

## **TOLERANCE WITHOUT LIBERALISM: The Local Nahdlatul Ulama and Intolerance Politics in Contemporary East Java, Indonesia**

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### **Abstract**

*There has been a rising Islamic fundamentalism, and intolerance cases in contemporary Indonesia. The fundamentalism problem in Indonesia particularly points to the Wabbābi for its puritanical ideology as the root of the intolerance cases. This article aims to analyse Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and its responses towards the Wabbābi group. Being the forefront for the struggle against fundamentalist Muslim groups in post-New Order Indonesia, this article argues that NU adopts an intolerant approach in dealing with Wabbābi groups and their Islamic dakwah (preaching) activism. Taking a close look at a local branch of NU in Jember, East Java, the organisation's approach is indeed ambiguous. On the one hand, NU calls for religious moderation, pluralism, and anti-violence approaches, but on the other hand, it also violates the principle of pluralism and democracy and is prone to authoritarianism for banning the Wababi group's rights to establish their educational institution in Jember. Based on a series of field research, this article contributes to the complexities of NU's*

*responses towards religious pluralism and the limits of the NU's tolerance in contemporary Indonesia.*

*[Persoalan fundamentalisme Islam, dan intoleransi di Indonesia semakin meningkat belakangan ini. Akar dari masalah tersebut secara khusus merujuk pada Wabbābi karena ideologi puritanismenya. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis organisasi Muslim terbesar di Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), dan tanggapannya terhadap kelompok Wabbābi. Dengan memotret NU sebagai garda terdepan perjuangan melawan kelompok Muslim fundamentalis di Indonesia pasca-Orde Baru, artikel ini berargumen bahwa NU mengadopsi pendekatan intoleran dalam menghadapi kelompok Wabbābi dan aktivisme dakwahnya. Hal itu tampak dari rekam jejak Pengurus Cabang NU Jember, Jawa Timur yang menggunakan pendekatan ambigu. Di satu sisi, mereka menyerukan pendekatan moderasi beragama, pluralisme, dan anti kekerasan, tapi di sisi lain juga melanggar prinsip pluralisme, dan demokrasi serta rawan otoritarianisme karena melarang hak kelompok Wabbābi untuk mendirikan lembaga pendidikannya di Jember. Berdasarkan serangkaian riset lapangan, artikel ini berkontribusi pada kompleksitas respon NU terhadap pluralisme agama, dan batas-batas toleransinya di era kontemporer.]*

**Keywords:** NU, Wabbābi, (In)tolerance, Islamic Fundamentalism

## **Introduction**

Established in 1926, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is a moderate Islamic organization with the largest number of followers in Indonesia. Its membership estimates range from 40 million to over 90 million (2019), making it the largest Islamic organization in the world. Over the years, the organization's history has evolved significantly, from an organization that defended the country's independence, tolerance to local Islamic practices, to a political party between the 1950s and 1984, and then to a civil society organization ever since. It differentiates itself from radical Islamist groups that struggle for political Islam. The NU upholds the principles of democracy, in strengthening the social-political life in

Indonesia, and sees principles of Islam as the backbone of the electoral process of Muslim politics. It maintains the Islamic political system as only suitable for countries with the monolithic Muslim population, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Political Islam on the other hand is not suitable given Indonesia's socio-political context, where the society is ethnically, racially, culturally, and religiously diverse. Therefore, the NU prefers an inclusive approach in accepting the nation-state system based on Pancasila<sup>1</sup> and the 1945 Indonesian Constitution.<sup>2</sup>

The NU strive for moderation in affairs related to religion. Nevertheless, manifestation of the NU's principles of religious moderation are not limited to politics but include also of how the organization responds to various socio-religious issues and groups. It differentiates itself from Islamist groups that strive for *sharia*-based governance and laws as well as the public ethics. Islamist groups like the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), Front Pembela Islam (FPI), Tarbiyah activists, and Forum Umat Islam (FUI), struggle for the obligation to wear the *hijab* for Muslim female students.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, NU represents the Islamization agenda through humanistic principles. Under the leadership of the former chairman of the NU-later appointed as the Indonesian president (1999-2001) Abdurrahman Wahid, the organization has struggled for freedom of opinion, expression, and religion, and stood up for persecuted minority groups.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pancasila refers to five principles underlying Indonesia's nationhood: "belief in Almighty God, the sovereignty of the people, national unity, social justice and humanity. Norshahrir Saat, *The State, Ulama and Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Masdar Hilmy, "Whiter Indonesia's Islamic Moderatism? Reexamination on the Moderate Vision of Muhammadiyah and NU," *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2013, pp. 24-48.

