



Islamism, Muslim Millennials, and Local Political Contestation in Indonesia

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Abstract

There is a trend of increasing Islamism after the 1998 Reformation Era in Indonesia. The previous studies reveal that it is caused, among others, by the weakness of the state, the decline of the authority of moderate Islamic groups, and the use of social media as *da'wah* channels by Islamist groups. This study is qualitative-based research by employing descriptive method and social content analysis of social media. The data were collected through observations (field study) of the election process in the Solo area, from social media, and in-depth interviews with academicians of UIN Surakarta, the initiators, and participants of the LISaN program. This study revealed that the low quality of political education, manipulative information spread on social media, and lack of autonomous political participation by the Muslim millennials have also contributed to the rise of Islamism. Therefore, the Islamic literacy for courteous and tolerant behavior (Literasi Islam Santun dan toleran, LISaN) is necessary to counter the Islamist movement. The LISaN movement which take form a noisy tolerant majority can be a means of values reproduction and encourage individual participation in political and religious affairs, in a polite and tolerant manner.

Keywords:

Islamism, Muslim Millennials, Islamic Literacy, Tolerance

Abstrak

Pasca Reformasi 1998 terdapat tren peningkatan Islamisme di Indonesia. Beberapa kajian terdahulu mengungkap hal tersebut, antara lain disebabkan oleh lemahnya negara, melemahnya otoritas kelompok Islam moderat, dan penggunaan media sosial sebagai saluran dakwah oleh kelompok Islamis. Studi ini merupakan penelitian kualitatif dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif dan analisis konten media sosial. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi lapangan terhadap proses Pemilu di wilayah Solo, dari media sosial dan wawancara mendalam dengan sivitas akademika UIN Surakarta, pengagas dan peserta program Literasi Islam Santun dan Toleran (LISaN). Hasil studi ini mengungkap, bahwa rendahnya kualitas pendidikan politik, penyebaran informasi manipulatif di media sosial, dan rendahnya partisipasi politik otonom oleh kaum milenial Muslim juga berkontribusi pada kebangkitan Islamisme. Oleh karena itu, gerakan LISaN menemukan urgensinya untuk melawan gerakan Islamisme. Gerakan LISaN yang mengambil bentuk gerakan 'bersuaranya kelompok mayoritas toleran' dapat menjadi sarana reproduksi nilai dan mendorong partisipasi individu dalam urusan politik dan agama, secara santun dan toleran.

Kata kunci:

Islamisme, Muslim milenial, Literasi Islam, Toleransi

Introduction

Over the past few years, *Islamism*, an ideology that believes in Islam as a complete (*kaffah*) teaching, not only guiding and regulating Muslim personal affairs but also social and political life, has become a movement as well as awakening power in some Muslim-majority countries (Berman, 2003; 257-272), including Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. In Indonesia, Islamism has emerged before and not long after the proclamation of Indonesian independence. It is evidenced from the dynamics of the debate over the formulation and acceptance of Pancasila as the ideology and foundation of the state (the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, NKRI). During the Old Order Era, Islamism as a movement was promoted by the Darul Islam/ Indonesian Islamic Army (DI/TII) under the command of Kartosuwiryo, who later proclaimed the Islamic State of Indonesia, NII (Azra, 2014; 175-182). Then, during the New Order Era, the centralized-militaristic system of government had succeeded in 'pressing' various forms and

types of Islamic movements to emerge and develop. But their existence and activity did not automatically disappear.

When the 1998 Reformation movement spread and efforts to institutionalize democratization were strengthening, the Islamist movement reappeared with various movement modifications (Kafid, 2016; 57-79). At the national level, the Islamist movement promoted the implementation of the Jakarta Charter. In contrast, at the local level, the formalization of Islamic law (*shari'ah*) became the main issue (Mubarak, 2015; 77-98). The Islamist movement at the local level, which was intertwined with democratic decentralization in Indonesia, has also become more varied in its movement strategies and goals, such as a mastery of access to economic resources (Kafid, 2018; 67-93), control of political channels and institutions (Machmudi, 2008; 1-310), mastery of public educational institutions (Rosyad, 2006; 31-54), and to the use of digital media (Bräuchler, 2004; 253-271). Currently, the use of social media by Islamist groups as a medium of movement makes this movement seem to be more massive than before.

