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**DEFENDERS OF DIVERSITY?
THE LEGACY OF THE 1965-66 MASSACRES
FOR A MUSLIM YOUTH ORGANIZATION IN INDONESIA**

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Abstract

Banser is the paramilitary wing of Ansor, the young men's organization for Nahdlatul Ulama (Renaissance of the Scholars; NU). NU is the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, and because Indonesia is so large, the largest in the world. It has been long committed to Indonesia as a non-shariah state as well as multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation. Nahdlatul Ulama's young men's organization Ansor, seeks to train non-radical Muslim leaders with a range of expertise and foci. Ansor has a sub-organization called Banser which regularly guards Christian churches, liberal Muslims, and businesses from being targeted by extremists like the Islamic Defenders Front. If the present, or even recent, history of Banser and Ansor is that of protecting religious minorities and pluralism, this has not always been the case. Ansor/Banser was an important auxiliary force in the Revolution (1945-1949) and in the 1965-1966 national bloodletting that left 500,000 alleged communists

dead. It is even more telling and interesting if we explore the ways in which the newer socially progressive actions are based on conservative, traditional understandings of Islam and not liberal or progressive religious understandings.

Keywords: Ansor, Banser, NU, History, Youth movement

A. Introduction

On December 24th, 2000 two young Muslims in paramilitary uniforms stood outside a church in Surakarta, Central Java. The Christmas Eve service was underway. They were on assigned guard duty. One of them, Riyanto, discovered a bomb that had been placed next to the church. Lacking either the time or the expertise to diffuse the bomb, he did the only thing he could, he took up the bomb, shouted a warning, and ran away from the church. It exploded in his arms severely wounding his compatriot and killing him. In the 20 plus years since this happened, Riyanto has been honored with the appellation, the Hero of Peace, has been made the focus of a display at the Nahdlatul Ulama museum in Surabaya, and has had annual memorial services to not only remember him and honor his sacrifice but to reinforce for the members of his militia that such sacrifices are expected of them all. Even in other settings, Riyanto is held up as example to be followed. He is the shining example of what it means to be in Banser.

Banser is the paramilitary wing of Ansor, the young men's organization for Nahdlatul Ulama (Renaissance of the Scholars; NU). NU is the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, and because Indonesia is so large, the largest in the world. It has been long committed to Indonesia as a non-shariah state as well as multi-religious and multi-ethnic

nation (Barton 2002, Bush 2009). Nahdlatul Ulama's young men's organization Ansor, seeks to train non-radical Muslim leaders with a range of expertise and foci. Ansor has a sub-organization called Banser which regularly guards Christian churches, liberal Muslims, and businesses from being targeted by extremists like the Islamic Defenders Front. In June 2000, it was prepared to send forces to defend Christians against attacks from a Muslim militia called Laskar Jihad. Further, Banser volunteers have been responders to "shock" events like earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. As of late, they have worked with local and national security forces to prepare to counter ISIS if it were to come to Indonesia.

If the present, or even recent, history of Banser and Ansor is that of protecting religious minorities and pluralism, this has not always been the case. Ansor/Banser was an important auxiliary force in the Revolution (1945-1949) and in the 1965-1966 national bloodletting that left 500,000 alleged communists dead. Current members of Ansor and Banser interpret both the slaughter of communists and the protection of Christians as arising from protecting the unity and sanctity of the Indonesian State. However, historical accounts make it abundantly clear that economic tensions and manipulations by the military were important in 1965 (Sulistiyo 1997, Roosa 2006, Robinson 2018: 7, 133). What needs to be explored is the historical trajectory of an organization formed in revolution and anointed in blood (1965-1966) that is now pluralistic. Further, it is even more telling and interesting if we explore the ways in which the newer socially progressive actions are based on conservative, traditional understandings of Islam and not liberal or progressive religious understandings.

B. Overview of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Ansor, and Banser

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) was established in 1926 by several leaders of the *pesantren* (traditional Islamic boarding school) based traditionalist, or classicalist (Lukens-Bull 2005:14) community to support and coordinate the efforts of that community in the context of Dutch colonialism (Fealy and Barton 1999). I have conducted research in and around NU and the traditional religious community it represents since 1992. I have worked with Ansor since the summer of 2014 examining its history, interviewing leaders, and attending events from the local to the national scale. A common theme I have heard in NU circles since the 1990s is that faith is a personal matter not a state matter or even a societal matter. If you want a Muslim (this could work for any religion) society, they would argue that you should preach and teach. Convince others of your point of view, but do not dictate and legislate. But NU in general, and its youth movement (Ansor) specifically, are working to define a conservative Islam that can be part of civil society, respect the rights of others, and insist on the peaceful resolution of conflicts. In religious matters, there are conservative people; they are creating a conservative Muslim perspective on defending to the death (literally) the rights and safety of minorities

NU has a number of autonomous units that are responsible for different segments of NU's mission including young men, young women, school age children, university students, and traditional Islamic education among others. Figure 1 shows the major autonomous organizations under the NU umbrella (indicated by a dotted line). These

organizations, like Ansor, receive advice and guidance from the NU national leadership, but do not receive directives. Banser is a semi-autonomous organization under Ansor; it can and does receive directives from the Ansor national leadership (indicated by a direct line). Ansor, in general, is loyal to NU – culturally if not always organizationally (there have been historical disagreements; Anam 1996 23-24, 81-82). Further, Banser members will refer to their organization the guard dog of the *kyai*¹ (traditional Muslim leaders), which emphasizes the important of traditional authority in the NU community. The main NU organization is run by men typically over the age of 50 and has roles for both religious scholars (‘alim, kyai) and laymen. Nahdlatul Ulama’s young men’s organization Ansor, seeks to train non-radical Muslim leaders with a range of expertise and foci. Ansor has a sub-organization called Banser which regularly guards Christian churches, liberal Muslims, and businesses from being targeted by extremists like the Islamic Defenders Front (Syaefudin 2014, Woodward et al 2104 Facal 2020). In June 2000, it was prepared to send forces to defend Christians against attacks from `a Muslim militia called Laskar Jihad. Further, Banser volunteers have been responders to “shock” events like earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. As of late, they have worked with local and national security forces to prepare to counter ISIS if it were to come to Indonesia.

