touch and kiss the car. Here he was clearly not only the president, father and teacher, but also the

wali of the people. (Later that day, in Bondowoso, where at least as many people were awaiting his arrival, one preacher told the public that they were awaiting the *Ratu Adil*, the Just King of Javanese messianic expectations.)

Kyai As'ad had until his death refused to reconcile himself with Abdurrahman and remained an embittered foe until the end, but today no one wished to be reminded of that. The host, Fawa'id As'ad, hailed Abdurrahman as the president of the people of Indonesia and said Gus Dur had been invited to this *khaul* in order to show the whole world that he had been unconstitutionally removed from office but still enjoyed the warm support of the people. Fawa'id's father, Kyai As'ad, he said, had struggled against Dutch colonial occupation as well as against colonialists with an Indonesian face, and the latter struggle was far from over. Who exactly these internal colonialists were and what the struggle consisted of, he did not say, but the clear implication was that Gus Dur was continuing that struggle and was given unconditional support.

Fawa'id was visibly enjoying his day; he had only recently been able to drift closer to Gus Dur. I remember first having met him at the 1989 NU congress, where he had come instead of his angry father. He had the arrogance of a *Gus* who believes himself entitled to privileged treatment, and he looked the part: young but already overweight, a fat ringed hand always ready to be kissed. Neither the senior kyais nor Gus Dur and his friends paid him much attention, for he had nothing of interest to say, and young educated people openly mocked him for his large turban and lack of content. But he wanted to be part of the "modern" NU; though not a bookish man himself, he tried to stimulate intellectual life in his pesantren. Neither mystic and magician, nor intellectual or social activist, he never made it into Gus Dur's inner circle until the days when the latter was in need of strong grassroots support. In the past months, he had frequently been to Jakarta and was often photographed close to Gus Dur. I doubt whether he understood much of Abdurrahman's religious, political and social thought but he endorsed it — which he also showed by inviting speakers who made this a more exciting event than the average *khaul*. It is the support of men like him, with great authority over an entire region, that gives Abdurrahman's thought the potential for effecting social change.

Abdurrahman's speech here was his first opportunity to explain to his largest constituency how he saw the struggle that had to be fought. He acknowledged his return to Situbondo in more than one sense. He gave credit both to Kyai As'ad himself and to the decisions taken at the 1984 NU congress here. The NU had, he said, accepted Pancasila as its ideology because in those days there was a real danger of a violent conflict between Islam and nationalism (as, clearly, there was now). There were, and are, people striving for an Islamic state (he did not need to mention the *Poros Tengah*, Amien Rais and Hamzah Haz, for most understood easily whom he meant), but the NU had already decided at its congress in Banjarmasin in 1936 that there was no need for an Islamic state as long as people were free to practice their religion. Most NU people belong to the poorer classes and have other priorities, such as the struggle for political and economic democracy and for the rule of law. They are fed up with those who want to maintain the status quo to protect vested interests. The Qur'an, as we know, enjoins mutual forgiving, but it also speaks of justice. And justice is what the underprivileged of the country demand.

The threats to be fought against, he implied, were radical Islam and the entrenched power elite of the New Order (who had colluded in forcing him out of office). But the nature of the struggle had to be peaceful and follow the rules of the democratic game. He wanted his followers to be principled but non-violent, and he even rejected civil disobedience. A few days earlier, NU activists in nearby Bondowoso had been arrested for distributing leaflets that rejected the special MPR session (and therefore Megawati's election as president) as unconstitutional and called for the dissolution of Golkar. Such quick action by the police, that had never taken action against President Abdurrahman Wahid's opponents, had caused much indignation. But rather than ordering massive protest actions, as some local people no doubt had hoped for, he only insisted that the law should be equal for everybody and that it was for legal experts to decide whether the laws had been properly applied. The way back to power was not through demonstrations but through the ballot box.

More than what he said, it was his style of speaking that was new. There was a toughness and power to his voice that I had

not noticed before. He had become a fiery orator, capable of electrifying his audience, and this became even clearer in the second address that day in Bondowoso, where tens of thousands had gathered in the *alun-alun* to hear him and where he spoke again of struggle for democracy and human rights. His immediate rapport with the crowd was palpable, his words and the emotions of the crowd seemed synchronised. He sounded like a populist demagogue, and I found myself thinking of Tjokroaminoto and Sukarno and the latter's mystique of union with the people — but the message was one of anger, justice and... proper democratic procedure. This was, effectively, the beginning of the election campaign for 2004.