<sup>3</sup> David M. Bourchier, "Two Decades of Ideological Contestation in Indonesia: From Democratic Cosmopolitanism to Religious Nationalism," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 49, No. 5, 2019, pp. 713-733.

<sup>4</sup> Greg Barton, *Gagasan Islam Liberal di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1999); Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000); Robin Bush, *Nabdlatul Ulama and the Struggle*

Nevertheless, the NU's moderate attitude does not imply consistencies but it changes and ambiguous depending on socio-political circumstances. Scholars say that during the New Order of the 1980-1990s, NU had strived for tolerance, pluralism, and other democratic agendas.<sup>5</sup> However, the claim that the organisation is the most moderate, tolerant, and pluralist Islamic organization in the country contradicts has been challenged by recent studies. Conservative groups within NU strengthened and engaged in numerous intolerant activities and promoted exclusivist ideas. Two leading political scientists, Mietzner and Muhtadi, consider pluralism within this organization a myth,<sup>6</sup> while others contend that NU is not as moderate, tolerant, and pluralist as previously perceived.<sup>7</sup>

This article aims to analyse the contemporary development of NU's moderate ideology and religious pluralism in Indonesia. Taking a close look at a local branch of NU in Jember, East Java, this article argues that the organization is indeed intolerant when dealing with fundamentalist minority groups, such as Wahhābi. In short term, the organisation's approach is indeed ambiguous. On the one hand, NU calls for religious moderation, pluralism, and anti-violence approaches. However, on the other hand, they also violate the principle of pluralism and democracy and is prone to authoritarianism for banning the Wahabi group's rights to establish their educational institution. In essential, democracy allows every citizen to achieve goals according to their social, cultural, religious, and economic interests. On the contrary, intolerance is the problem of

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*for Power within Islam and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam...*

<sup>6</sup> Marcus Mietzner & Burhanuddin Muhtadi, "The Myth of Pluralism: Nahdlatul Ulama and the Politics of Religious Tolerance in Indonesia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2020, pp. 58-84.

<sup>7</sup> David M. Bourchier, "Two Decades of Ideological Contestation..."; Jeremy Menchik, "Productive Intolerance: Godly Nationalism in Indonesia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 56, No. 3, 2014, pp. 591-261; Jeremy Menchik "Moderate Muslims and Democratic Breakdown in Indonesia," *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 43, No. 3, 2019, pp. 415-433.

democracy.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the NU's principle of pluralism is best represented as tolerance without liberalism.

### NU, and Moderation

The NU's inner circles agree that the organization should aspire to be a moderate one, even though what it means to be "moderate" remains contested. As below discussion, NU has also underlined the traits of moderation which it wishes to uphold. But the organization's relative moderate image *vis-à-vis* other institutions in Indonesia is widely acknowledged by academics, intellectuals, religious leaders, and government officials who are not affiliated with the organization. These neutral assessments by NU non-affiliated leaders measure NU as a non-violent religious organization championing human rights, pluralism, and democracy.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, western secular countries, such as the United States, Australia, and France, have collaborated with moderate religious organizations in Indonesian in fighting against religious extremism and NU was listed to be one of involving organisations. Similarly, the mass media often highlights NU's involvement in interfaith forums for world peace, such as the Interfaith Forum and World Peace Forum. Subsequently, Gadjah Mada University (UGM) proposed that NU, and Muhammadiyah receive the Nobel Peace Prize for their national and global contribution to peace realization.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Saiful Mujani, *Muslim Demokrat: Islam, Budaya Demokrasi dan Partisipasi Politik di Indonesia Pasca Orde Baru* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Masdar Hilmy, *Islamism and Democracy in Indonesia: Piety and Pragmatism* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010); Douglas E. Ramage, *Politics in Indonesia: Democracy, Islam and the Theology of Tolerance* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995); Greg Barton, *Gagasan Islam Liberal di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1999); Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam...*; Azyumardi Azra, *Indonesia, Islam, and Democracy: Dynamics in Global Context* (Jakarta: Equinox Publishing, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> DW Media for Mind, "Forum Perdamaian Dunia: Kekerasan Tak Berhubungan dengan Agama dan Budaya", June 25, ; M. Aziz, *Nobel Perdamaian untuk Diplomasi Perdamaian NU-Muhammadiyah, Mungkinkah?* April 30, 2019. <https://nasional>.

