



Contestation and Polemic of Islamic Thought in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study seeks to uncover the intricacies of Islamic thought and the issues that lead to religious polemics in Indonesia. Utilizing a narrative ethnographic approach, this study examines the polemic of religious thought among the “New Islam” groups, namely Jama'ah Tabligh, Wahdah Islamiyah, and former Hizbut Tahrir, as well as “old Islam” (PMII and Ansor) by taking the Gorontalo context. which was carried out in July-September 2021. within the context of Gorontalo. Data were collected from July to September 2021. The findings indicate that the polemics among Muslims primarily revolve around the topic of khilafiyah, such as practices like *tahlilan* and the issue of wishing Merry Christmas, and extend to ideological matters. This polemic occurs among Muslims affiliated with groups or organizations that possess an epistemological basis of the extreme right (fundamental) in contrast to those with a left (liberal) epistemological basis.

Keywords: Islamic Thought, Islamic Movement, Gorontalo, Polemic of Islam

Introduction

Indonesia, a country with a primarily Muslim population, boasts a diverse array of epistemologies.¹ Within the Muslim community, there are followers of Sunni Islam as well as non-Sunni Islam such as Mu'tazilah, Qodaria, Shia, and more.² Compared to other countries, Indonesia is unique in the way it expresses its religious beliefs, with a wide range of schools and understanding of the religion³, be it in the fiqh area and the tarekat and tasawuf areas. This diversity in religious understanding has led to the emergence of various schools of thought in addition to adherence to the four traditional schools of thought (the Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanafi, and Hambali schools). Indonesia can be seen as a place where Islam, in addition to Arabic, has taken root. This is because the majority of the Muslim population is not of Arab descent, unlike in countries where the majority of the population is Arab and Muslim.⁴

Religion pertains to the private realm of an individual. It is a domain where one can freely express their beliefs. Limiting religious expression through sharia and theological justifications is unjustified as belief in the transcendent is an inherent right of every individual or group. People possess the right to express their religion and beliefs in accordance with their knowledge and aspirations. For individuals who have deeply internalized their religious values, always provide an accommodating space for spiritual contemplation and attainment.

In Indonesia, when the democratic space is open, the population feels liberated from the constraints that have previously restricted political, social, and religious spaces for individuals and groups. On one hand, it brings renewed opportunities for political action and aspirations. This is because, for 30 years, the New Order regime under Suharto and his cronies imposed strict control and military repression on the population. Religious activities were heavily monitored and suspected, leaving religious leaders powerless, even though a few brave clerics attempted to resist, their lives ended in vain.

¹ Ricky Santoso Muharam, "Membangun toleransi umat beragama di indonesia berdasarkan konsep deklarasi kairo." *Jurnal HAM* 11, no. 2 (2020): 269.

² Rahman, Opin, and M. Gazali Rahman. "Tafsir Ideologi: Bias Idiologi dalam Tafsir Teologi Sunni, Muktazilah, dan Syiah." *As-Syams*, no. 2 (2020): 154-196.

³ Ramli Abdul Wahid, "Aliran Minoritas dalam Islam di Indonesia." *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 141.

⁴ Tajudin Nur, "Sumbangan bahasa Arab terhadap bahasa Indonesia dalam perspektif pengembangan bahasa dan budaya." *Humaniora* 26, no. 2 (2014): 235-243.

On the other hand, the opening of democratic space and freedom of religion is susceptible to polemics of religious thought within the Islamic community.⁵

During the New Order era, religious life was heavily restricted and the religious community was chained by impartial rules. Religious gatherings in public spaces were often suspected of the plan for threatening the stability of the state. Indonesia has learned from its history and now aims to prevent attempts to overthrow the government through laws that are not in accordance with Islamic teachings. For example, the resistance of Sekarmadji Maridjan Kartosoewirjo, an Indonesian Islamic figure who led the Darul Islam rebellion (DI/TII NII), was ultimately unsuccessful. However, it is surprising that to this day, there are still two million followers of Kartosoewirjo scattered throughout Indonesia. An online media in Indonesia reported on the existence of Kartosoewirjo's followers and also reported that the late Kartosoewirjo's son, Sarjono Kartosoewirjo, has pledged loyalty to the Republic of Indonesia.⁶

In contrast to the New Order era, the situation in the reform era was vastly different. Individuals and groups celebrated their liberation from the oppressive regime. Similarly, in religious life, people were free to practice their religion. Freedom of expression is a right granted to all citizens, protected by law. Recitation groups began to form, religious studies were conducted openly in public spaces, and religious expression was no longer restricted.⁷

Gorontalo is located at the northern tip of Sulawesi, which is 2000, separated from North Sulawesi and gained its own identity as a predominantly Muslim area. The majority of the population adheres to *Ahlul Sunnah Wal Jama'ah* (ASWAJA) *Annahliyah*, as evidenced by the practices of *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) *amaliyah*. In addition to NU, the people of Gorontalo also follow Kyai Ahmad Dahlan, the founder of the largest organization, Muhammadiyah, established in 1912 in Yogyakarta.

