

HUMOUR AS A COUNTER ISLAMIST DISCOURSE: NU Garis Lucu's Online Activism

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Abstract

This article addresses counter-Islamist discourses by NU Garis Lucu (NU's Funny Brigade) through its social media accounts. Instead of a clear-cut theological debates, NU Garis Lucu offers humour as method to counter attack Islamist's arguments through its social-media activism. Using a discourse analysis approach, this article examines tweets of the NU Garis Lucu's during the course of 2015-2020. It further reveals the account strategies to counter attack Islamist's discourse which include questioning the legitimacy of the religious authority of Islamist groups, promoting religious moderation, supporting democracy as an ideal political system, promoting 'smiling' Islam, and putting to an end religious polarization.

[Artikel ini mengkaji tentang upaya counter wacana Islamisme yang dilakukan oleh akun media sosial NU Garis Lucu. Di tengah pendekatan counter wacana yang berfokus pada argumentasi dan doktrin teologi, NU Garis Lucu memilih humor sebagai diskursus alternatif untuk menandingi argumentasi Islamisme di dunia maya. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan analisa wacana, artikel ini menjadikan cuitan akun NU Garis Lucu di Twitter selama 2015-2020 sebagai obyeknya. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa terdapat sejumlah strategi counter wacana NU Garis Lucu mulai dari mempertanyakan legitimasi otoritas keagamaan kelompok Islamis,

mengedepankan moderasi beragama, mendukung demokrasi sebagai sistem politik yang ideal, mempromosikan Islam yang ramah, sampai dengan meleburkan polarisasi.

Keywords: *NU Garis Lucu, Counter Islamist Discourses, Islamism*

Introduction

The concept of counter Islamist's discourse is often juxtaposed with terrorist or extremist activism with which it implies mainly promoting alternative interpretations and theological approaches. The Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme (BNPT/National Counterterrorism Agency), for example, carries out counter-radicalization by promoting nationalism and non-violent values through formal and informal education.¹² In this context, NU Garis Lucu ("NU's Funny Brigade") social media account offers an alternative method to counter Islamist's discourse through humour.

NU Garis Lucu is one of several online activists that promotes tolerant Islam through their social media activism. The account was created and managed by a group of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), particularly NU youths who take their inspiration to the figure of Abdurahman Wahid (known as Gus Dur) who is well-known for commenting, not exclusively, religious issues through humour. Carrying a jargon "Speak the truth, even though it's funny," NU Garis Lucu aims to respond religious exclusivism through humour and satire.³ The birth of NU Garis Lucu is closely related to the internal dynamics of NU's nation congress (*muktamar*) in 2015 as it serves as an antidote to the conservative NU Garis Lurus ("NU Straight Brigade"). Later, some religious groups and Muslim organisation follow

¹ Bilqis Rihadatul Aisy, (et.al.), "Penegakan Kontra Radikalisasi melalui Media Sosial oleh Pemerintah dalam Menangkal Radikalisme," *Jurnal Hukum Magnum Opus*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2019, pp. 276-592.

² *Ibid.*

³ James Bourk Hoesterey, "Nahdlatul Ulama's "Funny Brigade": Piety, Satire, and Indonesian Online Divides," *Cyber Orient*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2021, pp. 85-118.

the step with a similar nuance which include @MuhammadiyahGL, @KatolikG, @GIHindu, @KonghucuGL, etc.⁴ The NU Garis Lucu activism clearly illustrates the growing presence of Islamic moderate groups in digital public sphere. For a long period, Islamist accounts were dominant in there. The development of the internet which coincided with the collapse of the New Order gave room for Islamist groups to appear in front of the public.

The presence of these Islamist groups brings the consequences of strengthening the narrative of Islamism in public sphere. According to Mozaffari, Islamism is defined as a religious ideology with a holistic interpretation of Islam whose final aim is the conquest of the world by all means. In the other word, Islam is considered as a solution to various world problems. Although these Islamist groups are varied, Mozaffari believes they have the same goal. All of them aim at the re-institution of the Islamic might in the world. To achieve this goal the use of violence is often not rejected.⁵

This article seeks to examine online activism of NU Garis Lucu and argues that the presence of NU Garis Lucu has an important role in consolidating moderate representation of Islam in the public, although this role has not completely shifted the dominance of Islamist narration in the digital public sphere.