Public acknowledgement of NU moderation was not based on speculation but rational recognition of the organization's views, attitudes, and actions. NU's moderation is reflected in many ways. For example, they include its acceptance of the unitary Indonesian nation-state based on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution instead of struggling for establishing an Islamic state. NU also accommodates local religious traditions practised by traditionalist Muslims, such as collective commemoration of the dead (*tablilan*), pilgrimage (*ziarah*), and local Islamic rituals<sup>11</sup> to which puritan Muslims would consider these practices as unlawful innovations (*bid'ah*) for having their roots in Indonesia's pre-Islamic past. NU also shows its inclusive attitude by accepting Western social norms. For instance, formal educational institutions, including *madrasah* and secular schools, have been established within the Islamic boarding school environment—the NU's traditional bases of authority. They accommodate modern secular culture, alongside the two most important values of modernity, human rights, and democracy.<sup>12</sup>

NU's theological doctrine rooted in the Sunni Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, this doctrine alone does not explain NU's moderate orientation, for in Islamic history there are Sunnis who promote violence and exclusivism. The four main Sunni Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah principles which NU adhere to are *al-tawasuth* (middle), *al-tawazun* (fairness), *al-tasamuh* (tolerance), *al-qist* (equality), and *al-i'tidal* (justice). The *kompas.com/read/2019/04/30/20303851/nobel-perdamaian-untuk-diplomasi-perdamaian-nu-muhammadiyah-mungkinkah?page=all*; *Republika*, "Gelar Forum Lintas Agama, UEA Promosikan Perdamaian Global," December 6, . <https://www.republika.co.id/berita/pjblbv320/gelar-forum-lintas-agama-uea-promosikan-perdamaian-global>.

<sup>11</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976); Andree Feillard, *NU vis a vis Negara: Pencarian Isi, Bentuk dan Makna* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1999); Faisal Ismail, "The Nahdlatul Ulama: Its Early History and Contribution to the Establishment of Indonesian State," *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2011, pp. 247-282.

<sup>12</sup> Masykuri Abdillah, *Responses of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals to the Concept of Democracy* (Humburg: Abera Verlag Meyer & Co. Kg, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> The one of majority sect in Islam which follow the prophetic tradition and his successors.

NU deploys these five principles to emphasize their non-violent stance and to highlight the NU's mid-position between two extreme poles of *jabbariyah* (fatalism) and *qadariyah* (rationalism) of classical theological thoughts. Furthermore, NU prefers to disassociate itself from Western liberalism and radicalism, such as communism, and the radical Islamists, HTI, MMI, and FPI.<sup>14</sup>

Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), the former NU leader (1988 to 1999), argued moderation is the theological basis for the NU's members to behave and act in a such pluralistic society. He prompted Muslims to actively engage in ongoing dialogue with non-Muslims and the larger humanity to support intra and inter-religious tolerance. Wahid stated that NU members should practice three forms of ecumenical dialogue (*ukhunnwah*) with other religious groups. He advised NU members that they should remain to keep Islamic brotherhood (*ukhunnwah Islamiyah*) and all Indonesians, especially non-Muslims (*ukhunnwah wathaniyah*). NU should also promote shared values, such as world peace, human rights, and environmental protection (*ukhunnwah basyariyyah*).<sup>15</sup>

Thus, there are five principles essential to NU's religious moderation. The first is the ideology of non-violence in spreading Islam. The second is adopting a modern lifestyle with derivatives, including science and technology, democracy, and human rights. The third is the use of rational thinking, while the fourth is understanding Islam contextually. The fifth is the use of *ijtihad* or making legal opinions intellectually when there is no explicit justification from the Qur'an, and *hadith*. However, these characteristics could be expanded into tolerance, harmony, and cooperation between religious communities.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Greg Fealy, *Ijtihad Politik Ulama, Sejarah NU 1952-1967* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1998); Madar Hilmy, "Whiter Indonesia's..."