⁵ Amos Sukamto, "Ketegangan Antar Kelompok Agama pada Masa Orde Lama sampai Awal Orde Baru: Dari Konflik Perumusan Ideologi Negara Sampai Konflik Fisik." *Indonesian Journal of Theology* 1, no. 1 (2013): 25-47.

⁶ Fuad Jabali, "Strategi Politik Sukarmadji Maridjan Kartosoewirjo Dalam Mendirikan Negara Islam Indonesia (Nii) Sebelum Dan Sesudah Kemerdekaan." Bachelor's thesis, Fakultas Adab dan Humaniora UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta.

⁷ Hasyim Asy'ari, "Relasi Negara dan Agama di Indonesia." *Jurnal Rechtsvinding* (2014): 1-7.

Based on the preceding thoughts and empirical explanations, the authors have chosen to investigate the topic of religious thought in Islam in Gorontalo. The primary objective of the study is to describe the presence of religious groups with different epistemological-ideological and sociological backgrounds that tend to be polarized by interpretation, religious understanding, and organizational actions in Gorontalo. Additionally, the study analyzed the response of the cleric who represents the "old authorities" on Islam in Gorontalo in relation to the development of the diversity of thought currently taking place. Through these two angles, an anthropological approach to religion can be used to describe the local dynamics of Islamic thought in Gorontalo in depth.

Previous studies on religious thought in Indonesia have tended to focus on two aspects. The first is studies that examine religious thought from the perspective of the role of religion in the public sphere,⁸ religious and political relations.⁹ The second tendency is to view the problem of religious thought in relation to political identity carried out by hard-line Islamic groups, specifically the suppression of the caliphate,¹⁰ and religious conflicts.¹¹ and religious conflicts. From these two trends, it appears that religious thought in the aspect of contestation and polemic has not received much attention in religious studies, even though the problem of religious thought tends to lead to internal conflicts within Islam. The internal conflict among Muslims poses a significant threat to the realization of unity and wholeness within the Muslim community.¹²

⁸ M. Amin Abdullah, "Menengok Kembali Peran Agama di Ruang Publik." *Jurnal Sosiologi Agama* 11, no. 2 (2017): 157-184.

⁹ Muhammad Dawam Rahardjo, "Agama di Ruang Publik Politik." *Societas Dei: Jurnal Agama dan Masyarakat* 2, no. 1 (2015): 95-95.

¹⁰ M. Hasbi Amiruddin, "Isu Terorisme Dan Respon Aktivistis Muda Aceh," *Walisono: Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan*, 2014,; Muhammad Nuh, "Islam, Nilai Sosial, Sikap Keberagamaan Di Tengah Problem Kebangsaan," *POLITIKA* 5, no. 2 (2014): 5.

¹¹ Ulfah Fajarini, "Potret Konflik Keagamaan Masyarakat Tangerang Banten Dan Resolusi Konflik Berbasis Multikulturalisme Dalam Islam," *Al-Tahrir* 14, no. 2 (2014): 20; Khoirul Huda, "Fenomena Pergeseran Konflik Pemikiran Islam Dari Tradisionalis Vs Modernis Ke Fundamentalists Vs Liberalis," *Islamica* 3, no. 2 (2009): 23; H Djono Nurdianto, SA, Joebagio, "Kajian Poskolonial Gerakan Pemikiran Dan Sikap Ulama Pesantren Tegalsari Dalam Pusaran Konflik Multidimensional Di Jawa (1742-1862)," *Theologia* 29, no. 1 (2018): 1-26; Rasyidah, "Potensi Konflik Dan Masa Depan Islam Di Indonesia; (Kajian Terhadap Tantangan Dakwah)," *Al-Bayan* 21, no. 30 (2014): 14,

¹² Egi Sukma Baihaki, "Konflik Internal Umat Islam: Antara Warisan Sejarah Dan Harapan Di Masa Depan," *FIKRAH*, 2018,

Academic attention to the dynamics of Islamic religious thought and movements in Gorontalo tends to emphasize its biographical aspects, as shown in a study conducted by Subair.¹³ Thaib's research in 2014 highlighted the emergence of a new Islamic movement,¹⁴ but it focused primarily on the textual analysis of Hizbut Tahrir's open criticism of democratic ideas in Indonesia. Additionally, existing studies tend to adopt a historical approach, describing events that occurred long ago and the signs of "Islamic organization" that were prevalent in Indonesia during the early 20th century. The only exception is a study carried out by Sriwahyuningsih, which examined the contemporary phenomenon of the "Niqab" fashion among female students of Islamic tertiary institutions in Gorontalo and emphasized the role of peers, family environment, and da'wah networks in certain cities in Indonesia.¹⁵

However, an in-depth study that comprehensively examines the development of religious thought and the impact of new leadership patterns, media, and public space usage, and regional, national, and transnational networks on the development of Islamic religious organizational thought in Gorontalo, using an anthropological approach, has yet to be undertaken. Academic research on the dynamics of Islamic religious thoughts and movements in Gorontalo has not yet delved deeply into the subject matter and tends to focus on its biographical aspects or historical events. Such Islamic religious dynamics are rapidly evolving and have a significant impact on other sectors of life in Indonesia, and are not separate from variants of thinking at the local and regional level, which are partly or wholly inseparable from major developments at the national and even global level.