Based on several previous studies, the rise of the Islamist movement is caused by some factors including the state's weaknesses (Kafid, 2016; 57-79), the inability of the community in building a tolerant culture (Mudhoffir, 2015; 1-22), the 'intelligence' of the supporters of the Islamists in employing various modern and innovative da'wah channels and the decrease of the authority of moderate Islamic groups in Indonesia (Arifianto, 2020; 111-132). However, those previous studies have not been concerned with political education and individual autonomy in the political process. In fact, the quality of political education and autonomous political participation of the society, especially among Muslim millennials, might influence the discourse and dynamics of community diversity. Therefore, this study focuses on the LISaN Movement in countering the Islamist movement, especially through social media.

The LISaN movement used as the focus of this study based on its forms which is are using form of education, training, and public campaigning especially through social media. In addition, it also become a campaign of kindness, as well as a counter-balance effort against hoaxes and hate speech among millennial and generation Z Muslims. In practice, the LISaN movement invites participants to jointly discuss, understand and respond to various social realities around them in creative forms, such as popular essays, memes and short videos.

Based on qualitative research, the data of this study gathered through direct observation, to the various phenomena related to political dynamics and religious trends of millennial Muslim groups in the Solo area. This study applied a descriptive method and content analysis of social media. The former is used to describe the phenomena that occurred amid society, while the latter was employed to analyze the phenomena on social media. The data were obtained through observations of the election process including the 2020 Solo's Regional Head Election, the 2018 Central Java's Gubernatorial Election, and the 2019 President Election in the Solo area, social media, and in-depth interviews with academicians of UIN Surakarta, the initiator of the LISaN movement, the Center for the Study and Development of Pesantren Nusantara (PKPPN)-UIN Surakarta, Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) of Surakarta, and participants of the LISaN movement.

Social Media and Muslim Millennials

Digital media, as a new public space, has been successfully utilized by the Islamist groups as a means of spreading their ideology and political orientation. Research results of the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta in 2019 show a trend of dominant religious narratives that tend to be conservative in the social media during the 2014 General Election. Political situations and contestations that occur were often associated with religious issues.

Religion was often used as a tool for political legitimacy to gain voter supports (Garadian & Kirana, 2020; 615-622). Such a condition also has caused a shift in the image of Indonesian Islam, from a *moderate* to a *conservative*, and even tends to be extreme-radical. This phenomenon is also reflected in the dynamics of Islam and politics in the Solo area, an area that covers not only the Municipality of Surakarta, but also all areas in the former Surakarta Residency commonly referred to as Soloraya, including Boyolali Regency, Sukoharjo, Klaten, Wonogiri, Sragen, and Karanganyar.

Solo is one of the areas in Central Java (Jawa Tengah) that has undergone a process of industrialization since the 1900s (Brenner 1998). As an area with plural socio-religious backgrounds, the people's living culture is so competitive. As a result, the potential for conflict of interest among individuals and groups is unavoidable (Baidhawiy 2010). Several conflicts with religious and ethnic motives occurred on a large scale, such as the *Pecinan* (Chinatown) and Mega-Bintang cases, and a small scale such as conflicts among religious organizations and youth organizations. Therefore, Solo is often labeled as a "short-axis" city (Hartono & Suyanto, 2016; 2-4). Although according to the residents of Solo, as stated by the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) of Surakarta, the term is considered not to reflect the actual conditions of harmonious life of the Solo society, which upholds the principles of harmony and tolerance, *Javanese*: "guyub-rukun" and "tepo-seliro" (interview with FKUB Surakarta, 23 December 2020).

So, the strengthening of democratization at the local level has been successfully utilized by Islamist groups in Solo in which their seeds have existed for a long time (Siraishi 1990) and have been 'underneath' to re-emerge in the public sphere with various forms and movements, including the use of online media, especially social media, with the youths as the main target (Hasan, 2010: 49-76); (AF, 2013; 174-191); (Fanani, 2013; 4-13).

The Muslim millennials, whose characters are almost the same as Generation Z, are very familiar with modern information and

communication technology. They have even made social media a part of their identity and style (Nisa, et al., 2018; 1-21), especially those who live in urban or semi-urban areas. They are a group of people who have a high intensity in accessing and using social media, especially for information-seeking purposes. They also use information from social media as a reference regarding political (Andersen, et al., 2021; 99-118) and religious issues (Slama, 2018; 1-4); (Lengauer, 2018; 5-23). Even, through the development of the internet, the Muslim millennials have succeeded in becoming politically aware groups and significantly influenced the political succession in the 2014 General Election (Jati, 2016; 147-116).