<sup>15</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, "Traditions for the Future: The Reconstruction of Traditionalist Discourse within NU," Greg Barton & Greg Fealy (eds.), *Nabdlatul Ulama, Traditional Islam and Modernity in Indonesia* (Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, Clayton, Victoria, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Masdar Hilmy, "Whiter Indonesia's Islamic..."



## NU's Resistance to Wahhābi Groups

NU is one of the largest Islamic organizations in Jember. As the most dominant Islamic organization, the local NU in Jember arguably is essential to explain religious life of Muslim in this city. As a result, NU's religious attitude determines the order of religious life between majority and minority. There has been no recent violence between NU and its ideological rival Wahhābi groups in Jember. However, this does not mean the two are open for any form of collaboration, and chances of integration seem to be far-reaching idealism. Since its inception in 1926, NU has disliked and has even been intolerant of Wahhābi religious teachings. Wahhābi is often used to refer to the followers of Muhammad ibn Abdul-Wahhāb (1703-1787) in 19th century Arabia, and they claimed to be the bearers of the Salafi *manhaj*.<sup>17</sup>

The Salafi refer to the three generations of Muslim after the passed away of Prophet Muhammad, and the group considered to be the best models of religiosity and condemned Islamic practices that they see of having no textual explanation either in the Qur'an or the prophet's tradition (*sunnah*). Therefore, NU considers Wahhābi a threat to the religious teachings and practices of the Muslim community in Indonesia, which have for centuries been accommodative towards local Islamic practices, such as *tablilan*, and *ziarah*.<sup>18</sup>

Looking back to history of Islam in Indonesia by the early twentieth century, the establishment of NU in 1926 is a response the puritanical ideologies promoted by some modernist Muslim organisation like Muhammadiyah (1912). Since its establishment to the 1970s, the modernist Muhammadiyah activism was strongly oriented towards the

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<sup>17</sup> Muhammad Abu Zahrah, *Tarikh al-Madżahib al-Islamiyah: Fi as-Syryasah wal 'Al-'Aqid* (Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, t.t); George Antonious, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (Beirut: Librairie Du Liban, 1969).

<sup>18</sup> Choirul Anam, *Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan NU* (Surabaya: Bisma Satu, 1999).



purification agenda of religious teachings and practices.<sup>19</sup> Following the fall of Soeharto government in 1998, the expansion of fundamentalist Islamic ideology grew more potent and wider in Indonesia neo-Wahhābi/neo-Salafi groups are determined to codify and follow the ideas developed by three classical figures, including Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Qayyim Al-Jauziyah, and Muhammad ibn Abdul-Wahhāb. Also, the ideas were created by other Wahhābi *ulamas*, such as Abdul Aziz ibn Baz and Nashiruddin Al-Bani.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the New Order period, these Salafi groups were under repression of the authoritarian government. Following the fall of Soeharto, these groups publicly emerged after the realization of freedom and openness after the New Order. HTI, MMI, FUI, FPI, Tarbiyah activists, and other Wahhābi-Salafi ideological groups have shaped the dynamics of religion in various regions in Indonesia.<sup>21</sup> Despite multitude orientations and strategies, these Islamist groups are inclined to struggle for Islamization than democratization.<sup>22</sup>

The expansion of Wahhābism especially the new radical and moderate Salafi variants, has received serious attention from NU. Al-Ustaz Luqman ibn Muhammad Ba'abduh (born in Bondowoso, East Java, May 13, 1971), is a prominent Salafi *ulama* that had lived in Yemen between 1994 and 2000. Lukman Ba'abduh studied religion under a well-known *hadith* expert, Moqbil ibn Hadi Al-Wadi' Al-Hamdani. At the end of 2000,

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<sup>19</sup> Suaidi Asyari, "A Real Thret from Within: Muhammadiyah's Identity Metamorphosis and the Dilemma of Democracy," *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2007, pp. 18-41.

