

Faith-based Polarisation and the Use of Social Media in Indonesia

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Indonesia is home to hundreds of diverse ethnicities, faiths, and religions. The relations between these ethnic and religious communities are generally harmonious. However, it has become clearer in recent years that working for social justice has become more difficult with the existence and the growth of religious polarisation. This becomes more apparent during political moments like elections¹ and, in many cases, lasts for much longer afterwards. It is strengthened by some research² that connects the backsliding of democracy with the emergence of polarisation that challenges pluralism and tolerance.

Several studies conducted by the Center for the Study of Islam and Society of State Islamic University Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta³ and the Maarif Institute⁴ also reveal that young people in Indonesia are an easy target for the spread of intolerant and radical ideas in environments of educational institutions. This data is strengthened by a study conducted in 2018 by the CisForm of State Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga at eighteen Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia.⁵ This study found a significant percentage of Islamism among students of the Islamic Education department (*Pendidikan Agama Islam*).⁶ From around 600 Islamic Education departments spread across various colleges of Islamic studies, this department has contributed a considerable number of Islam teachers for public schools.

In another study conducted by the Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (CRCS), Gadjah Mada University,⁷ we analysed the spread of intolerant ideologies in the Indonesian Muslim community, and described efforts to counter them by religious and ethnic communities.⁸ Our research studied four different Islamist groups to identify relevant trends, namely: (1) Aksi Bela Islam 212 ("Defend Islam Action on 2nd December") and post-212 groups, (2) Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, (3) Salafist movements using exclusivist housing, and (4) the Salafist piety movement as opposed to Muslim *laskar* ("paramilitarism"). Due to the limited space, I will only discuss the second group and its use of social media in spreading their ideologies.

Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (The Party of Liberation)/HTI) is an international pan-

Islamic political organisation whose goal is to unite Islam and politics under *al-Khilafah al-Islamiyyah* ("the Islamic caliphate system"), which encourages faith-based polarisation. In July 2017, the Indonesian government disbanded *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia* as a social organisation. HTI, however, still continued to operate after this dissolution. Seeing as their leaders are still free to carry on with their operations, they have adopted different methods of operation.

Without officially associating their activities with HTI, they remain active both offline and online. Their offline strategy includes conducting *halaqoh* ("closed study circles") with more general Islamic names such as *Ngaji*, *Cinta Qur'an*. This has made it possible for individuals to participate in a variety of groups and to connect to online Islamic networks that are free from state restrictions, such as *Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran* ("Indonesia without Dating"), *Yuk Ngaji* ("Let's read the Qur'an"), and *Jaringan Pengusaha Rindu Syariah* ("Networks of Muslimpreneurs").

Their use of social media platforms has been successful and has found acceptance among many of the *hijrah* (spiritual migration) communities, utilising certain youthful expressions such as *NgeFast*, *NgeSlow*, and *Xkwavers*⁹ as vocational and motivational training platforms to introduce their ideology. Committed participants through these "light" religious sessions, will then be recruited to join "heavier" sessions on HTI's ideology. One tagline of *NgeFast*, for example, reads:

Kamu punya komunitas
(you have a community)
Kami punya program hijrah
(we have hijrah program)
Kita cocok deh kayaknya
(I think we complement each other)¹⁰

Therefore, HTI continues to promote its ideas and actively seeks out new members behind closed doors. By capitalizing on the political opposition to the Jokowi administration and the notion that HTI is a victim of "Jokowi's anti-Islamic agenda," this organisation has been able to develop new bases of support in society.¹¹

The above phenomenon seems to mirror some critics who state that the Indonesian

civil society movement and the notion of Indonesian pluralism are a myth! Mietzner and Muhtadi's research is a notable example where they question the tolerance and cultural plurality of the followers of the biggest mass Muslim organisation of *Nahdlatul Ulama*. They argued that NU followers are by and large as intolerant toward religious minorities as the overall Muslim population in Indonesia, and in certain instances, they exhibit even greater intolerance.¹²

I do not agree with the argument that Indonesian tolerance is a myth. I realise that there are problems related to religious pluralism, but I argue that the Indonesian civil society movement is real as people on the ground are working and consolidating their efforts for interfaith tolerance, dialogue initiatives, and peace building movements. It is important to acknowledge that the increase of fragmented society and the spread of Islamism does not proceed in a linear direction. Various civil society organisations, indigenous communities, young religious leaders, and some inclusive religious organisations have made an effort to counter this radicalist tendency, including through the use of social media. These efforts, including those by youth and women, may not solve the problems, but are important actions that need to be acknowledged.

This dynamic response towards Islamism at local levels, however, does not seem to be apparent in the public discourse, and thus, tends to neglect arenas of contestation behind the main stage. By acknowledging various efforts toward social justice within current Indonesian socio-religious development, we will be able to value and expand the arenas of contestation behind the main stage, areas which have demonstrated genuine challenges to the expansion of Islamist movements' mobility.

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Notes

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- Islamism here is defined as "the use of Islam as a supremacist ideology in which all aspects of governance and social life should be based on a particular version of Islam."
- CRCS UGM (2020). "Enabling Environments for Radicalisation and Tolerance Promotion in Indonesia." Unpublished.
- The study title is the "Enabling Environments for Radicalisation and Tolerance Promotion in Indonesia." The following discussion is mainly based on the study's findings and reports.
- The term *Ngefast* and *Ngeslow* refer to a training program run by The Fast Training focusing on an intensive understanding of Islam and on being Muslims. The program is conducted in a relaxed way and targets young Muslims. Whereas *Xkwavers* (ex-Korean wavers) are those who had been formerly addicted to Korean pop cultures. The *Xkwavers* program targets this group to learn about Islam and to channel their enthusiasm to the religion.
- <https://ngefast.id>
- HTI media such as Media Umat, Muslimah Media Center, Khilafah channel consider government's counter-radical policy as against Islam. See "Jubir HTI: Rezim Jokowi Mengidap Sekularisme Radikal" <https://mediaumat.news/jubir-hti-rezim-jokowi-mengidap-sekularisme-radikal> retrieved on April 14, 2020.
- Marcus Mietzner and Burhanuddin Muhtadi (2020). "The Myth of Pluralism: Nahdlatul Ulama and the Politics of Religious Tolerance in Indonesia." *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 42 (1).

Fig. 1: An online Islamic training program targeting former K-Pop fans (source: <https://rufindhi.wordpress.com/2021/05/23/kelas-ngeslow-buka-batch-2-video>)