The goal of this paper is to address the limitations of previous studies by carefully identifying potential conflicts arising from religious polemics in public spaces. Additionally, we aim to explain why these conflicts occur in the context of religion. By understanding the underlying factors that contribute to the emergence of polemics in society, we can gain valuable

¹³ Muh Subair, "Ulama Kharismatik Kh. Hamrain Kau Anugrah Atas Ilmu Dan Amalnya," *Al-Qalam* 21, no. 1 (2015): 45–54.

¹⁴ Sukrin Thaib, "Demokrasi Menurut Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia; Kajian Tentang Pemikiran Dan Gerakan Aktivistis Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia Kota Gorontalo" (2014).

¹⁵ Sriwahyuningsih, Nurul Aini N. Pakaya, Chaterina Putri Doni R. Saleh, "Pembentukan Identitas Keagamaan Mahasiswi Bercadar Di Perguruan Tinggi Agama Islam Di Gorontalo," *Madani* 1, no. 2 (2019): 110–22.

insights into promoting harmonious coexistence in the future. Our argument is that polemics of thought can lead to conflicts between groups of Islamic thought, diminishing the values of Islamic brotherhood and creating suspicion and hostility among different groups, including those of different mainstream streams, age groups, and localities.

The Polemic of Thought: From the Issues of Fiqh to State Ideology

The issue of religious thought in Islam has long been a contentious topic in Indonesia, leading to the formation of various ideological currents, organizational structures, shifting tendencies, and movement relations over time. The prolonged polemics arising from these ongoing debates have given rise to multiple variants of thought, some being extreme right, extreme left, and some taking the "middle path" (*al-wasathiyah*) or what is known as the moderate group. Each claim the truth and collective ideals they have. These conflicts are often involved in endless polemics among the extreme right and extreme left. The former is often associated with fundamentalism while the latter is identified with liberalism. These two groups are like two sides of a coin that have never met an agreement (*kalimatun sawa*).

These two groups have yet to reach a mutual understanding, often characterized by debates that lead to accusations of apostasy (*takfiri*) by one group against the other. This type of situation is not new in Islam, as historical records indicate that polemics within Islamic thought began with disputes over leadership (*imamah*), and have continued to this day, causing major divisions within the Muslim community. The issue of Imamah was initially a political problem between the Muhajirin and the Ansar following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, but it was resolved through the election of Abu Bakr as caliph. However, after the death of Uthman bin Affan, the community was divided, leading to civil wars and the emergence of the term *al-fitnah al-kubro* (great disaster) to this day.

In addition to the issue of *Imamah*, Hizb ut-Tahrir promotes caliph. This was also part of the crisis of Muslim leaders who became role models after the collapse of Abbasid Caliph (750-1258, 1261-1517) and the Ottoman Caliph (1517-1924). Attempts to establish a khilafah are part of the process of upholding Shari'ah and the Islamic State. Along with Hizb ut-Tharir, the DI/TII movement emerged in Aceh's Veranda of Mecca in 1949, with DI/TII Imam Kartosuwiryo in West Java. This movement was emerged and motivated by the establishment of an Islamic State in Indonesia.

The issue has spread to discussions about the relationship between

philosophy and religion, Pancasila and religion, reason and revelation, the existence of God, heaven and hell, and so on. However, it must be acknowledged that fiqh-related issues are a major source of contention among Muslims, particularly the Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama organizations. These two mainstream organizations are the oldest and the biggest followers in this country. Muhammadiyah strongly rejects the practice of TBC (*Takhayul, Bid'ah, and Churafat*) due to the spirit of purification of Islamic teachings from local cultural influences. Meanwhile, the NU *amaliyachs* are very close to local traditions that thrive among rural Nahdhliyin members.

Recently, there has been a movement of salafi groups in Gorontalo with the jargon of returning to the Qur'an and Sunnah. This group strives to purify Islamic teachings. They are considered to resurrect the old debates on *furu* (branches) or *khilafiyah* issues between Muhammadiyah and NU. Efforts to purify Islamic teachings have also occurred in the Padri movement that occurred in Minangkabau in 1821-1837.¹⁶ The movement of the Padri is also known as the Whites, who adhere to the Hanbali school of thought and Wahhabi, so they are linked to Islamic teachings for religious purification which are strict in nature.¹⁷ The puritan movement of the Padri is oriented towards changes in the religious and moral behavior of the community and seeks to implement sharia which originates from the Qur'an and Hadith.

Gorontalo, a region on the northern tip of Sulawesi dominated by Muslims, is vulnerable to different thoughts of Islam. In Gorontalo, Islamic thought groups have a variety of movements and ideas that are very different epistemologically and ideologically. Aside from Nu and Muhammadiyah, there are salafi groups that seek refuge in mass organizations, such as Wahdah Islamiyah and Jama'ah Tabligh. The last two groups are referred to as "New Islam" groups because their presence in Gorontalo is relatively new, having emerged in the 1990s. While the two previous organizations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, known as "Old Islam," existed in the 1920s.