NU Garis Lucu is arguably the most activated account and the most significant influential humour-inspired activism as shown by their number of followers on several platforms. On December 2020 NU Garis Lucu has followed by 695K people on Twitter and 731K people on Instagram.

There are a number of studies have been conducted regarding the existence NU Garis Lucu. Hoesterey, for instance, examines the interplay

⁴ Dawam Multazamy Rohmatulloh, "In Meme Dakwah: A Netnographic Study of Garis Lucu Social Media Accounts," Paper of The 19th *Annual International Conference on Islamic Studies* (AICIS 2019).

⁵ Mehdi Mozaffari, "What is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2007, pp. 21.

between NU Garis Lurus and NU Garis Lucu and sees on how satire and humour are used to temper the accusations of NU Garis Lurus towards the original roots of NU betrayed by current NU leadership.⁶ Another work by Ghozali sees the witty sentences and humour across religions deployed by NU Garis Lucu as a new political model on social media communication emphasizing humanity. This article on the other hand is eager to fill the research gap on how NU Garis Lucu's humour is utilized to destabilize the arguments of Islamism.⁷

As for obtaining the data, this article uses a number of technical data collection. First, interviews NU Garis Lucu founders and admins in their social media platforms: Twitter and Instagram. Second, analyzing their contents on social media. The data were taken from the @NUGarisLucu Twitter account's tweets during 2015-2020 which was uploaded on NU Garis Lucu Instagram account.

By using critical perspective, this article tries to uncover the power that exists in every language process. This analysis was popularized by Fairclough which combines text, context, and social culture.⁸

Islamist Discourse in Social-Media

There are at least three conditions that influence religious practice on social media.⁹ These factors can simultaneously explain how Islamic narratives are present on social media. First, the opening up of Indonesian political system after the fall of Suharto in 1998. Second, the introduction of the Internet in the late 1990s. Third, the rise of a Muslim middle class

⁶ James Bourk Hoesterey, "Nahdlatul Ulama's 'Funny Brigade'..."

⁷ Imam Ghozali, "The Criticism of the Political Model of Humanity's Twitter NU Garis Lucu Against Intolerant Groups and Government," *Islam Realitas: Journal of Islamic and Social Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2022, pp. 1–11.

⁸ Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

⁹ Martin Slama, "Practising Islam through social media in Indonesia," *Indonesia and the Malay World*, Vol. 46, No. 134, 2018, pp. 1–4.

that started to “consume” Islam.¹⁰ As for the first, the mushrooming of Islamist movements is related to the democratization following the fall of the New Order regime.¹¹

During the New Order regime, Islamist movements had existed but they lived under the state’s repression. Anti-Islamic stance of the New Order were strengthened in the 1980s through, for example, the ban of the headscarf in schools and campuses. Meanwhile, in the political realm, the power of Islam is diminished by the application of the single principle of Pancasila in which all parties and associations were forced to get rid of all loyalties to other ideologies besides.

The fall of New Order in 1998 gave birth to a more open political life. Prior to his fall, Suharto’s stance towards Islam began to soften. This can be seen in the efforts to establish an Association of Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI) and provide space for Muslims in the political, military and bureaucratic spheres. This step is followed by the establishment of an Islamic bank, an Islamic quality newspaper that could compete with Indonesia’s leading (Christian-owned) dailies, legislation raising the status of the Islamic courts, and others. other.¹² Although the space for Islamic groups started to open, it was only after the fall of Suharto radical-Islamist Muslim groups expressed themselves through street politics.

A number of social scientists presented their analysis about the face of Indonesian Islam after the New Order. Martin van Bruinessen argue what is happening to Indonesian Islam as a form of “conservatism turn.”¹³

¹⁰ Greg Fealy, “Consuming Islam: Commodified Religion and Aspirational Pietism in Contemporary Indonesia,” *Expressing Islam* (ISEAS Publishing, 2008), pp. 15–39.

¹¹ Noorhaidi Hasan, “Laskar Jihad Islam, Militancy and The Quest for Identity in Post-New Order Indonesia” (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

¹² Martin van Bruinessen, “Genealogies of Islamic Radicalism in post-Suharto Indonesia,” *South East Asia Research*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2002, pp. 117–154.