If the present, or even recent, history of Banser and Ansor is that of protecting religious minorities and pluralism, this has not always been the case. Ansor/Banser was an

¹ Although dogs are sometimes considered unclean, guard dogs are generally acceptable, so the phrase is not as odd as it might seem.

important auxiliary force in the Revolution (1945-1949) and in the 1965-1966 national bloodletting that left 500,000 alleged communists dead. Current members of Ansor and Banser interpret both the slaughter of communists and the protection of Christians as arising from protecting the unity and sanctity of the Indonesian State. However, historical accounts (cf. Sulistiyo 1997) make it abundantly clear that economic reasons may have been paramount. What needs to be explored is the historical trajectory of an organization formed in revolution, anointed in blood (1965-1966), and that is now pluralistic. Further, it is even more telling and interesting if we explore the ways in which the newer socially progressive actions are based on conservative, traditional understandings of Islam and not liberal or progressive religious understandings. Also involved is the question of Islamic authenticity; what is an authentic NU position? Has NU/Ansor's position changed or is there a consistent vision or agenda across this history?

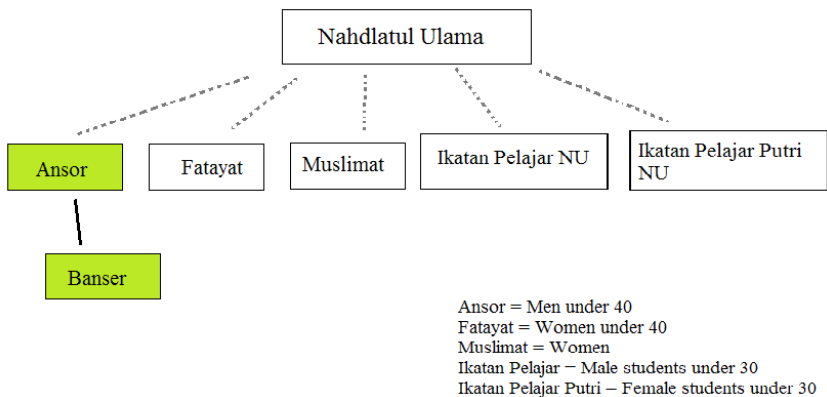


Figure 1: NU and NU sub-organizations

Today, as an organization, NU is committed to anti-radicalism, although Mietzner and Muhtadi have recently shown that self-identifying as a follower of NU does not always translated into anti-radical, pluralist or views (2020)². Some NU leaders asserted that many radical groups target a particular demographic (18-25, strong western education, little Islamic education)³ (Lukens-Bull 2001:364). Therefore several NU *kyais* have sought to inoculate this population either through *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) created specifically for university students or by opening up their *pesantren* to university students. In either case, *pesantren* tradition is altered so that the students may daily leave the *pesantren* campus for outside education. The best example of this is Pesantren Al-Hikam in Malang which was founded by Hasyim Muzadi (Abdurrahman Wahid's successor to the General Chairmanship of NU) who states that he had the specific purpose of creating anti-radicals when he established Pesantren Mahasiswa Al-Hikam (Lukens-Bull 2001). Elsewhere, I detail the efforts of this *pesantren* and the ways in which they are defining a way in which to interact with the West, the modern world, and globalization in a specifically

² It is beyond the scope of the present paper to fully interrogate these findings. It noted that Mietzner and Muhtadi used a random sample of Indonesian in which they asked with which major organization respondents identified. Millions of Indonesians identify with NU, Muhammadiyah, and other organizations without ever participating in them. There is no contradiction whatsoever between the idea that NU, as an organization, is plural, tolerant, and anti-radical and the fact that people who self-identify as being NU in orientation are in fact none of those things. What is needed is a survey that correlates degree of involvement in the organization, including formal training, and these perspectives.

³ This is certainly true for groups like Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), Partai Keadilan Sejahtara (PKS, Justice and Prosperity Party), , an affiliate of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. This is not true for the Islamic Defenders Front, or FPI.

Islamic way. Hasyim Muzadi and other NU leaders assert that the *kitab kuning* (yellow books), which include classical Shafi'i *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence)⁴, are the best defense against radicalism (reference removed for blind review).

Ansor and Banser, currently hold two core values: 1) NKRI, Negara Kesatuan Republic Indonesia, a unified Indonesia; 2) Ahlus Sunna wal Jamaah (People of the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad and his Community), a gloss for the traditional religious practices most closely associated with Nahdlatul Ulama. The value of NKRI necessarily includes upholding the state ideology of *Pancasila* (Five Principles) which encourages pluralism in religious practice, and the national slogan of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, or Unity in Diversity (Winataputra 2008). This value sets it in opposition to both national groups like the Islam Defenders Front (FPI) and international groups like Hizbut ut-Tahrir⁵ and the Muslim Brotherhood, both of which have a presence in Indonesia. An extension of NKRI is the Rule of Law. In general, this means a rejection of violence. However, when violence has been used by the organization in the past, and even when they offered to use violence in 2000 to defend Christians in Ambon, it is dependent on government approval and working with security forces⁶. The Rule of Law aspect of NKRI means working with and supplementing government

⁴ There are four major schools of Sunni jurisprudence: Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, and Shafi'i, each named after a founder. Historically these have been geographically distributed with Shafi'i most common in East Africa and Southeast Asia, Maliki most common in North Africa, and the other two most popular in the Middle East.

⁵ Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia was banned in 2017 (BBC Indonesia 2017).