<sup>20</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, *Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militansi dan Pencarian Identitas di Indonesia Pasca Orde Baru* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> Martin van Bruinessen (ed.), *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the "Conservative Turn"* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013); Gabriel Facal, *Islamic Defenders Front Militia (Front Pembela Islam) and Its Impact on Growing Religious Intolerance in Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Bassam Tibi, *Islamism and Islam* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2012); Fahlesa Munabari, "Reconciling Sharia with Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia: The Ideology and Framing Strategies of the Indonesian Forum of Islamic Society FUI," *International Areas Studies Review*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2017, pp. 242-263.

Lukman Ba'abduh returned to Indonesia and led his Salafi group.<sup>23</sup> It is said that Lukman Ba'abduh's return was motivated by his enthusiasm to participate in the *jihad* during the Islamic-Christian conflict in Poso, Central Sulawesi in late 1998. However, Lukman Ba'abduh canceled his plans after receiving advice from his teachers who instructed him to establish his Salafi *pesantren*.<sup>24</sup>

In 2002, Lukman Ba'abduh launched his Salafi *pesantren*, *Ma'had As-Salafy*, in Summersari sub-district of Jember. The school welcomed hundreds of students from various regions which later provoked the NU's responses. Leader of NU lobbied the local government officials, members of people council, and security forces asking to freeze the establishment of Salafi *pesantren*. They came into the street calling for the ban of the *pesantren*. However, the Salafi *pesantren* was established and started operating after receiving permits of administrative requirements, including land ownership and government permits.<sup>25</sup>

The Ba'abduh's Salafi *pesantren* later experienced internal divisions which impeded its development. There were apparent differences in vision among the elites of this school. Lukman Ba'abduh and the lower functionaries of the school adopted a pure informal education format akin to any other traditionalist Islamic boarding schools. By contrast, other functionaries aspired to adopt an accommodative development system similar to the formal education system. The first group comprised the Salafi *pesantren* led by Lukman Ba'abduh, who imagined the school to be consistent with the classical education system. The second group comprised of the Salafi academic group alumni of the University of Medina, Saudi Arabia. This later group established a formal educational institution called Sekolah Tinggi Dirasat Islamiyah/Islamic High School

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<sup>23</sup> Luqmanbaabduh.com, *Biografi Al-Ustadz Luqman Ba'abduh*. <https://luqmanbaabduh.com/biografi-al-ustadz-luqman-baabduh/>

<sup>24</sup> Interview, July 8, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with some NU figures, August 21, 2019.

(STDI) in the Summersari area in Jember.<sup>26</sup> STDI developed Islamic educational institutions, including elementary and high schools and early childhood and higher education. The establishment of STDI is connected to Salafi network, especially with donors from Middle Eastern countries, that provides financial assistance to expand its educational institutions. Therefore, the limited land due to its financial capacity could be expanded, enlarging educational institutions. Many sources revealed that STDI expensively purchased lands. As consequence, the rapid development of STDI strengthened the Salafi influence and importantly threatened moderate Islam's dominance with the main agent of NU. In this context, NU considers the religious and material challenges endangering the *kiai* leadership.<sup>27</sup> This explains why NU in Jember protested the presence of the Salafi in the city.<sup>28</sup>

There has been another pretext explaining NU's resistance towards the Salafi *pesantren* and its proselytization activities: the STDI is accused of misleading, apostatizing, and discrediting local Islamic practices in Jember. Testimonies given by the NU elites in Jember indicate that many children from the surrounding community studying at STDI started excommunicating their parents. According to NU administrators and leaders, this condition is considered dangerous for the moderate Muslim religious communities in Jember. One of the *kiai* and important leaders of the NU in Jember stated that Wahhābi/Salafi are allowed to preach or spread their religious beliefs. However, they should not perceive the religious practices of other Muslim groups as heretic, apostate, and worst as infidel, especially those are popular among NU communities.<sup>29</sup>

The NU contests the Wahhābi preaching activism because it threatened moderate Islam and Indonesia's integrity based on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution. This view is consistent with nationalists

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<sup>26</sup> <https://stdiis.ac.id/sejarah-singkat-stdi-imam-syafii-jember/>

<sup>27</sup> Greg Fealy, *Ijtihad Politik Ulama*...