The use of social media to gain information (Servaes & Malikhao, 2016; 316-321), is not wrong. But if not guided by proper and sufficient knowledge, it can lead to disinformation (Fallis, 2011; 201-214). In the religious aspect, this condition will encourage the emergence of religious understandings and practices that tend to be symbolic-formalistic (Hosen, 2008; 159-173) and counter-productive with the essence of Islamic teachings. The abundance of information in social media is often *taken for granted* as truth without being evaluated by critical thinking and rigorous verification. As a result, an individual will have the potential to be quickly mobilized by various interest groups, including the Islamist groups. Whether in the social, economic, political, or religious spheres, a person's autonomy in making choices tends to be neglected. The individual would also be easily trapped by religious and political understandings and practices that tend to be intolerant (Parahita, 2018; 127-143) and extreme-radical.

Local Political Dynamics

The democratization process that has been going on since the 1998 Reformation Era has brought many important changes to the lives of the Indonesian people. The decentralization policy has guaranteed the freedom and political rights of civilians and positively affect people's behavior and institutionalization of democracy. However, if it is examined more deeply,

especially in the local area such as in Solo, the fact shows that there are still many problems. It can be seen from the rampant political practice of “villain’s allotment” (Wilson, 2015; 289-297), which, to some extent, have involved Islamist groups as politicians’ tactical and strategic alliances, as in the case of the Surakarta Islamic Youth Front (FPIS) in Solo, Central Java (Kafid, 2016; 57-79) and the Reformed Islamic Movement (Garis) in Cianjur, West Java (Kafid, 2018; 67-93). The high political costs that political contestants must spend, including those in the local political contestation, contribute to the growth of corruption and collusion, as practiced by the Regional Head in Klaten Regency, Central Java (Nurdin, 2017). A similar case also occurred in the Philippines and Thailand in which the practice of political bossism is widespread (Sidel, 1996; 57). As a result, the practices and political relations established are clientelistic (Kafid, 2018) and more oriented towards self-perpetuation of political power, rather than empowering and strengthening the autonomous participation of the wider community.

The low quality of political education further degenerates this situation. Instead of making people more politically literate, the regeneration process conducted by political parties and the political elite is far from political competence. Besides, the high political cost that the political elites must pay during the political campaign has also contributed to disturbing the political dynamics, both at the national and local levels. The candidates who won the election just want to take back their political capital rather than to create people’s welfare (Anwar, 2020; 2). As a result, many people become indifferent to the political process. Even if the people are still willing to participate in politics, it is caused by the mobilization factor (Nelson, 1994; 1-23) such as money (*money politics*) (Aspinall et al., 2017; 1-27) or the use of sentiments or issues of ethnic or religious identity (Maarif and Afdillah, 2015).

The Muslim millennial generation, including Generation Z, especially beginner voters, is vulnerable to be mobilized in political participation. By age, they are a group of people considered unstable in thought, are in

the phase of seeking identity, and are easily swayed in the 'obscurity' of identity. They are easily influenced by social, political, and religious factors that tend to be manipulative and authoritarian and new values outside themselves. The Muslim youths are very vulnerable to *social deprivation* and easily triggered by a feeling of dissatisfaction (Michael 1988), easily alienated (Duverger 1981), and quickly get frustrated in facing problems (Althoff 1986). A symbolic-formalistic self-image is more important. Thus, they are easy to be mobilized by certain parties or interests (Kafid, 2016; 57-79). Freedom in making a choice in socio-political and religious affairs tends to be neglected. As a result, the Muslim Millennials are easily influenced by intolerant and radical-extremists (Hidayat, 2018; 35-49).

As a generation close to information and communication technology development, the Muslim millennials will quickly gain various circulating information, primarily through social media. However, the information spread in social media today, especially those related to political and religious issues, is more doctrinal and manipulative (Syuhada, 2017; 75-79). Therefore, their engagement and participation in politics tend to be pragmatic and rigid, *'black and white or true and wrong'* (Andersen, et al., 2021; 99-118). Rational calculation in the political process is neglected. The political relations built are more pragmatism (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; 479-497). Track records and political contracts with candidates or political elites are no longer a consideration.

In the study of the 2018 Central Java gubernatorial election conducted by the students of Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Raden Mas Said Surakarta, it is clear that Muslim Millennials in determining their political choices (pairs of candidates for Governor and Deputy Governor) were driven by the popularity factor of the figures (candidates) on social media, especially the candidates who get more likes or positive comments from their peers. Rational calculations or track records of the candidates are not their main considerations in making a choice.