⁶ Although, the practice of guarding churches which began in the late 1990s and this offer to fight a violent jihad in defense of Christians may appear to be an apology for NU's involvement in the 1965 massacres, most in NU see all of these actions through the lens of doing what is best for the nation.

forces. While Ansor and Banser often supplement local police and national security forces, there are times when they are an alternative. When, through either understaffing, corruption, or unwillingness to do so, the police are unable to protect churches or civil organization from extremist elements, Banser can and does provide security. As observed by Kyai Fauzi of Bululawang, Malang, that there is sometimes a feeling that police are late to an incident. He argued that because Indonesia does not have anti-terrorist laws, the police cannot act before an actual crime has been committed. He also argued Banser nor any other civil organization should never take on the duties of the government. There are laws that state that if they so they can be disbanded.

The other core value, Ahlus Sunna wal Jamaah is a contested term, which literally means the Way of the Right Community. NU uses it to mean a more tolerant form of Islam that allows and encourages mystical practices and many popular forms of religious practices such as prayers for the dead and pilgrimage to saints' grave. Further, they use to term to embrace the idea of peaceful coexistence with other religions following the example of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina. They refer to this as the Piagam Madinah or Medina Charter (Fauzi 2005, Misrawi 2009, Taken together, these values establish Ansor and Banser as an importance force for societal resilience and stability.

For certain people Banser and Ansor has a less than stellar reputation. This includes some academics, some journalists, and even some Indonesians. These observers tend to focus on the events of 1965-66 and are insufficiently informed about Banser as currently constituted. The political scientist Robin Bush says at a 10 March 1998 meeting of

multiple NU youth organizations to discuss the future of Soeharto, the atmosphere was tense because of the very presence of Banser (Bush 2009:113). As recently as 2012, NU leaders report, that a French journalist labeled Banser an (active) terrorist organization, but were not able to give a name or more information. A September 2017 Time Magazine article's headline and photo (see Figure 2) clearly gives the impression that Banser is a dangerous group, even if the article itself is more nuanced. The photo caption goes as far as putting scare quotes around the phrase "militant moderates" and suggesting that all 50 million people associate with NU go through the paramilitary training (Stahlhut 2017).



Figure 2: Time Magazine's Misrepresentation of BANSER.

A researcher in the Indonesian Science Academy says that he sees no difference between Banser, common thugs, and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and holds up Banser's role in the 1965-66 massacres as evidence. An incident in Garut, West Java in which Banser members tore down and burned a flag associated with HTI confirmed this perspective of Banser for some. In order to analyze this question, we need to review the history of this organization to examine the ways in which it has, or has not, changed.

C. Historical Trajectory of Ansor

It is critical for our understanding of Indonesia to critically interrogate the transformation of an organization involved in the 1965-66 massacres. We can think of four major stages of the Nahdlatul Ulama's history: 1) the Revolutionary period, from the founding in 1926 through the War for Independence; 2) the 1965-66 massacres; 3) the New Order during which two major shifts occurred for NU, namely the *Kembali ke Khittah* (return to basics) movement in the 1980s which took officially NU out of formal politics and the establishment of Panca Sila (state ideology) as the sole ideological base for all organization; and 4) the Reformation era after the fall of Suharto including the recent conservative turn in Indonesian Islam.

The history of what is today Ansor and Banser is disputed by those who have attempted to write it. Choirul Anam, once the Chair of NU in East Java, wrote what is considered the seminal history of Ansor (1996). Shortly after NU was founded, a youth wing was created and given the name Ansor meaning "helpers" in Arabic (Anam 1996:26-7). Banser or

Barisan NU Serba Guna (all purpose lines or brigades) were created/recognized in the 1937 ANO⁷ congress and the 1938 congress Banser was recommended for all ANO branches (Anam 1996: 34). Since Ansor Naudlatul Oelama (ANO) and Barisan (brigade, lit. lines) Ansor Naudlatul Oelama (BANO) were disbanded during the War of Independence and the members generally became part of Laskar Hizbullah (LH), the NU militia fighting against the Dutch, and that after the war members of the militia formed Barsian Ansor Serbaguna (Ansor's Multipurpose Brigade), many hold that Banser is the continuation of BANO. Choiral Anam, who was the regional chair for NU in East Java in the 1990s and the author of one of the first books about Ansor, has said that BANO was the *cikal bakal* (fore runner) of Banser (in Fauzi 2008).

However, the Indonesian anthropologist Hairus Salim's more recent history of Ansor disputed this continuity because BANO was more of a political arm of NU since NU was not political yet (2004:35) and the organization called Banser was created in 1962 for the purpose of confronting PKI. This is consistent with the oral history told by the family of KH Yusuf Hasyim⁸, which claims that he created Banser in Jember with the express purpose of destroying the communists. Anam suggests that BANO served many of the same roles as Banser -- especially the sargent-at-arms, security role. Salim

⁷ A change in orthography in 1973 change the spelling from Nahdlatul Oelama (NO) to Nadhlatul Ulama (NU). Since the names ANO and BANO were used exclusively prior to that time, I will following the spelling of that time.

⁸ Yusuf Hasyim (1929-2007) was the the youngest son of one of NU's founder's, Hasyim Asyari. His older brother, Wahid Hasyim was Indonesia's first Minister of Religion, and his nephew, Abdurrahman Wahid was Indonesia's fourth president. Yusuf Hasyim was active in both the War for Independence and the events of 1965-66.

argues that the paramilitary meaning of “barisan” (lit. lines, but often translated as brigades) only appeared during the Japanese occupation (2004: 35). Whether Banser started before the War for Independence, started in the last years of it, or was established with express purpose of confronting PKI is crucial for understanding the nature of Banser and Ansor more generally. If there is a clear historical continuity between ANO and BANO pre-war, Laskar Hizbullah during the war, and Ansor and Banser after the war, then we will be better able consider whether 1965 was an aberration or part of a consistent trajectory for the organization.