In this last respect, there was no return to Situbondo 1984: no retreat from “practical politics,” no equal distance to political parties. The PKB remained Gus Dur's chosen instrument, and he expected his allies and followers to rally behind this party. His heavy-handed intervention in party affairs — such as appointments and dismissals, and the agenda of party conventions (such as was to take place less than a week later) — indicated that this was indeed Gus Dur's party.

This leaves the NU with an old dilemma: should it associate itself closely with one political party, even if this is Gus Dur's? And can it fight for procedural democracy and at the same time maintain an internal structure of authority based on charisma and descent? Two decades of debates on democratisation, civil society, human rights, good governance and equality before the law have made an impact. Even in Situbondo, Bondowoso and Jember, young commoners have begun questioning the authority of the kyais and the *Gus-Gus*. Young men told me that they were grateful to Gus Dur for teaching them to think independently — adding that this might well mean they would not follow him and have to part company with the NU's traditional elite.

[1] This paper contains preliminary notes of a field trip to Java in June-August 2001, during which the author visited numerous pesantren, branch offices of NU and NGOs affiliated with this organisation, and had the

privilege of accompanying Abdurrahman Wahid on his last presidential and his first post-presidential tour of East Java. It also draws on numerous conversations the author had with Abdurrahman and other NU personnel as well as ordinary members during his stay in Indonesia from 1986 to 1994 and later shorter visits. The author is presently affiliated with ISIM, the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World, and teaches at Utrecht University.

[2] I use the terms “Modernist” and “Traditionalist” here in the sense in which they are commonly used in Indonesia to describe the major dichotomy in Indonesian Islam, even though especially the former is hardly an appropriate description of the various Islamist and fundamentalist currents it includes.

[3] Abdurrahman Wahid once told me that for this reason membership in Nahdlatul Ulama does not end with death.

[4] As’ad even claimed to have played a minor part in the establishment of the NU, see his biography (written under the supervision of his son Fawa’id): KHM. Hasan Basri, *KHR. As'ad Syamsul Arifin, riwayat hidup dan perjuangannya* (Surabaya: CV. Sahabat Ilmu, 1994).

[5] Visitors to the sacred cave at Karangnunggal, on the south coast of Tasikmalaya in West Java, are still shown the narrow underground corridor through which the 17th-century Sufi teacher, Shaykh Abdulmuhyi (sometimes called “the tenth saint of Java”), who lived here, passed each Friday on his supernatural voyage to Mecca. As a rational explanation of such supernatural voyages to Mecca, Abdurrahman Wahid once told me of another kyai believed to perform them. One Friday a sceptical santri broke into the kyai’s room and found him there in prayer — but facing an enormous Ka’ba, that he had apparently visualised by the power of his concentration. (Visualisations, perhaps a borrowing from Tantrism, are practised in some Sufi orders; there are accounts of visualisations being so strong that they can be observed by others.)

[6] One version of the events — including part of the conspiracy theory that Abdurrahman and his friends adhered to — is given in: Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 190-3. Both the churches and the NU’s youth organisation Ansor investigated the background of the events and published reports: Paul Tahalele and Thomas Santoso, *Beginikah kemerdekaan kita?* (Surabaya: Forum Komunikasi Kristiani Indonesia, 1997); Tim Pencari Fakta GP Ansor Jatim, *Fakta dan kesaksian tragedi Situbondo* (Surabaya: 1997). Thomas Santoso, co-author of the first report, later wrote a Ph.D. dissertation on the Situbondo events: “Kekerasan politik - agama: studi historis - sosiologis atas perusakan gereja di Situbondo” (FISIP, Universitas Airlangga, 2002).

[7] Greg Fealy, “The 1994 NU Congress and aftermath: Abdurrahman Wahid, *suksesi* and the battle for control of NU”, in: Greg Barton and Greg Fealy (ed.), *Nahdlatul Ulama, traditional Islam and modernity in Indonesia* (Clayton, VIC: Monash Asia Institute, 1996), pp. 257-277; Marzuki Wahid, Abd. Moqsith Ghazali and Suwendi (ed.), *Geger di “Republik” NU* (Jakarta: Kompas bekerja sama dengan Lakpesdam, 1999).