<sup>28</sup> Interview with NU Jember Syuriah, June 14, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Interview, October 31, 2019.

and secularists that the Wahhābi is a serious threat to national security, historical identity, and community cohesiveness.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the fact, Salafi *pesantren* and STDI educational institutions did not conduct flag ceremonies and sing national anthems, such as Indonesia Raya, strengthens the group as exclusivist. Salafi *ulama* stated that respecting the legal flag contradicts to Islamic scriptural tenets, the Qur'an, and the prophetic *sunnah*.<sup>31</sup>

The local of NU in Jember strongly responded the Wahhābi threats through blocking the roads heading to the Salafi institutions. Also, NU prevented the Salafi activism through demonstrations, sending protest letters to government agencies, and lobbying the members of local council. Furthermore, its strategy is oriented to boost the traditionalist Muslim community by establishing the Aswaja Center—the institution to protect Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama'ah ideology. Consequently, they strengthen Aswaja's preaching outreach on social media, publishing books, articles, opinions, and religious news. This strategy aimed to reaffirm Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama'ah ideology and protect it from the Wahhābi threats.<sup>32</sup>

### **NU's Resistance: Illiberal Tolerance?**

The local NU in Jember displays an intolerant attitude towards the Wahhābi ideology and other trans-national Islamic groups threatening social harmony in the city. The local NU in Jember was often in direct confrontation with Islamist groups through mass mobilization calling for the banning of *Ma'had* Salafi led by Lukman Ba'abduh in 2002. Also, in 2018, the organization protested against the establishment of the Imam Syafi'i Junior High School (Sekolah Menengah Pertama/

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<sup>30</sup> Mohamed Osman and Mohamed Nawab, "Reviving the Caliphate in the Nusantara: Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia's Mobilization Strategy and It's Impact in Indonesia," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 2010, pp. 601-622.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with NU Jember Tanfidziyah, September 11, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with *Aswaja* Center management and LDNU, November 12, 2019.

SMP) and argued that the establishment of the school posed *madharat* (negative consequences) than *mashlahat* (common good). The local NU in Jember also uses institutional channels, such as communicating with local governments, education offices, and members of the local council, in order to realize its struggle against Wahhābi.<sup>33</sup>

The local NU in Jember strongly resisted Islamist groups in the city and, at national level, we also witnessed the ban of two important Islamist groups, the HTI and FPI, by the national government. For the NU, these two organizations endangered the state's national integrity and ideology. HTI is a radical Islamic organization that contests the Indonesia and is against the state ideology Pancasila and democracy.<sup>34</sup> FPI, on the other hand, led by its populist leader Habib Rizieq Syihab, was heavily involved in religious violence and self-vigilantism, spreading hate speeches, politicizing religion as in the case of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), and illegal sweepings.<sup>35</sup> However, some scholars disapprove of the government for banning FPI and HTI, considering the move as authoritarianism. It is counterproductive to democratic principles, these scholars contend, especially religious the very notion of freedom.<sup>36</sup>

Without a doubt, freedom of opinion, association, and religion are important pillars of democracy and liberal pluralism adopted by many

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<sup>33</sup> Inilahcom, "NU Jember Tolak Pendirian SMP Imam Syafi'i", August 27, 2018. <https://inilah.com/news/2476501/nu-jember-tolak-pendirian-smp-islam-imam-syafi>.

<sup>34</sup> Burhanuddin Muhtadi, *Dilema PKS: Suara dan Syariah* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Marcus Mietzner & Burhanuddin Muhtadi, "Explaining the 2016 Islamist Mobilisation in Indonesia: Religious Intolerant, Militant Groups and the Politics of Accommodation," *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 2018, pp. 479-497; Mark Woodward, M.Yahya, I. Rohmaniyah, D. M. Coleman, C. Lundry, A. Amin, "The Islamic Defenders Front: Demonization, Violence and the State in Indonesia," *Cont Islam* Vol. 8, 2014, pp. 153-171.

<sup>36</sup> Ahmad Najib Burhani, "The Banning of Hizbut Tahrir and the Consolidation of Democracy in Indonesia," *Perspective*, No. 71, 2017 (ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, September 19, 2017); Ihsan Yilmaz & Greg Barton, *The Islamic Defenders Front: The Face of Indonesia's Far-Right Islamism*, *Europian Center for Populism Studies*, May 7, 2021. <https://www.populismstudies.org/the-islamic-defenders-front-the-face-of-indonesias-far-right-islamism/>.