D. The War for Independence

Like other historians of Ansor, Salim acknowledges that ANU and pesantren were the sources of the personnel in Laskar Hizbullah (LH) during the War for Independence. In fact, he argues that almost all pesantren youth joined LH especially the members of Ansor NU (Salim 2004:39, 43). He asks whether Ansor could be considered the post-Independence continuation of Laskar Hizbullah (2004: 39). The Ansor NU (ANU) symbol is very similar to the LH symbol and so it seems that ANU is LH and vice versa (2004: 43). He acknowledges that many Banser and Ansor folks argue that Banser was born in Blitar around 1948 by Muhammad Zainuddin Qalyubi as a possible response to either the Second Dutch Aggression during the War for Independence or to confrontations with PKI troops during the 1948 PKI Rebellion in Madiun. (c.f Khariudin 2014). Salim favors a 1965 founding of Ansor, and argues that a long duree, a connection with the

earlier organizations was imagined in order to claim greater legitimacy (2004: 27-77).

In an October 22, 1945 meeting the Leadership of NU decided that fighting against the Dutch was a legitimate Jihad (Anam 1996:63, and many other sources). Anam does not explore the role of GP Anzor, Banser, or Laskar Hizbullah (yet another subset) in the war for independence, but it commonly accepted that they played a role and he picks up his history of ANO/Anzor after the war for independence. It is important to remember that the members of ANO/Bano before the War, Laskar Hizbullah during the War, and Anzor and Banser after the war were a single pool of members. Kusuma clearly argues that while the organization and structure (*wadah*) of ANO was not used during the War and the Japanese occupation, all the strength and potential of Anzor was redirected to the efforts of Hizbullah, or the Army of God (2011:33). He is using the *wadah/isi* metaphor common to Indonesian Sufism – the container (*wadah*) and the contents (*isi*). Kusuma argues that the container changed but the content did not. Some current Banser leaders argue that after the war for independence, Hizbullah disbanded and the remnant members formed Banser. Kusuma concurs that GP Anzor is the pre-War ANO reconstituted.

Contributing to the confusion about organizational history, Robinson mistakenly describes NU has having two paramilitary groups in the 1960s (2018:47). Alternatively,

Herwawan Sulistiyo argues that there was no meaningful distinctions between Banser and Anzor in the 1960s. He says in a footnote, “there should be no confusion here about the name of the organization. Banser stands for

“Barisan Serbaguna” (Multi-purpose guard), was another name for Ansor. During the slaughters, the name of Banser was used more often than its official name of Ansor. However, after the realignment process, the term Banser was used only for ‘special troops’ within Ansor” (Sulistiyono 1997: 215, fn).

The terms Ansor and Banser continue to be used interchangeably, particularly by those not in the organizations because Banser is part of Ansor, all Banser members are members of Ansor, but not all members of Ansor are members of Banser.

Although some authors like to differentiate the various NU young men’s organizations according to their explicit purpose and function, in the end they all were organizations for younger men under the NU umbrella. Further, from the beginning there was always a paramilitary component.

Banser leaders often boast about the *longue duree* and that being founded in 1938 means that NU’s paramilitary is older than the Indonesian armed services. They sometimes tease attending military commanders that TNI (Indonesian Army) is Banser’s little brother (*adik*). There is a long tradition of cooperation between the youth of NU and the Indonesian armed services). Laskar Hisbullah was militia supplementing the efforts of the during the War for Independence. In the Sukarno era, the military worked with multiple paramilitary organizations. In June 1957, the army met with four youth organizations and came to an agreement called the *Janji Pemuda* (Youth Promise), which placed all youth organizations under the military including Pemuda Rakyat (from PKI) (Kusuma 2011:90). It should be noted that

the War for Independence ended in December, 1949. Young men who were soldiers in the war will still young enough to fight and even command in 1965-66. This includes men like KH Yusuf Hasyim, the late headmaster of a famous pesantren, who I knew as an elderly man in 1995.

1. 1965 and the Destruction of PKI⁹

In 1965-1966, 500,000 or more alleged communists were killed or disappeared. In some areas, NU affiliates were involved. This event and the involvement of Ansor has shaped how Ansor and Banser both see themselves and are seen by others.

Budi Susanto, SJ, a Roman Catholic priest, in the preface to Salim (2004) argues that Banser is trying to reconcile itself with a past that is not happy (*tidak menyenangkan*) (Susanto 2004: ix) and that they are now the *Penyambung Lidah Rakyat* (the connections of the peoples tongue) -- that is allows them to speak to power (2004: x). Susanto sees Salim's book as possibly offering some comfort to the those still suffering from the actions of the past (esp. 1965) (2004: xiii). The discourse about the role of Ansor in 1965 is part of dealing with this unhappy past and what makes for authentic NU culture. Today, both Ansor and its parent organization, NU, walk a careful line to reject both communism and the use of

⁹ Joshua Oppenheimer, the director of two films (2012, 2015) about the 1965 killings, prefers to use the term genocide for these events. While there very well may have been an ethnic component in some parts of Indonesia, like Medan, where Oppenheimer filmed, this does not seem to be the case in Java, especially in East Java where NU's role was most prominent

violence. The events of 1965-66 are seen today as self-defense but have suggested that other factors, such as economics, may have been more important (Sulistiyono 1997, Rosa 2006, Robinson 2018).

According to Choirul Anam (p. 104), as PKI grew in influence during the early 1960s, Ansor quietly distributed Doktrin Lima Pettingi (5 high doctrines):

1. Value of organizational discipline
2. value of safeguarding (kewaspadaan)
3. value of faithfulness to the party
4. value of the use of political tactics and strategies
5. value of the mental and physical preparedness of the membership (1996:104)

Anam argues that from 1961 on, Ansor and Banser were at the forefront of stopping PKI actions in East Java (Anam 1996: 106). Following the 30 September 1965 allegedly communist coup -- on 5 October 1965 NU and especially Ansor issued a formal statement that Sukarno should dissolve PKI (Anam 1996: 111). Anam makes no secret or apologies for Ansor's role in the destruction of PKI, although it seems clear that this role was played mainly in East Java. In his 1997 doctoral dissertation, Herwawan Sulistiyono details the bloody history of the conflict between Ansor and PKI in Jember and its environs. Kusuma argues that there are two phases to Ansor's involvement. The first is spontaneous physical conflict in East Java and Central Java from 1963-1965. The second is their involvement in military operations

menumpas PKI after 1965 (Kusuma 2011:128). Where exactly one draws the line seems to be open to debate, although there is clear indication that in the immediate aftermath of the events of 30 September, the military was disorganized in its responses and that in the Jombang area, Ansor was acting relatively independently.