¹³ Martin van Bruinessen (ed.), *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam Explaining the “Conservative Turn”* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2013).

The clearest expression of the conservative turn was perhaps given by a number of controversial fatwas, authoritative opinions, issued by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI, Council of Indonesian Ulama) in 2005.

Other studies explain that the rise of religious conservatism in Indonesia cannot be separated from the global context where religious revival is indeed becoming a trend in a number of countries and not only Islam. According to Berger, the era of religious revival was actually driven by the same two factors that previously served as the basis for secularization theory, namely democratization or political freedom and advances in information technology.¹⁴

Meanwhile, according to Hadiz, in democratizing Islamic countries such as Turkey, Egypt and Indonesia, a phenomenon called new Islamic populism is growing. A political approach of the “ummah” but combining various interests, aspirations and complaints of the intersection of various social classes such as urban society, from the lower to middle class, as well as marginalized segments of the bourgeoisie.¹⁵

On the other hand, the internet in Indonesia has developed amidst tight supervision of the print media. Radical Islamic groups that are politically weak due to repressive governments see this as an opportunity for a new medium to disseminate their ideas. Many agree that the advance of radical mobilization is facilitated by the emergence of vacant social spaces effectively cultivated by militants and extremist groups.¹⁶ The internet can be called as a vacant space which is characterized by the absence of symbols and institutions fostering social solidarity, limited governmentality and levels of what Durkheim termed anomie or alienation; a condition in which society provides little moral guidance

¹⁴ Peter L. Berger (ed.) *The Desecularization of the World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999).

¹⁵ Vedi R Hadiz, *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁶ Mohammad Iqbal Ahnaf, “Introduction on Shifting Patterns in the Enabling Environments for Radicalization and Tolerance Promotion in Indonesia,” *unpublished research by CRCS UGM* (2020).

or authority. The utilization of the internet by radical Islamic groups in the early days of internet penetration in Indonesia practically made the Islamic discourse dominated by the idea of Islamism or radicalism.

The internet has become a strategic choice for many Islamist groups to spread their ideas. Hundreds of blogs, sites and forums have appeared massively. According to Lim, there are a number of reasons why fewer dominant groups need this media. The advantages of the internet are: (a) can avoid surveillance and censorship; (b) allow for one-to-one and many-to-many communications; and (c) are entrenched, broadly available, easy to use, and priced at a low or at least affordable cost.¹⁷

Based on the *alexa.com* ranking site until 2015, which means 17 years after the reformation, top twenty Islamic sites are still dominated by Islamist groups. Moderate groups such as NU and Muhammadiyah, whose followers constitute the majority in Indonesia, are inferior in quantity and popularity in the internet realm. Along with the development of information technology, new platforms have emerged which have also become new spaces for the dissemination of Islamism. Islamic narratives not only through websites, but also developing on social media. The social media revolution occurred in the early 2000s with the emergence of Facebook (2004), Flickr (2004), Blackberry Messenger (2005), Twitter (2006), WhatsApp (2009), Instagram (2010), and so on.

In 2012, *CNN Tech*, as quoted by Lim called Indonesia as a “Twitter Nation” where Indonesia was dubbed the most Twitter-addicted nation on the planet.¹⁸ According to the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) in the 2018 National Internet User Penetration Survey, the number of internet users in Indonesia are 171.17 million people or 64.8% of the total population, where this number continues

¹⁷ Merlyna Lim, “Islamic Radicalism and anti-Americanism in Indonesia: the Role of the Internet” (Washington, DC: Policy Studies 18 by East-West Center Washington, 2005).

¹⁸ Merlyna Lim, “Many Clicks but Little Sticks: Social Media Activism in Indonesia,” *Digital Activism in Asia Reader* (2013), pp. 127.

to grow, up 10% from the previous year. 18.9% of respondents use the internet for social media.

According to Nisa, the high intensity of social media in Indonesian society became a space for the expansion of *dakwah* (preach) and movements of various Islamic groups, such as the One Day One Juz (ODOJ) movement that originates from the initiatives of Islamist Tarbiyah movement activist who are known for their zeal and their well-structured method of Islamic learning.¹⁹ Some other Islamic movements that have emerged in urban areas such as “Great Muslimah,” “Pejuang Subuh” (Dawn Prayer Fighters), and “Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran” (Indonesia without Dating).