The same thing happened at the 2019 Election. As if the Muslim Millennials didn't want to miss the presidential and vice-presidential

election campaigns. During the Prabowo-Sandi and Jokowi-Ma'ruf Amin pairs campaigns, their enthusiasm and participation in this five-year democratic party were evident. However, if examined more deeply, those who took part in the campaign were mostly the same people (interview with Nur Rohman, 23/12/2020). The motive for their participation was friendship solidarity and the money given by the candidates. Again, their participation is not based on rational calculations, such as vision-mission or the track record of candidate pairs.

Another case, during the 2020 Surakarta Mayor election, when Gibran Rakabuming Raka (one of the candidates), the eldest son of the President of the Republic of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, won the election with the most votes with a people participation rate of more than 70 percent. Gibran, who is part of the millennial generation, gained massive support from the young Muslim groups. Likewise, during the 2014 and 2019 Presidential Elections even though the issue of Islamic law (*shari'ah*) application was prevailing at that time. There seems to be good communication between the political and religious elites in Solo and was successfully used as social capital for the candidates to get votes and support.

If viewed from the trend on social media, the Islamist groups and Muslim millennials are very active in sharing, commenting, and liking issues related to the campaign of Islamic law enforcement and other issues such as the hijrah movement, the concept of Islamic (*shar'i*) life, preferring a Muslim leader, etc. It can be seen from the Instagram accounts of *the Muslimah Community of Ummah Desire* (KMDU), *Sukobarjo Islamic Youth Forum* (Forpis), *Sububan Biker*, *al-Mustanir Forum*, *Soloraya Islamic Youth Community Forum* (Furisa), *Ar-Rasail Community*, and *Yuk Ngaji Solo*.

These groups are very active in posting various activities on social media in the form of news, videos, or religious appeals. Their followers are very active and huge. However, their political participation is still not fully independent. There are still many choices and political participation triggered by money politics, religious leaders, and peers. Their participation

is still not fully based on rational calculations such as vision-mission orientation, work program, and track record of the candidates (interview with M. Zainal Anwar, 23/12/2020). Almost similar to the dynamics of political contestation in East Java, where the socio-cultural capital of the sons of Kiai, *an honorific title given to Muslim clergy*, had a significant influence on the political choices of the Muslim millennial generation (Thoriquttyas, 2018; 88-97). The difference is that in Solo the socio-cultural capital that has been successfully used is the patron-client relationship model built from work and political relations of supporters of the candidates.

The Islamic Literacy for Courteous and Tolerant Behavior (LISaN)

The high political participation that is not fully autonomous, especially among Muslim millennials, should be the main concern of political elites and parties. Independent political participation must be their main agenda to educate supporters and voters. But what happens is the opposite; they become a commodity and ‘exploitation’ of shortly political interests. If it continues, moreover if there is an assumption from the political elite that public participation is easier to mobilize, people will then become ‘allergic’ and indifferent to politics (Amoateng, 2019;9-25). It will also reduce the public trust in political parties (Aspinall, 2017; 1-27). Even, people may become antipathetic to the state. This situation will lead to the emergence of various types of the Islamic movement under the pretext of state failure, marginalization of the Muslims, the need for alternative solutions for the current political situation, namely a political system that is considered more “Islamic” as to have been promoted by Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) (Karim, 2016; 90-118). Although the Indonesian government has officially disbanded it, its ideology will not vanish.

The autonomous political participation of the Muslim millennials is still a serious challenge for the government, especially for those who have

limited access to information. Thus, it is necessary to have a mechanism or space that can attract their attention so that they will take part in various social, political, and religious activities that are more liberating. It means that they must be given a space that will not trap them into a symbolic-formalistic status. Art, sports, social media, education, and technology can be a new space for interaction (Bradya & Chaskinb, 2020; 1-11) as long as the elites can use these new spaces for driving autonomous participation (Whiteley, 1995; 211-233) of individuals in politics.

The Muslim millennials are supposed to understand that digital media, especially social media, can be used as a new space to engage in enlightening social, political, and religious life; not being a space for indoctrination and spreading hatred. Social media can be used as a new space and form of political participation (Theocharis, 2015; 1-14), as a continuation of actions in the *offline* sphere, and independent participation (Theocharis & de Moor, 2019; 1-24). As a result, individual choice and participation occur rationally or as a form of rational action that contributes significantly to the democratization process (McGann, 2016; 1-12).