[8] For the background to this congress, see: Martin van Bruinessen, *NU: tradisi, relasi-relasi kuasa, pencarian wacana baru* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1994), esp. chapter 4, “Jalan ke Situbondo: konflik faksi, Pancasila, dan kembali ke Khittah”; Andrée Feillard, *Islam et armée dans l'Indonésie contemporaine: les pionniers de la tradition* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995); Mitsuo Nakamura, “NU's leadership crisis and search for identity in the early 1980s: from the Semarang Congress to the 1984 Situbondo Congress”, in: Greg Barton and Greg Fealy (ed.), *Nahdlatul Ulama, traditional Islam and modernity in Indonesia* (Clayton, VIC: Monash Asia Institute, 1996), pp. 94-109.

[9] For an analysis of the progressive content of this “return” to tradition see: Martin van Bruinessen, “Traditions for the future: the reconstruction of Traditionalist discourse within NU”, in: Greg Barton and Greg Fealy (ed.), *Nahdlatul Ulama, traditional Islam and modernity in Indonesia*. Clayton, VIC: Monash Asia Institute, 1996, pp. 163-189.

[10] At the national NU conference in Cilacap in 1987, Abdurrahman Wahid had to confront a group of former allies, led by Mahbub Djunaedi, who considered the depoliticisation of the NU a grave mistake and wanted it to establish a new political party. Abdurrahman’s chief argument against them was that Indonesian law left no room for a fourth party besides the three official ones.

[11] Marcus Mietzner, “Nationalism and Islamic politics: political Islam in the post-Suharto era”, in: Arief Budiman, Barbara Hatley and Damien Kingsbury (eds), *Reformasi: crisis and change in Indonesia*, Clayton: Monash Asia Institute, 1999, pp. 173-99.

[12] I was invited on a number of separate occasions during and after the congress to take part in discussions organised by critical NU youth on the style of opposition to be adopted towards the new government (and, for that matter, towards the new NU leadership).

[13] Interviews with Arvin Hakim, then the Banser chief, and various other persons in Abdurrahman’s immediate environment, November 1999.

[14] The classical study of Modernism in Indonesia is: Deliar Noer, *The Modernist Muslim movement in Indonesia 1900-1940* (Kuala Lumpur, etc.: Oxford University Press, 1973); on tradition and Traditionalism, see van

Bruinessen, “Traditions for the future”.

[15] Cf. My analysis of ICMI in: Martin van Bruinessen, “Islamic state or state Islam? Fifty years of state-Islam relations in Indonesia”, in: Ingrid Wessel (ed.), *Indonesien am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Hamburg: Abera-Verlag, 1996), pp. 19-34.

[16] See the articles on the “Operasi Naga Hijau” in *Forum Keadilan*, 12 February 1997, and the passages in Hefner’s *Civil Islam* referred to in note 6 above.

[17] The most detailed survey of the manoeuvres is: Marcus Mietzner, “The 1999 General Assembly: Abdurrahman, Megawati and the fight for the presidency”, in: Chris Manning and Peter Van Diermen (ed.), *Indonesia in transition: social aspects of reformasi and crisis* (Singapore: ISEAS / London: Zed Books, 2000).

[18] Interview, August 5, 2001.

[19] On this distinction, see: Muridan S. Widjojo and Moch. Nurhasim, “Organisasi gerakan mahasiswa 98: upaya rekonstruksi”, in: Muridan S. Widjojo, et al. (ed.), *Penakluk rejim Orde Baru: gerakan mahasiswa '98* (Jakarta: Sinar Harapan, 1999), pp. 290-376. Forkot (Forum Kota) was Jakarta’s major anti-New Order student movement, Famred later split from it; in other cities, ideologically related movements went by different names. The largest Islamic student movement was KAMMI, on which see: Robin Madrid, “Islamic students in the Indonesian student movement, 1998-1999”, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 31 (1999), 17-32; Richard G. Kraince, “The role of Islamic student groups in the Reformasi struggle: KAMMI (Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia)”, *Studia Islamika* 7 no. 1 (2000), 1-50.

[20] The term “unseen world” alludes deliberately to Merle Ricklefs’ superb study, *The seen and unseen worlds in Java, 1726-1749. History, literature and Islam in the court of Pakubuwana II* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin and Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998). This work yields valuable insight in elite Javanese views of the interaction of spiritual and material forces in politics.