The majority of the people of Gorontalo are affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and are strongly associated with the religious practice of *al-nahdliyah*. Their religious practices are often "accused" as violating the

¹⁶ Haedar Nashir, "Purifikasi Islam Dalam Gerakan Padri Di Minangkabau," *Unisia* 31 (2008): 12.

¹⁷ Haedar Nashir....

Sunnah of the Prophet. They are referred to as *ahlul bid'ah* or groups who are considered to mix Islamic teachings with local culture. For example, *tahlilan*, *maulidan*, grave pilgrimage, *istighosah*, *tawasul*, and so on. This accusation arose because NU's practices were deemed to be not based on a practice practiced or exemplified by the Prophet.

According to the New Islamic group, such practice is part of a *bid'ah*, which is very misleading. They argue that Islamic teachings must be protected from the influence of local culture or actions that the Prophet never exemplified. The reason that is quite simple is the desire to maintain the purity of Islamic teachings taught by the Prophet Muhammad and the *salaful ummah* (generations of companions and *tabi'in*). This group focuses on promoting their religious beliefs through various methods, including formal education and religious institutions, as well as through informal gatherings and social media platforms. The activities include *tarbiyah* and *da'wah* which are carried out in mosques in Gorontalo City including the *Bincang-bincang Santai* (BBS) through Facebook.

Long before Gorontalo, in the 1960s, Gorontalo clerics were involved in a religious polemic between *Nahdlatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah*¹⁸. Similarly, in 1970 and 1980, debates by several Gorontalo religious leaders ignited Muslim polemics between *Nahdlatul Ulama* Gorontalo and Islamic purification groups. The polemic that erupted among Muslims at the time was distinct from the polemic that resulted in conflict in West Sumatra and its surrounding region, which lasted from 1803 to 1838. The conflict which lasted 35 years occurred between the *Padri* who were influenced by *Wahhabi* thinking and the indigenous people who led by Sultan Arifin Muningsyah. Indigenous groups are considered by the *Padri* to have done a lot of damage to Islamic teachings so Islam has drifted away from the *Qur'an* and *al-Hadith*.

The above-mentioned polemic involves religious figures and scholars who are well-versed in their fields. They are people who have read many books written by famous Middle Eastern scholars. In contrast to the current situation, many of those involved in the debate lacks comprehensive religious knowledge, particularly among Muslim youths who "suddenly" become *ustadz* or those who simply attend the assembly. This group

¹⁸ Subair, "Ulama Kharismatik Kh. Hamrain Kau Anugrah Atas Ilmu Dan Amalnya."

frequently had conflicts and arguments related to religious beliefs on social media platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp. These arguments often involve people who use anonymous accounts on Facebook.

This group experiences open conflicts and arguments on social media platforms, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, which mostly involve issues of Islamic law (*masailul fiqhiyah*) and state ideology (*khilafah*). These issues of Islamic law are classic problems that have occurred among the Imams of different Islamic schools of thought in the past, and have been discussed by 4 Imams of Madzhab. These problems have now re-emerged and are frequently debated in the public sphere or on social media.

Islamic law, or Fiqh, often has problems or issues that arise in *furu'iyah* (specific areas) rather than in its *ushul* (substance). For example, differences of opinion regarding the wishing a merry Christmas, *qunut*, *tahlilan*, grave pilgrimage, *tawasul*, and so on. These issues have been discussed by four Imams of Madzhab. However, these problems have recently been debated again in the public sphere, particularly on social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. The main point of debate is whether there is a clear example or argument from the Prophet Muhammad for these practices. Additionally, discussions on these issues have also appeared on social media platforms specifically in Gorontalo, Indonesia, such as the Gorontalo portal account and a WhatsApp group called "Gorontalo Bersyari'ah."

The issue of khilafiyah is difficult to avoid as individuals and groups often rely on their own understanding of revelation and hadith as justification for their *amaliah*. This debate often involves participants affiliated with organizations such as Wahdah Islamiyah, Jama'ah Tabligh (JT), Nahdliyin (PMII and Ansor), former Hizbuth Thahir (HTI) and former Wahdah Islamiyah. The debates that occur between these groups of thought are often colored by endless polemics. Each group of thoughts departs from an egocentric attitude which is often irrational and even tends to be emotional. Another thing is intellectual arrogance often discredits the opponent's position in a dishonorable way, or tends to justify group A as misguided and misleading and group B as the right group. The measure of wrong and right is called "Manhaj". If a group identified themselves as Manhaj of the Salaf, with those who align with this approach are deemed as "sunnah ", or correct, while others are viewed as misguided.