While it is clear that Ansor was a major player in East Java, it is less clear what their role was in other provinces. For example, Dr. Hasyim Asyari, a sociology professor at Diponegoro University in Semarang, Central Java and the Commander (Panglima) of Banser, Central Java stated that several years ago, he attended a campus event organized by students to discuss the events of 1965. It was an informal “truth and reconciliation” meeting. He went as a representative of Banser to ensure that would be someone there to speak on the group when its role was discussed. Given the well document actions of Ansor in East Java, he was prepared for the worst. He was pleasantly surprised that the survivors and family members of victims said that Banser was not involved any killings in the greater Semarang area (Personal Communication, November 2015).

McGregor argues that at one point the involvement of Ansor and NU in the destruction of PKI as a service to the nation and even celebrated. (McGregor 2009: 196). However, this is a disputed point. Some argue it was a necessary act but that they have never celebrated. In 2014, I examined all NU publications that could be found at NU headquarters and libraries in Jakarta, Surabaya, and Yogyakarta as well as the library of Pesantren Tebu

Ireng and the public library of Yogyakarta. In general, NU magazine published before 1980 are few and far between. However, if we look at the publications from 1980 to 2000, we see many articles celebrating the role of NU in the War for Independence and none for the 1965 massacres.

According to McGregor (2009), there is no direct evidence of NU calling on its membership (or followers) to assist the military in the PKI killings. She suggests that any instructions would have been carefully worded given that Sukarno was still to blame, and he did not blame PKI for the attempted coup. She finds indirect evidence in official statements of gratitude from PBNU to the Pekolongan branch for its role in the efforts to crush the September 30th movement, which granted syahid, or martyr, status could be declared for those abducted by or killed in Battle. She mentions a discussed but not found 1966 booklet, endorsed by NU, that said that crushing PKI was *ibadah* (2009:199). A smoking gun is hard to find proving official leadership approval for the attack. I found a document dated 1 October 1965 which gives writing instructions to all members of Ansor. In sum, it says that they should distance themselves from PKI, prepare to oppose (*membantah*) PKI, and await further instructions from PBNU or the military. This is also not a smoking gun given that it calls for standing-by and was issued the day after the alleged coup when everything was in chaos. It is interesting however, to compare it to a similar document issued in 1957, following the banning of Masyumi, which instructed Ansor members to be calm and not worry about the situation.

Sulistiyo interviewed both PKI survivors and “perpetuators” in the East Java towns of Jombang and Kediri. Sulistiyo’s account of the events based on eyewitness accounts somewhat differs from the way the events are described in 2014 in interview, the majority of which were not eyewitness and one who was about 9 years old at the time (Choirul Anam). The explanation that the event was “kill or be killed” was given by both Choirul Anam and by a senior Ansor leader in 2014 and is found in Salim’s history of Ansor (Salim 2004:3). Even Sulistiyo reported this as the reason given by Yusuf Hashim who in 1965 was in Jakarta serving as the head of Ansor. NU people remembered and had in mind the 1948 PKI rebellion in Madiun and understood growing conflicts both physical and symbolic in that contest. Choirul Anam understands the killings as part of defensive actions, which is also a key component of the Ahlus Sunna Wa Jamma’ah understanding of Islam; only defensive warfare is allowed.

Choirul Anam described physical attacks, like one in Banyuwangi, in which PKI invited Ansor for Tahlilan, served them refreshments and poisoned them all. However, when speaking to me about the threat from PKI, he spent more time talking about ideological attacks:

Ludruk plays then told PKI stories declaring that God was Dead, and lakon which insulted the Prophet. Choirul also asserted that PKI used the term “setan desa” which included kyai because many of them had significant land holdings. PKI took unilateral action in land reform. Choirul himself, as a 9 year old boy, was an eye witness

to these events. The land reforms involved occupying the land (by force was the implication) and redistributing it. It is not clear whether this involved violence or the threat of violence. But he repeatedly said that PKI committed significant acts of violence against them and did many other things to bait (*memancing marah*, literally fishing for anger) Ansor/Banser. He also wanted to emphasize that they took action when asked by the military to do so (Interview, July 2014)

However, Sulistiyo's account of the events in two specific towns suggests that "kill or be killed" is a post-hoc justification. There were actions of PKI violence previously but following the assassination of 5 generals in West Jakarta, the PKI in East Java did nothing. They were awaiting for orders of clarification from the PKI central offices, orders which never came. Sulistiyo draws on the eyewitness accounts of Ansor members, survivors, police and other government officials in the region to depict a months long program of assassination. In this region, at least, there was no PKI retaliation or significant resistance (Sulistiyo 1997:201). The initial actions in October 1965 might be understood in a "kill or be killed" framework, but ongoing operations for months on end with no reprisals, no counter actions, that no longer fits the framework.

Sulistiyo describes at length the prior tension between NU and PKI -- PKI was unilaterally enforcing land reform laws which disproportionately impacted kyai -- which was also seen as an attack on wakaf land. (1997: 158-159). Sulistiyo (1997:159) cites Rex Mortimer,

“Almost from the outset, religious passions were injected in conflict over land. NU groups accused the PKI and the BTI of attacking religious schools and insulting Islam, while the Muslim in tern we alleged to inciting their followers to crush “the atheists” and defend their property in the Name of Allah” (Mortimer 1972:48)

Salim (2004:3) suggests that it has become part of the oral tradition of Banser that these actions were heroic and has become part of the collective memory of the events (2004:4). McGregor describes Anam’s work as commemorative history that celebrates the role of Banser in crushing the PKI (McGregor 2009:202). (I still need to evaluate her assessment). McGregor avers that throughout the new order, NU celebrated this aspect of its history -- mostly to remind Soeharto regime of its indebtedness to NU. While true, NU seemingly spent more time and effort in the Soeharto era reminding all of their role in gaining independence. But some leaders, including Adung, the Secretary General on Ansor in 2014, asserted that they never celebrated their role and were never proud (Interview, July 2014). Another explanation given in 2014 was that the military asked for Ansor’s assistance in dealing with PKI. However, Sulistiyo suggest that it does not bear up under examination. In the initial phase of killing the military personal in East Java were described as being confused and simply watched without either encouraging or impeding (Sulistiyo 1997: 210-211). It wasn’t until December 1965/January 1966 that the TNI issued a general statement ordering all social organizations to cease and desist in vigilante actions.