Western countries.<sup>37</sup> Seen from this liberal perspective, the NU's intolerant actions against *Ma'had* Salafi and Imam Syafi'i Islamic Junior High Schools do not meet the standards of democracy and openness. Liberals would argue that Lukman Ba'abduh, the Salafi Islamic Boarding School leader, and the STDI, have different religious beliefs and understandings from the Muslim majority, and that they have right as citizens of a democratic state and to express their opinions and theological beliefs. Therefore, it is reasonably true that criticism against the NU suggests that the organization's attitude contradicts to the principles of moderate and pluralistic theology, such as *tawasuth tawazun*, *tasamuh*, and *i'tidal*.<sup>38</sup>

Responding to the criticism, leaders of NU in Jember argue that a strong measurement against Islamist groups is necessary for protecting Indonesia's moderate Islam against the intolerance of Wahnabi fundamentalist groups. The same is true for national leaders of NU.<sup>39</sup> KH Said Aqil Siradj, the chairman of national NU (PBNU) 2010-2021, argues that a latent threat facing contemporary Indonesia is not the threat of communism, but radicalism and terrorism with which the followers of Wahnabi have significant influence. He said that in confronting and eliminating terrorism and radicalism networks, people should face the root of these problems together. The seed is the entrance to be swiped, i.e., Wahnabism as the entrance to terrorism.<sup>40</sup>

In addition, the intolerance against Wahnabi is also based on nationalism ideology because trans-national Islamist groups, such as HTI, Wahnabi poses a threat to the state unitary ideology. The puritan movement known as Arabization, carried out by Salafi, could

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<sup>37</sup> Saiful Mujani, *Muslim Demokrat*...

<sup>38</sup> Alexander R. Arifianto, "Practicing What It Preaches? Understanding the Contradiction between Pluralist Theology and Religious Intolerance within Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama", *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 2, 2017, pp. 241-264.

<sup>39</sup> [www.nu.or.id/berita/](http://www.nu.or.id/berita/)

<sup>40</sup> Syaiful Hakim, "Said Aqiel Sebut Ajaran Wahabi dan Salafi Pintu Masuk Terorisme," March 30, 2021. <https://www.antaranews.com/berita/2071966/said-aqil-sebut-ajaran-wahabi-dan-salafi-pintu-masuk-terorisme>.

jeopardizes the moderation of Indonesian Islam and the state's ideology.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the Islamist groups are suspected for keeping an interest to transform Indonesia to an Islamic state and to impose Arab culture towards Indonesian Muslims.<sup>42</sup>

However, apart from the above arguments on the danger of Islamist groups in contemporary Indonesia, I see the NU's intolerance contradicts to principles of religious moderation and argue that contestation against Islamist groups should not necessarily be translated into an intolerance response. Thus, the NU's attitude towards Wahhābi opposes pluralism, and its intolerance shows ambiguity towards article 29 of the 1945 Indonesian Constitution,<sup>43</sup> which regulates freedom of religion. Moreover, it may also exacerbate polarization and social disharmony.<sup>44</sup> The conflict between NU and Wahhābi also hinders the realization of a harmonious, pluralist, and democratic social-religious life.<sup>45</sup> The attitude shows the NU's failure in comparing one of the ecumenic dialogues, Islamic brotherhood (*ukhrawmah Islamiyyah*).<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, the local NU's intolerance also aimed to prevent Wahhābi homogenization efforts of Indonesian Muslims' understanding, practice, and religious identity according to their theological beliefs.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, *Contemporary Developments...*

<sup>42</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, "Indonesian Muslim..."

<sup>43</sup> Paul Marshall, "The Ambiguities of Religious Freedom in Indonesia," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2018, pp. 85-96.

<sup>44</sup> Eve Warburton, "Deepening Polarization and Democratic Decline in Indonesia", in Carothers T. & O'Donohue A. (ed.), *Political Polarization in South and Southeast Asia: Old Devisions, New Dangers* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> Muhammad Ali, *Teologi Pluralis-Multikultural: Menghargai Kemajemukan Menjalin Kebersamaan* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 2003).

<sup>46</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, "Traditions for the Future: The Reconstruction of Traditionalist Discourse within NU," Greg Barton and Greg Fealy (eds.) *Nabdlatul Ulama, Traditional Islam and Modernity in Indonesia* (Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, Clayton, Vic. 1996).