Wahdah Islamiyah focuses primarily on the purification of Islamic teachings and this often draws reactions from NU groups such as PMII and

Ansor. For PMII and Ansor, there is no mixing or syncretization between Islamic teachings and local culture. Thus, they see that there is a difference between Islamic teachings and culture. Islamic teachings originate from the Qur'an and Hadith, while culture originates from human creations based on interactions with their environment. Therein lies the debate that ends in polemics among them in legal matters.

Unlike Hizbuth Thair, although this organization has been disbanded based on Perppu No. 2 of 2017 concerning Community Organizations. Hizbuth Thahir Indonesia (HTI) is proven intending to change the basis of the state, Pancasila, with a caliphate system, however, the presence of HTI followers is still very strong and exists everywhere. For followers of the former HTI, the khilafah is an obligation based on the Quran, which states "*la hukma illa lillahi*" (There is no rule but that of God), and tend to adhere to a khawarij perspective, where everything must be based on the Qur'an and Hadith. Groups such as Wahdah Islamiyah and HTI are referred to as "*dalil* groups".

The HTI group's desire to replace Pancasila with a khilafah system elicited responses from the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) youth group. Pancasila as the philosophy of the nation cannot be changed or replaced as it unites all differences (race, religion, culture, language, and ideology), which is then referred to as "*kalimatun sawa*" or mutual agreement. For young activists of NU, the fact that Indonesia is predominantly Muslim does not imply that the country is an Islamic state.

Contestation of Religious Movements in Public Spaces

Discourse conflicts among Muslims are difficult to avoid, as differing perspectives on a given subject can lead to a stalemate in Islamic discourse. Language becomes a tool of contention between competing interests, ultimately undermining rationality - a principle held in high esteem in the acquisition of knowledge. In the realm of religion, this is evident in the way individuals interpret and understand their faith. William posits that there are four levels of religious interpretation: 1) The secret level: a person adheres to the teachings for himself, not to be revealed to others; (2) The private level; a person discusses his religious beliefs with a certain number of people who are close to him; (3) Denomination level; individuals have the same religious beliefs as those of other individuals in a large social group; (4) Community level: individuals have the same religious beliefs as other

members of the community.¹⁹

These differing interpretations can lead to conflicts of interest and identity, often damaging common sense and undermining the values of brotherhood in Islam (*ukhuwa Islamiyyah*). These conflicts are further exacerbated on social media and in public spaces among fundamental and liberal Muslims. According to Hasan²⁰ the emergence of fundamental Islamic groups can be traced back to George W. Bush's response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Organizations including FPI, Front Pemuda Islam Surakarta, KAMMI, Himpunan Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia (Hammas), GPI, Front Hizbullah, MMI, PBB, and PKS, serves as a protest against America. Terrorism in the United States is referred to by most Muslims as "Islamic terrorists."²¹

Fundamentalist ideas and movements are often categorized under the concepts of extremism, radicalism, and scripturalism. The phenomenon of fundamentalism can be studied within the framework of rationalism that prevails in modern social science. While all fundamentalist movements share certain characteristics, Fundamental Islam is a hardline ideology that seeks to transform Islam into a political system rather than a religion in the modern world²².

Fundamental Islam is a socio-religious movement that aims to bring Muslims back to the fundamental teachings of Islam.²³ Fundamental Islamic groups are exoteric and focus on the boundaries of what is permissible and what is forbidden according to fiqh.²⁴ It is unlike Khatib's assertion that fundamental Islam is a new social movement that seeks to shape global reality rather than negate it²⁵. Fundamental Islamic groups use the assertion

¹⁹ R. Robertson, *Agama Dalam Analisa Dan Interpretasi Sosiologis* (Jakarta: Rajawali Pers, 1993).

²⁰ MH. Nathan, K.S, dan Kamali, *Islam in Southeast Asia, Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century* (Singapore: Singapore: ISEAS, 2005).

²¹ Fealy, G, dan Hooker, *Voices of Islam in Southeast Asia A Contemporary Sourcebook* (Singapore: Singapore: ISEAS, 2006).

²² Samsi Pomalingo, *Agamamu Apa? Kritik Atas Nalar Pemahaman Keagamaan Kita* (Yogyakarta: Yogyakarta: Atap Buku, 2019).

²³ YI Mahendra, *Modernisme Dan Fundamentalisme Dalam Politik Islam: Perbandingan Partai Masyumi (Indonesia) Dan Jama'at-i-Islami (Pakistan)* (Jakarta: Jakarta: Paramadina, 1999).

²⁴ A. Azra, *Pergolakan Politik Islam: Dari Fundamentalisme, Modernisme, Hingga Post-Modernisme* (Jakarta: Jakarta: Paramadina, 1996).

²⁵ L. Khatib, "Communicating Islamic Fundamentalism as a Global Citizenship,"

of their particular identity as a means of contesting power and influence in the global system.²⁶

Fundamental Islamic movements, also known as Wahhabi or Islamic revivalists, advocate for the implementation of Islamic law over man-made laws and the establishment of an Islamic state.²⁷ They aim to monopolize the positions of judges in such a state.²⁸ These movements, associated with reformists in theology, reject the authority of traditional schools of thought²⁹. In Indonesia, the Padri movement in Minangkabau has led to horizontal conflicts among Muslims due to their radical interpretation of Islam, heavily influenced by Wahhabism.