The dynamics of local politics in the Solo area, as explained above, have inspired the birth of a courteous political literacy movement. This movement is part of the LISaN movement initiated by the Center for the Study and Development of Pesantren Nusantara (PKPPN)-UIN Surakarta (Anwar, Kafid & Ubaidillah, 2021). It focuses on assisting the community through education and training programs, and public campaigns, especially through social media. According to M. Zainal Anwar (interview, 15/11/2020), this movement has become an integral part of the campaign of good speech to counter the rise of hoaxes and hate speech on social media.

PKPPN is one of the semi-autonomous institutions born on the creative initiation of young academicians at IAIN Surakarta on October 19, 2017. In 2021, along with the institutional transformation of IAIN Surakarta into UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta, PKPPN became the Center for the Study and Development of Islam Nusantara. Its vision is

promoting Islamic values and teachings in a polite, tolerant, and creative manner by emphasizing the importance of using “contemporary” (*slang*) language without neglecting the authoritative references from the work of the ulama and employing the values of local wisdom. The focus of this literacy movement is the Muslim millennials and generation Z.

The participants of the program were high school students and early semester students at Islamic colleges in the Solo area. Along with print and digital media practitioners, religious leaders, and academicians, they were prompted to see, understand, discuss, and respond to various information and then compare it with the social reality of their surroundings in the form of sharing lived experiences, whether related to social, political, or religious issues. Then, they were asked to document their respective responses, which had been shared with their friends, into creative works. They can choose one of the creative forms such as popular essays, memes, or short videos.

During sharing life experiences, participants were always asked to refer to authoritative Islamic sources (works of the ulama) as their argumentation basis. Through this forum, the participants must identify and verify whether the information referred to is clear or not; whether it is a hoax. In addition, the sharing experience is aimed at solving problems, not making ‘judgments’ against perpetrators. Finally, they have to initiate the best way to invite their closest people to behave wisely in judging a case and the perpetrator.

In this regard, the self-awareness of an autonomous individual is emphasized. Social media users must be able to explore various sources of information received and how to respond to social phenomena autonomously and gently. Social media, as a new public arena that has become part of daily life, must be fulfilled with more educational content, providing true information, and not used as a space for manipulation and indoctrination. Social media must be used as a space for the reproduction of values and collective identity as a form of active participation in social, political, and religious activities in an autonomous, polite, and

tolerant manner. Yet, re-excavation and comprehensive understanding of local wisdom values that are contextualized with the current situation is necessary (interview with Abdul Halim, 24/12/2020).

After joining LISaN training program, the Muslim millennials understand that information in social media is not neutral and does not emerge suddenly. Instead, it is present or deliberately presented through rigid stages, including the possibility to mix with religious, political, or economic interests. Therefore, the independence of the reader becomes important in responding to the information or opinions spread online. So, verification before sharing information is important.

Except as a medium for disseminating ideas, virtual space mastery is believed by the initiators of the LISaN movement as a means for *mainstreaming* individual autonomous movement in politics and religion. The new public space, dominated by doctrinal, authoritarian, and manipulative information, needs to be colored with information that leads to an empowerment program and generates awareness of individuals and groups autonomously to inspire others. This movement then promoted the hashtag #WaniUripWaniSantun (*brave to live, brave to be courteous*). This movement was finally able to become a noisy tolerant majority movement.

The effectiveness and success of the LISaN movement were evidenced after the evaluation result, which found that the Muslim millennial generation is individuals who have unique life experiences and deserve to fill the contents of new public space (social media). Even though social media has been dominated by manipulative information, if the Muslim millennials are given the opportunity and assistance, they will be independent and creative individuals. They can reflect their life experiences in an autonomous, polite, and tolerant manner, even capable of being agents of change and disseminating the self-autonomy value in political and religious affairs.

Conclusion

The trend of increasing Islamism movements in the local level, especially in the Solo area, especially those targeting millennial Muslim groups, is not only caused by the rapid flow of information that tends to be authoritarian and manipulative, but also as a result of political dynamics and political elite movements that have not fully targeted efforts to strengthen awareness. politics and the autonomous participation of society. The the Islamic literacy for courteous and tolerant behavior (LISaN) movement, which aims to strengthen the understanding and awareness of the millennial Muslim generation as autonomous individuals finds its urgency. The movement, later called the ‘noisy tolerant majority’, turned out to be a means of reproduction and strengthening of effective community autonomous participation, both socially, politically and religiously.

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