This interpretation can best be understood as part and parcel of the claims that Soeharto Order was indebted to NU and Ansor.

Sulistiyo describes at length the prior tension between NU and PKI -- PKI was unilaterally enforcing land reform laws which disproportionately impacted kyai -- which was also seen as an attack on wakaf land¹⁰ (1997: 158-159). Sulistiyo says that the New York Times was incorrect to report that the communist killings were jihad¹¹.

Some of the first attempts at “reconciliation” came during Choirul Anam’s tenure as the general head of PWNU East Java. This was not a “truth and reconciliation” kind of progress, but one Choirul says came about organically. Choirul Anam himself promoted several of the children of PKI leaders to be his assistants (*wakil*). When others objected to them being given leadership roles, because of who their fathers were, he insisted on it stating that they

¹⁰ Sulistiyo argues at length that the grounds of the conflict between PKI and NU were economic. PKI pushed for 1960 laws for land reform and share-cropping reform. PKI unilaterally carried out the laws and occupied land. Many kyai were wealthy landlords -- being and they controlled both pesantren and associated institutional lands and therefore it is hard to “separate institutional assets from personal ones” but in the unilateral actions taken by PKI for land reform did not distinguish personal property of the kyai from wakaf land. Therefore, kyai suffered greatly from the land reform programs (1997:158). NU of East Java declared that PKI’s unilateral actions were “counter revolutionary” (the idiom of the time, for the continuing growth of the country) and counter productive to Sukarno’s national goal.

¹¹ Sulistiyo says that his informant who worked closely with Machrus Ali said that he never issued a statement declaring the killings jihad. Sulistiyo claims that another influential kyai, KH Syafii Marzuki argued that “killing the communists was justifiable.” Hence there was disagreement among the kyai at the time whether the killings were religious justifiable (1997).

need to put all of this behind them. So rather that truth and reconciliation is was a process of let by-gones be by-gones, not always the most well received approach, but certain a step forward (Anam interview, June 2014)

From 1969 to 1979, there were no Banser regional or national congresses or conferences. During this same time, they were forbidden (by the government) to wear the Banser uniform, have drum bands and even had difficulties with carrying out training (Salim 2004:74, cf Feillard 1999:221; Anam 1990:127-135).

2. Suharto Era

Under the repression of the Suharto Era, or New Order (1965-1998), political Islam, in all its forms, was kept out of power and even pushed underground (Abuza 2004: 6). Including the gradual movment of NU out of politics and refocusing itself as a socio-religious organization. Salim asked the question why Banser was not disbanded (*bubar*). The partnership between NU and New Order was only at the start (p. 69). First, the New Order government promoted the idea of the ongoing danger of latent communists. Second, with the change in government, Ansor and Banser revisited their role and so the New Order was an important period for Banser (2004:68).

NU has long been committed to Indonesia as a non-Sharia state (Barton 2002, Bush 2009). Prominent NU figures were among the 8 Muslims and 1 Christian members of the committee that removed the Jakarta

Charter (the requirement for Sharia law for Muslims) in the preamble of the Indonesian constitution. During constitutional conventions in the 1950s, this question was reopened and some NU figures argued for this requirement to be returned. Once this round of discussion was finished, NU has since defended the idea of Indonesia as a non-Sharia state (Adung Interview July 2014).

However, in parallel to the developments in NU, Islamism was never far from the surface. Muhammad Natsir, considered by some to be the elder statesman of Indonesian Islamism (Woodward et al 2012: 3) was active throughout the Suharto Era and even established *Dewan Dakwah Islam Indonesia* (DDII; Indonesian Islamic Missions Council) when he was not allowed to revive the Islamic political party, Masyumi (Liddle 1996). DDII, a key portal for Saudi influence (Hasan 2011: 96), was a way of doing politics with *dakwah* (van Bruinessen 2002) and propagated Islamism when politics and armed struggle were restricted by New Order policies (Woodward et al 2012: 3). In the mid-1980s, Islamist (*salafi*) communities started expanding and becoming more assertive through the establishment of *salafi madrasah* (Hasan 2011: 95). (Lukens-Bull 2013).

The New Order history given above only explains the emergence of radical groups; it does not explain their turn to violence. Radicals want quick and dramatic changes in the social, economic, and political life of Indonesia (Sukma 2003: 345). For example, the desire to eradicate social ills and vices have led some groups, like the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), to raid and

vandalize bars, karaoke lounges, gambling houses, and brothels. Although their methods are rejected by most Indonesians, their concerns about these vices have entered mainstream political discussion. For example, a law was passed closing all bars during the month of Ramadan. Further, an anti-pornography law was passed in 2008 which no one was willing to oppose despite the fact that it was so vaguely worded that some people were concerned that it would effectively ban some forms of traditional dances including those of predominantly Hindu Bali (Setiawati 2008, Allan 2007, McGibbon 2006). Hardliners are still a small minority in Indonesia but they have been able to influence public notions of morality and religiosity. Given this influence, mainstream Muslims have been compelled to counter this influence. NU and Muhammadiyah collaborated to produce a book entitled, *Ilusi Negara Islam, or The Illusion of an Islamic State*, which discussed the shortcomings of movements trying to establish shariah law in Indonesia (Wahid 2008).