Gorontalo, like other regions, has various religious groups with differing epistemological foundations, including Sunni groups (Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah), Fundamental Islam (Wahdah Islamiyah and Jama'ah Tabligh), and liberal Islam (Pergerakan Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia and Ansor).

NU youth activists are often labeled as "Western liberals" due to their liberal interpretation of the Quran and Hadith. This term was adopted by foreign observers and writers Charles Kurzman and Leonard Binder. Kurzman defines liberal Islam as a combination of Socrates' dialectical-critical philosophy (470-400M) Descartes' rationality (1596-1650) and Mutazilah thinking.³⁰ This philosophical trio greatly influenced the birth of the liberalist-secularist-transformative style of thinking. Meanwhile, according to Assyaukani³¹, Liberal Islam is an attempt to address the problem of the relationship between Islam and the state, Islam with civil rights, and Islam with individual freedom which is considered to be inexplicable through classical Islamic concepts. Fundamentalist groups may view this approach as diminishing the divine nature of Islam.

Wahdah Islamiyah and Jama'ah Tabligh are the outcomes of a shift

Journal of Communication Inquiry 27, no. 4 (2003): 389–409.

²⁶ P. Beyer, *Religion and Globalization* (London: Sage publications, 1994).

²⁷ YM Choueiri, *Islam Garis Keras; Melacak Akar Gerakan Fundamentalisme* (Yogyakarta: Qonun, 2003).

²⁸ O. Roy, *Genealogi Islam Radikal* (Yogyakarta: Yogyakarta: Genta Press, 2005).

²⁹ M.v. Bruinessen, *Rakyat Kecil, Islam Dan Politik, Editor Dan Penerjemah Farid Wajidi* (Yogyakarta: Yogyakarta: Bentang Budaya, 1999).

³⁰ NH. Samsudin dan Lubis, "Sejarah Munculnya Pemikiran Islam Liberal Di Indonesia 1970-2015," *Patanjala* 11, no. 3 (2019): 483–498.

³¹ A. Suhelmi, *Polemik Negara Islam: Soekarno versus Natsir* (Yogyakarta: Teraju, 2002).

in beliefs among Sunni groups, such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, as well as the Pergerakan Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia (PMII) and Ansor, which are considered offspring of Nahdlatul Ulama. This shift in thinking is a natural occurrence resulting from dialectical processes, social and religious realities, and the influence of left and right-leaning social theories. This change in perspective leads to the emergence of a new spirit in thinking, characterized by a shift in paradigms, methodologies, and interpretations of texts and reality. These varying interpretations emerge new perspectives that can shape the characteristics of thought, movements, and ideologies. Fundamental Islamic groups, which tend to be textual (*al-thabit*) or based on traditional thoughts³² often strive to return everything to the Quran and Sunnah. They are typically anti-change and reject all elements of modernism and attempts at westernization.

Wahdah Islamiyah, in particular, is a group that enthusiastically adheres to the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet. They position themselves as followers of the *salaful ummah*, adhering to the manhaj salaf or *masdar talaqi*. This extends not only to their thoughts but also to their beliefs, *mahdhah* worship (such as prayers, zakat, etc.), and non-worship (*muamalah*), all of which are derived from the Quran and Sunnah. Returning to the Quran and Sunnah is a trend in the context of purifying Islamic teachings. However, this approach often invites criticism, particularly in matters related to khilafiyah.

In 2014, the Baitul Rahman Mosque in Limboto hosted a grand meeting of the Tabligh Jama'ah, also known as the *Jama'ah kompor*, which brought together members from across the country. This gathering not only showcased the high level of religious spirit among Muslims in building Islam in the future, particularly in promoting what is good and forbidding what is wrong, but it also sparked controversies among various parties, particularly among the younger generation of Nahdlatul Ulama. The meeting, which lasted for three days, was deemed "excessive" as it caused closure of vital access points, including the main highway and public spaces for recreational purposes, such as the tower and Limboto park.

The Tabligh Jama'ah's mission is to provide impetus and motivation for spreading God's teachings. They believe that religion can create strong feelings and encouragement for individuals to worship and convey God's

³² Huda, "Fenomena Pergeseran Konflik Pemikiran Islam Dari Tradisionalis Vs Modernis Ke Fundamentalists Vs Liberalis."

messages through da'wah in open spaces. Religion, according to Geertz, is a system of symbols that functions to establish feelings and motivations in a strong, comprehensive, and long-lasting manner in human beings by formulating various concepts about the general order of existence and by imbuing these concepts with a sense of realism.³³

The atmosphere of public space with religious activities is a proposition of the "new Islamic movement" in Gorontalo. The Baiturrahman Mosque, also known as the traditional mosque is located in Limboto and is the target location for *Jama'ah Tabligh* da'wah activities such as Wahdah Islamiyah. On the other hand, the mosques in Gorontalo are involved in the two organizations' da'wah (*khuruj*) and tarbiyah activities. The production of discourse (*dakwah*) began in these locations. Not only does it give birth to discourse, but it also gives birth to individuals who are reactive, fanatical, scripturalistic, and exclusive. Furthermore, their reading and comprehension tend to be literal and textual.