[21] This was not a very commonly used term within the NU until the late 1990s, when it was popularised by journalists reporting on Kyai Abdullah Faqih’s role in the NU. The Arabic term *khas*, which carries connotations of a spiritual elite (as opposed to the common believer) may in this context be translated as “specially gifted”.

[22] Chief objects of pilgrimage are the “nine saints” (*wali sanga*) believed to be responsible for the Islamisation of Java. Local traditions vary as to

who exactly these nine were, and the number of recognised founding fathers of Islam, most of them on the north coast, adds up to more than nine. Then there is a large number of lesser Muslim shrines of local importance, as well as numerous sacred spots visited by syncretists but avoided by the stricter Muslims. Recent studies of *ziarah* include: James J. Fox, “Ziarah visits to the tombs of the wali, the founders of Islam on Java”, in: M.C. Ricklefs (ed.), *Islam in the Indonesian social context* (Clayton: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies Monash University, 1991), pp. 19-38; Claude Guillot and Henri Chambert-Loir, “Indonésie”, in: Henri Chambert-Loir and Claude Guillot (ed.), *Le culte des saints dans le monde musulman* (Paris: EFEO, 1995, pp. 235-260); Martin van Bruinessen, “Najmuddin al-Kubra, Jumadil Kubra and Jamaluddin al-Akbar: Traces of Kubrawiyya influence in early Indonesian Islam”, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 150 (1994), 305-329; Jamhari, “In the centre of meaning: Ziarah tradition in Java”, *Studia Islamika* 7 no. 1 (2000), 51-90.

[23] Judith Schlehe, *Die Meereskönigin des Südens, Ratu Kidul: Geisterpolitik im javanischen Alltag* (Berlin: Reimer, 1998).

[24] Cf. Ricklefs, *Seen and unseen worlds*, pp. 8-13. I never had a chance to discuss this particular event with Abdurrahman, since I learned about it rather late, and my interpretation is necessarily speculative.

[25] I did not get hold of a copy of this footage (distributed on VCD); it was no longer a hot item during my visit in mid-2001. A few times, anti-government demonstrators referred to it, banners calling Abdurrahman a Ratu Kidul worshipper not worthy of being the president of a Muslim people.

[26] This politician was Slamet Effendy Yusuf, once a close associate of Abdurrahman but since many years an irreconcilable foe.

[27] The text of the minutes and decisions of the Musyawarah Nasional Kaummuda NU in Malang, March 2001, was kindly provided me by the coordinator of the conference, Anom Surya Putra.

[28] “Ulil: NU Hendaknya Kembali ke Khittah”, *Kompas*, 6 June 2001.

[29] The latter is apparent from several contributions in a recent collection of writings by young NU NGO activists: Hairus Salim HS and Muhammad Ridwan (ed.), *Kultur hibrida: anak muda NU di jalur kultural* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1999).

[30] An interesting oral history study of the killings was, incidentally, produced by a local branch of Ansor itself: Agus Sunyoto, et al., *Banser berjihad menumpas PKI* (Tulungagung: Lembaga Kajian dan pengembangan PW. GP. Ansor Jawa Timur & Pesulukan Thoriqah Agung

(PETA), 1996). The study does not deny the violent role of Banser but emphasises that the killings were carried out at the initiative of the army.

[31] In late June 2001, he came to the Yogya area to initiate the training of a recently established youth militia, Pergerakan Pemuda Islam, in the pesantren village of Mlangi. In a brief interview I had with him on July 22, he claimed to have done so in various parts of Java.

[32] Abdurrahman's younger brother Solahuddin, who had never been involved in the NU but who in 1998 began publishing articles fiercely critical of Abdurrahman in the ICMI newspaper *Republika* and the (nationalist) paper *Media Indonesia* and who appeared to aspire to a leading position in the NU, was restyled as "Gus Solah" by his supporters. Friends of another ambitious younger brother, Hasyim, began referring to him as "Gus Iim."

[33] The top brass had lost patience with Abdurrahman, both because of his interference in army matters — he had sidelined several powerful and politically ambitious generals — and because of his leadership style in general. The commanders of Kostrad and Kopassus, who owed their appointments to him, had declared him their loyalty, as had the special units of the Navy and Air Force.

[34] These included the secretary-general of the MPR, Umar Basalim, and the spokespersons of Golkar (Slamet Effendy Yusuf) and the small Muslim parties (Satari).