3. Khittah and Asas Tunggal

Under Suharto, all mass organizations including NU and Muhammadiyah (the largest and second largest Muslim organizations) and PPP (the “Islamic” political party) had to accept the national ideology, *Pancasila* as their sole philosophical basis. The first point of the *Pancasila* was belief in one great God; all the officially recognized religions (Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism,

Hinduism, and Buddhism¹²) were imagined to fit this mold. This point therefore established Indonesia a religious but multi-creedal state. The other points concerned democracy, justice, and prosperity for all Indonesians and were not as challenging to religious organizations as the first. One result of accepting *Pancasila* as their sole philosophical basics was that these organizations not self-identify as Islamic (Abuza 2004: 15). (Lukens-Bull 2013).

Acceptance of the *Pancasila* state ideology which supported pluralism and unity was consistent with the religious world view of the leadership at the time, especially Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur)¹³. There was much ink spilled about how to understand the call for *Asas Tunggal*. Some of this discourse overlapped with the *Kembali ke Khittoh* movement which took NU out of formal party politics. Once the commitment to *Pancasila* was made by Gus Dur, it was easy for the organization and him to keep to it after Suharto, especially when he served as Indonesia's first democratically elected President. After his death, Gus Dur was considered by many to be a saint, which elevated many of his commitments, like pluralism, to the level of doctrine.

¹² In 2000, two years after the fall of Suharto, Abdurrahman Wahid, the former Head of NU and the fourth President of Indonesia, rescinded the Suharto era ban on Confucianism.

¹³ Abdurrahman Wahid was the son and grandson of two highly regarded Islamic leaders in Indonesia, and an important figure in his own right. He was the general chairman of NU during an important transitional period and served as Indonesia's fourth president.

4. Reformasi Era

In the waning months of Soeharto era, first students and then other citizens protested calling for Soeharto to step down. According to Zudhli Mudhor, the former head of Ansor in Yogyakarta, Banser played an important role in the transition to democracy because of the level of trust the general populations has for them. He recalled a large protest on the northern square (*alun-alun utara*) in front of the Yogyakarta kraton with what he estimated to be 1 million people. In conjunction with security forces, Banser planned and provided the security for this event. Because there was concern that uniformed members of TNI, which included the police at that time, would lead to violent outbursts. In the end, the only uniformed presence was Banser – TNI personnel were in plainclothes – which because of the general regard in which the populace held Banser, peace was maintained (interview 2014).

Some argue, the transition to democracy and greater civil society opened the space for “uncivil society” (Abuza 2004: 6, Sukma 2003: 343, 350), but it is misleading to suggest that democracy radicalized certain groups. The roots of their radicalization came during the Suharto Era. Suharto was deeply concerned about Islam as a political force (Sukma 2003: 343). In general, Islam was not allowed to play a pre-eminent role in politics and policy making and the state was suspicious of Islam as a political force until near the end of the New Order (Sukma 2003: 343, Chernov-Hwang 2009: 47). Suharto did not distinguish between violent and non-

violent groups; all forms of political Islam were seen as a threat to the state (Chernov-Hwang 2009: 47). Sukarno disbanded the popular Islamic party Masyumi and folded all Islamic parties into the United Development Party (PPP), which was one of two “opposition” parties to the ruling party, Golkar (Abuza 2004: 14, Sukma 2003: 34). The PPP was structured in such a way to be politically impotent; by combining groups with conflicting religious views, the Suharto regime hamstrung it from the start. Further, neither opposition party was allowed to have a societal presence outside of the month prior to elections (Chernov-Hwang 2009: 50); they could not have offices, or hold rallies, or even provide social services to stay in the public eye between elections. It was not the last time Suharto would neuter an Islamic organization (Lukens-Bull 2013).

In the Reformasi era of the late 1990s, the role of Ansor in 1965-66 became a bit of stigma and even groups within NU stigmatized Banser for their role (McGregor 2009:206). McGregor sees a start to the process of recognizing the role of NU in the 1965-66 massacres when in 1999 two things happened: 1) a discussion by 18 local leaders on the effect of the 1965 tragedy on Ansor and Banser, and 2) in the same year, but maybe not following the first even. NU congress called for repentance and seeking God’s forgiveness. Indeed, Ansor has a complicated relationship with its past regarding PKI. Although the DIY branch formally apologized in the late 90s or early 00s for its role in 1965-66, following Gus Dur’s example, people’s actual thoughts

on this are more ambivalent. There is a clear rejection of the use of violence to advance their agenda on their own. However, they work with the security forces, and the remaining idea is if police or army were to legally ask for their assistance it would be given. This is part of the context for understanding the PKI culling -- they were asked by the army for help. My sense is for many people in Ansor is that it was a regrettable necessity, as opposed to the celebrated heroism as seen in the Act of Killing. PKI threatened NKRI; and they are then quick to point out that the threat now to NKRI and even more to ASWAJA is the far right, hard line Islam, and terrorism.

5. Defending Churches

In the late 1990s under the leadership of Choirul Anam, Banser in East Java started guarding Christian churches, especially on major holidays, like Christmas eve. He first came up with the idea and took the idea to Gus Dur, then the head of NU. Anam said that they had Qur'anic justification for this, to answer any objections from both kyai and community members. He did not give me the specific ayat but said that it spoke to the idea that we must guard all for peace. Later this practice expanded out of East Java and became national (Anam Interview July 2014). When explaining why Banser guards churches, Faisul Saimima, the Secretary General of Ansor until November 2015 simply stated that it was good for the nation. Several leaders would say that they are not guarding churches but guarding the nation and peace by being in front of churches. Further, Hasyims

Asyarai's aspiration was that Indonesia should become Darul Salam not Darul Islam: the Land of peace and not the Land of Islam (Fairus Samima interview June 2014).