The Tablighi Jama'ah and Wahdah Islamiyah, being relatively new movements in Gorontalo, often encounter conflicts with more established groups, particularly the Nahdlatul Ulama. However, these conflicts also occur within the movements themselves. For instance, members who have undergone a "spiritual awakening" may post videos of lectures by "Wahhabi Ulama" on social media, leading to heated debates and a war of words between them. These discourse wars arise from a belief in the righteousness of one's own opinion and can cause mistrust and misunderstanding among both "young learners" and those who consider themselves well-versed in the sciences of fiqh, interpretation, and Quranic and Hadith studies.

The Role of Ulama in Resolving Polemics in Gorontalo

Gorontalo is known as the "Veranda of Medina" which has a philosophy of life "*adat bersendi syara', syara' bersendi Kitabullah*". These two mottos have become the basis for articulating the religiosity of the people of Gorontalo, who are predominantly Muslim. Older people (religious leaders and traditional leaders) often express a *paduma* (guideline) which reads "*Agama To Talu Lipu Pe'I Hulalu*" that means "religion first, while building the country" which is believed to be the basis for the formulation "*Adat Bersendi Syara', Syara' bersendi Kitabullah*". This expression highlights the

³³ Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion.*, ed. M. Banton (London: Tavistock, 1966).

high moral and ethical standards within the Gorontalo Muslim society, compared to science.

The ongoing polemic on religious thought in Gorontalo reflects the typical religious beliefs of the people in Gorontalo. The emergence of transnational Islamic ideological movements and thoughts is seen as a result of this polemic. In the past, polemics of thought have occurred between two religious leaders, such as the polemic over the seizing of the Baitur Rahim mosque, which was suspected of being a khilafiyah problem, specifically the tarawih prayer (between 8 cycles and 20 cycles). The polemic that occurred between K.H. Abas Rauf (NU) and Mohammad Podungge (Muhammadiyah figure) was mediated by the government, with the involvement of Habib Ahmad Al-Masyhur from Yemen.

In contrast to the present, polemics in Islamic issues are commonly "tolerated" as normal. Transnational Islamic groups, such as the Salafis espouse a doctrine of purification, aimed at preserving the purity of Islamic teachings from the influence of local customs and traditions. They have been present in Gorontalo since the 1990s, and have attracted a significant following among the local Muslim community. They are not only active in the physical realm of *syahadah*, but also in the virtual realm of social media. The nature of their da'wah has evolved over time, initially characterized by a hardline approach, but gradually becoming more moderate. This is influenced by the increasing stigmatization of Salafism. Nevertheless, they continue to reject the blending of Islamic teachings with local traditions

In light of this, Gorontalo's religious leaders recognize the need to prevent these polemics from causing divisions among the Muslim community. They advocate for the unity of the community and for the understanding of Gorontalo's Muslim community to be placed within the framework of *ahlul sunnah wal jama'ah* (ASWAJA), which prioritizes *tawasut* (moderation), *tawazun* (balance), *tasamuh* (tolerance), and *I'tidal* (justice), as the fundamental spirit of *rahmatan lil alamin*.

To counter the rapid spread of the ideological movements and thoughts of the Salafi groups (Wahdah Islamiyah and Jama'ah Tabligh) in Gorontalo, which have been the source of religious polemics among Gorontalo's Muslims, the clerics have employed various strategies such as providing comparative perspectives, respecting differences, gently offering guidance, and preaching with tact.

Clerics in Gorontalo balance the thoughts and movements of the Salafi groups (Wahdah Islamiyah and Jama'ah Tabligh) as their

responsibility in preserving the unity of the Muslim community. The unity of Muslims is paramount in the preservation of the faith (*hifzud dien*), and differences are a *sunatullah* that must be respected and upheld. Muslims are encouraged to avoid being easily swayed by propaganda from irresponsible groups and to always adhere to the teachings of Allah by fostering friendships among groups with differing opinions. This approach is often conveyed through various forms of study, such as in assemblies, *ta'ziah*, and the commemoration of religious holidays in Islam.

In 2016, the disbandment of an assembly led by the Wahdah Islamiyah at the Kota Barat Mosque occurred, as the study presented by one of the *ustadz* was deemed insulting to the practices commonly performed by Nahdliyin members. The congregation around the mosque rejected the assembly, and the incident was reported to the local police and the Gorontalo City Council of Indonesian Ulamas. The head of the Gorontalo City cleric, K.H. Muin Mooduto, subsequently invited the *ustadz* and guided in a respectful manner in the presentation.

The incessant polemics among Muslims necessitate the presence of Ulama as a mediator who can bridge the gap between differing opinions. According to Weber, legitimate authority is required, specifically a "rational-legal authority" that is grounded in the belief of individuals who possess positions and possess charisma. Unbridled discourse has always been a ticking time bomb among Muslims, and has only been allowed to perpetuate an unfavorable scenario.