<sup>47</sup> Mark Woodward, "Resisting Salafism and the Arabization of Indonesian Islam: a Contemporary Indonesian Didactic Tale by Komaruddin Hidayat," *Contemporary Islam*, Vol. 11, 2017, pp. 237-258.



Wahhābi's intolerance towards local religious practices, such as *slametan*, *tablilan*, *maulid*, and *ziarah* is seen as a threat to national values which also include rituals such as respecting the national flag and singing the national anthem. The local NU in Jember tolerates the Wahhābi's intolerant religious activism which means that the NU tolerates religious violence that contradicts the principles of moderation, tolerance, and pluralism. Therefore, the NU's intolerant response to Wahhābi religious intolerance activism shows that its very nature of a moderate Islamic organization that struggles to realize *rahmatan lil 'alamin*.<sup>48</sup>

The local NU's intolerant responses when dealing with intolerant religious activism and the refusal of the establishment of Islamic educational institutions by Wahhābi does not necessarily resort to violence. When the NU is failed in its struggles, it respects the government's decisions, obeys the rule of law, and seeks other constitutional paths to pursue its interests.<sup>49</sup> The local government permitted the establishment of Islamic Boarding Schools and educational institutions of the Wahhābi. However, NU Jember did not resort to violence, such as expulsion, destruction of homes and educational facilities. This was the case with religious intolerance perpetrated by conservative-radicals Sunni groups in Sampang, Madura against the Shia minority.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, NU's intolerance is akin to what Menchik argues as "tolerance without liberalism."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Douglas E. Ramage, *Politics in Indonesia*; Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam...*; Gustav Brown, "Civil Islam: Muhammadiyah, NU and the Organizational Logic of Consensus-making in Indonesia," *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 43, No. 3, 2019, pp. 397-414.

<sup>49</sup> Seung-Whan Choi, "Fighting Terrorism through the Rule of Law?," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 54, No. 6, 2010, pp. 940-966; William A. Galston, "The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2018, pp. 5-19.

<sup>50</sup> M. Khusna Amal, "Towards Deliberative Conflict Resolution? A Reflection on State Inclusive Response to Sunni-Shi'a Tension in Indonesia's Democracy," *Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2020, pp. 226-256.

<sup>51</sup> Jeremy Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

## Conclusion

The local branch of NU in Jember exercised intolerant approaches as responding to an intolerant Wahhābi group and other Islamist groups. It is clear that Wahhābism is considered a severe threat to the diversity of traditionalist Muslims and Indonesia's moderate Islam. Also, it threatens the state's integrity based on Pancasila and the 1945 Indonesian Constitution. As part of political Islamism, Wahhābi's activism attempts to purify Muslim religious teachings and practices following the Qur'an and the prophetic *sunnah*, and calls for the implementation of Islamic principles and laws in a complete manner (*kaffah*) and for the whole Indonesians.

The local NU's intolerance towards intolerance activism, discrimination, and violence groups cannot be seen in liberal perspective. This is particularly because the NU's intolerance signifies a constructive response in order to protect the values of tolerance, pluralism, and democracy. The local NU takes a defensive position when conservative and radical groups carry out religious violence that threatens pluralism. Importantly, the NU's intolerance is not translated into violence that contradicts the rule of law. Despite the fact that the NU's activism seems to contradict to the principles of the organization's religious moderatism, such as *tasamuh*, *tawazun*, *tasamuh*, and *i'tidal*, the NU is indeed in its method to exercise these principles.

Thus, the local NU's intolerance when calling for the banning of Wahhābi and its institutions in Jember can also be seen as a strategy to realize religious moderation itself. Nevertheless, the NU's intolerance does not contradict the principles of moderatism and pluralism because it adheres the Indonesian law. However, such actions still affect its image as the true champion of Indonesia's moderate Islam. Additionally, moderation theology developed by NU does not sufficiently answer the challenges and empirical demands of religious pluralism of Indonesia's democracy. This is evident in NU's attitude towards religious intolerance

from minority groups, such as Wahhābis-Salafi. It prefers an intolerant approach of the fundamentalist groups. Consequently, its moderation ambiguity makes the realization of a harmonious, pluralist, and democratic Indonesian society face steep theological obstacles.

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