Another leader, Muhibbin, says that some NU members, even some kyai, criticize the church guarding. However, he claimed that this was standard for NU; NU and Ansor help people with not much power and Christians have the rights to build a church and have services, The nation needs to avoid unnecessary conflict and this the key reason for guarding churches (Muhibbin, June 2014 1). One leader boasted that in practice, guarding events or churches only takes 2 or three members in their uniforms with hand phones (Interview June 2014)

The most celebrated example of Banser's commitment to pluralism occurred December 24, 2000. In the East Javanese town of Mojokerto, Banser members were guarding churches for Christmas Eve services. While services were underway, a Banser member named Riyanto found a bomb on church premises. Deducing that he had neither the time nor the expertise to disarm the bomb, Riyanto picked it up and ran away from the church as far as he could before the bomb exploded in his hands. Riyanto's sacrifice is memorialized in the Nahdlatul Ulama Museum in Surabaya and is valorized to remind NU members that this is what they are about – protecting the unity of Indonesian society even at the cost of one's own life.

6. Testing the “Change”

On October 23, 2018, I woke to see that my Facebook notifications had exploded. The day before, on National Santri Day, Banser in the village of Garut, West Java, Banser members captured a black flag with Arabic writing stating, “There is no God, but God,” the first part of the Muslim confession of faith. This flag had been used by the recently banned, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, a chapter of an international movement committed to the establishment of a global Caliphate. In the days and week which followed there were street protests and calls for Banser to be disbanded and banned for its allegedly intolerant and anti-Islamic behavior. Part of the reason for this reaction is the ways that the burned flag was framed. Obviously, those protesting Banser did not frame this flag as the symbol of a movement committed to the destruction of the Indonesian republic and its absorption into a global Caliphate. Rather it was held that it was the Flag of Islam — that Banser had burned the core symbol Islam, the *kalimat tauhid*, or the sentence “God is one” (Daryono 2018). Iqbal Daryon argued that it was not the official flag of HTI, but it could not be because HTI had been officially banned in 2017.

Those who wished to defame Banser, wrongfully denied that HTI even had a flag and that this flag was the same as the one used the Prophet. In fact, the flag had been used by HTI. Further, both al-Qaeda and ISIS used a variation of this flag — a black flag with the tauhid statement. It is generally accepted that the Prophet used such a flag, but that the black flag was explicitly the war

banner. In times of peace, the prophet used a white flag with the same declaration. Using the war banner is and of itself a statement that this is the battlefield, and those who oppose it are the military opponents of the faith. When used by Caliphate organization, it can be interpreted as a declaration of war against the Indonesian State. Of course, Banser tore it down and burned it.

In the days that followed the event, there was discussion and theories that some had planned this, that they paid some to raise this flag in the middle of an NU event, it hopes that it would garner exactly the reaction that it did. The scuttlebutt in the weeks that followed was that thousands of these flags had purportedly stored for use in the immediate counter protests.

One East Java kyai, KH Fauzi acknowledged that Banser members took down the flag and that it was the duty of the police to remove this display because it did not have permits and was encroaching on another groups event. He further argued that because there are laws that call for the disbanding of any civil organization that takes on governmental duties, the flags were raised in an effort to bait Banser into breaking that particular law (interview November 2018)

E. Conclusion

A Muslim paramilitary group that currently guards minorities is interesting, but one which once participated in the slaughter of over 500,000 alleged communists requires more investigation. In the current discourse, the values of

National Unity (NKRI) and Ahlus Sunna wal Jamaah are used to understand both current activities and the slaughter of communists in 1965-1966. Ansor has a complicated relationship with its past regarding PKI (Indonesian Communist Party). The Yogyakarta branch of Ansor formally apologized in the early 2000s for its role in the events of 1965-66, following example of Abdurrahman Wahid, the former head of NU and at the time the President of Indonesia. However, when asked, Ansor leaders and members have much more ambivalent thoughts about this past. There is a clear rejection of the use of violence to advance their agenda. However, they argue that they worked with the security forces in 1965-66. Further, they maintain that if police or army were to legally ask for their assistance again, it would be given. For many people in Ansor is that it was a regrettable necessity, as opposed to the celebrated heroism of the secular nationalist militia seen in the film *The Act of Killing* (Oppenheimer 2012). The argument is that the Communist Party threatened National Unity (NKRI). Discussions of the past communist threat are quickly followed by a discussion that the current threat is the far right, hardline Islam, and terrorism.

The more important changes that we have explored here are organizational and ideological. Prior to 1998 Banser was localized and responsible to local kyai —one became a member by being asked by a kyai to join. Concerted efforts to centralize trading groups and commanders started in earnest in 2000. Following the Garut incident in 2018, nearly all meetings stressed the importance of one chain of command (satu komando).

Banser did not have effective centralized command until 1999-2000. this was brought up in talking about training and the fact that training was not a national routine until about then. before then, each region would design and conduct their own training, so there was not consistency. with this came the fact that local banser units were at the command of a local kyai, whoever recruited them. The moving to a chain of command may be a direct attempt to move beyond cults of personality; such locally commanded units are what participated in 1965-66.

When I asked one advisor and former leader of the Yogyakarta Banser command, what kyai thought about this shift, he suggested that kyai still have considerable authority. In asking him how it might work, we started with something simple, like a request to provide security. He said that if branch members are asked to provide security by a kyai they would simply let the regional command know. However, if the request were more serious, it should work that it is reported all the way up the change of command for approval. In the context of Garut, it therefore makes sense that Banser emphasized that this was done only on the local level, and that in the time following this events, Gus Yaquut stressed the importance of chain of command.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore the nature of Banser training. Suffice it to say, there are several levels of training depending on the particular activities a member wishes to participate in and the level of leadership to which they rise. Core to all Ansor and Banser training are key sessions on what it means to be part of NU, what the ideological and religious commitments of the organization

including supporting Indonesia as a pluralistic democratic state, the protection of minorities, and NU's more mystically inclined interpretation of Islam.

When asked about contemporary commitments, Ansor and Banser leaders argue that while NU may have been interested in advocated for Sharia in the past, it is not a settled matter that Indonesia should not be a Sharia state. The experiences of the 1980s and the withdraw from direct involvement in party politics and the commitment to Panca Sila as the foundation for the organizations ideology has meant that NU is committed to Indonesia as a plurally religious state.

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