Ulama as charismatic figures and leaders play a crucial role in addressing the dynamism of Islamic thought which tends to generate polemical ideas. The presence of the Ulama as a figure who can translate the language of the Quran as a heavenly concept that requires interpretation, internalization, and implementation in the reality of Muslim life. Differences in understanding the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet, which is based on partial arguments and lack of proper understanding, often lead to chaos among Muslims and cause polemics of thought.

Transnational Islamic political movements, as a form of development of Islamic thought, have bred polemics that have violated the collective agreement in maintaining brotherhood among groups of Muslims. Gorontalo has been associated with the diversity of thought. Such a situation calls for a response from the cleric in addressing the dynamism of thought which is increasingly heating up among Muslims in Gorontalo. The massive transnational Islamic da'wah movement in various social media and public

spaces has consumed the time and energy of the Ulama and ustadz. The intensity of da'wah in dispelling the propagation movement of salafi groups in social media and public spaces is deemed capable of minimizing partial understanding of Wahdah Islamiyah and Jama'ah Tabligh.

Gorontalo's clerics remain figures of the ummah who are always a place for questions and discussions in seeing these changes. The Ulama, as holders of religious authority, aims to respond to the evolving situation of Islamic thought in the area. The response of the clerks can be seen in the activities of recitation or *ta'lim*. This can be observed through the organization of recitation or ta'lim assemblies, as well as programs such as "Ngaji Live" on NUtizen TV, which is led by a group of young Nahdlatul Ulama members, and the Tabligh Akbar, a collaborative effort between the Gorontalo City ANSOR Branch Manager and local ulama. These activities serve as a response to the dynamic development of Islamic thought at the local level, which can often become polarized in terms of religious thought and movements.

However, hard-line Islamic networks have a tendency to carry out suicide bombings. One example is the East Indonesia Mujahidin, which continues to carry out suicide bombings in Poso. On March 29, 2021, millennial terrorists affiliated with Jama'ah Ansharut Daulah who pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria carried out a suicide bombing at the Makassar Cathedral Church (ISIS). Following the bombings, Densus 88 conducted a massive operation, arresting 32 terrorists in various areas at the end of March 2021, including three women in Makassar.

The Gorontalo clerics are concerned about the canalization of hard-line Islamic network cadres who carry out suicide bombings and are suspected of thinking haphazardly by easily disbelieving others outside their group. The tactical alliance between Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah Gorontalo is expected to protect the Gorontalo region from the siege of hard-line Islamic ideology. The government-initiated religious moderation program was intensively socialized by ANSOR of Gorontalo City in order to present a friendly Islam rather than an angry Islam amid polemic thoughts.

The role of Gorontalo clerics in overcoming ideological polemics is critical to maintaining Muslim unity. In the case of Indonesia, the issue of religion is critical. Religious issues are rarely resolved quickly; usually, these efforts are made after shifting from polemics to internal Muslim conflicts. If it is already in the realm of conflict, it will take a long time to reconcile the

parties involved. The Ulama did not want Gorontalo to be involved in conflicts such as the civil war that erupted in several Indonesian regions.

The Ulama in Gorontalo adhere to the principle of *Payu Limo Totalu Lipu Pei Hulalo* (With the five basic foundations, I build the State) as the formulation of *Duluwo Limo Lo Pohalaa* (Two big kingdoms out of five small kingdoms) namely; 1) *Bangusa talalo lipu poduluwalo* (the nation is guarded and the country is defended); 2) *Batanga pomaya* (self is devoted); 3) *Upango potombulu* (the treasure is sacrificed); 4) *Nyawwa podungalo* (the life is at stake); 5) *Oponu de moputi tulalo bodila moputi lo baya* (shame worse than death).

The clerics of Gorontalo understand that the Gorontalo people originated from a small, familial unit known as a *laihe*, led by an individual named *Pulahe*. As the community expanded, it evolved into a *Lembo'a* led by a leader known as *bantalo*, and developed into larger settlements called *Linula* led by *Olongia*. The long-established societal structure of Gorontalo cannot be disrupted by differing opinions, as all Gorontalo citizens are descended from one familial unit (*ngala'a/laihe*). The five principles listed above are considered vital elements of social capital in Gorontalo society, promoting a sense of mechanical solidarity among Muslims.

Conclusion

The polemic of thought reveals the immaturity of religious groups in managing emotions. Polemics often result in one group or individual misleading or oppressing another. While the essence of being religious or Islamic is powerful, it is often not reinforced by a thorough understanding of various disciplines such as *fiqh*, *ushulul fiqh*, *hadith*, and the ability to interpret science. This leads to a partial understanding that is imposed upon religious texts (the Quran and Hadith) and the opinions of scholars. Debates that culminate in polemics are founded on weak arguments and lack a robust epistemological foundation. The reason is subjugated to intellectual ego and desire. The portrayal of polemics as a necessity has become a common occurrence in Islamic thought groups, as Islam and its texts (the Quran and Hadith) are open to interpretation.

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