The emergence of various social media platforms, as previously mentioned, makes preaching content no longer limited to lectures on television but through WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Youtube to applications. Alvara’s survey report of the Muslim middle class group shows that although television is still the main source of religious information (68.4%), followed by Islamic preaching near home (54%), sources from social media and the internet show a sufficient percentage such as: broadcast messenger accounts (17%), articles on social media (14.1%) and articles on the internet (13.9%).²⁰ In line with the increasing trend of internet consumption from year to year as reported by APJII, access to religious information via the internet will continue to increase in the future.

The rise of a prosperous, modern and digital savvy Muslim middle class made disseminating of Islamic discourse in the digital world even more inevitable. On the internet, Islamic narratives appear not only through go-digital and popular preachers such as *Ustaz* Abdul Somad

¹⁹ Eva F. Nisa, “Social Media and The Birth of an Islamic Social Movement: ODOJ (One Day One Juz) in contemporary Indonesia,” *Indonesia and the Malay World*, Vol. 46, No. 134, 2018, pp. 24–43.

²⁰ Alvara Research Centre, *Survey report The Face of Indonesian Middle Class Muslim: Between Materialism and Religiosity*, 2017.

and Felix Siau, but also in the form of social movements and various online communities.

Narratives of Islamism that appear on the internet include four major themes: (1) a narrative about a political system that campaigns for the establishment of a *khilafah* and the application of sharia, (2) the narrative about the privilege of Islam in Indonesia, (3) the intolerance narrative that concerns in the depiction of deviant sects and the polemic of worship houses, (4) narratives about violence and terrorism framed in the concept of *jihad*. These four narratives are not clear-cut one to another but there are some possible overlaps between one and another.

Amidst the spreading of Islamist narratives on the internet, campaign for tolerance and diversity are also exist. In fact, the transmission of Islamism narratives on social media has invited a number of moderate groups with an inclusive ideology to offer counter-narrative to the Islamist's agenda. Indeed, the presence of moderate groups can be said to be lagging behind Islamist groups. Counter-narrative initiatives emerged from religious groups such as NU and Muhammadiyah—the two largest moderate Islamic organizations in Indonesia—as well as various non-religious groups that echoing the urge of tolerance and pluralism without representing any religious views.

NU Garis Lucu and its Counter-Discourses of Islamism

NU Garis Lucu is managed by youths from the *pesantren*²¹ community after the emergence of anonymous accounts naming themselves NU Garis Lurus just before the 33rd NU's national congress (*muktamar*) in 2015. NU Garis Lucu appears as a parody account of NU Garis Lurus which aims to counter the “purification” of *Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah* (Aswaja) they voiced. After the euphoria of the NU *muktamar* subsided, NU Garis Lucu continued to be active on Twitter and even expand into

²¹ A *pesantren* is a traditional Islamic educational institution where students live together and study under the guidance of teachers who are better known as *kiai* and have dormitories for students to stay at.

Instagram. They criticized Islamism narratives that circulate broadly on social media. Trying to be consistent with a humorous perspective, NU Garis Lucu made Gus Dur as a role model for promoting justice and peace through humour. According to Dynel, humour that has its roots in philosophical tradition is commonly divided into three general approaches: relief, superiority, and incongruity. The relief approach states that laughter is a homeostatic mechanism by which psychological tension is reduced.²²

Meanwhile, superiority approach believes that the general idea of humour is basically laughing about the misfortunes of others. The incongruity approach perceived laughter as a response to the perception of incongruity: the disparity between a concept and a real object related to the concept. Following those definition, the character of NU Garis Lucu's humour in social media meets the incongruity approach where humour arises from a violation of the expected or normal pattern in a given situation. Through this approach, NU Garis Lucu effectively ridiculed and satirized Islamist narratives.

NU Garis Lucu argues that hatred and anger are two things that should be avoided in religious and social media practice. Therefore, they voiced the urgency of cheerful religious practice (*praktik Islam yang gembira*) and smiling Islamic approach (*Islam ramah*). They also become an unofficial NU representative in social media that wants to show NU's broader national vision rather than short-term political goals. NU Garis Lucu questions new urban preachers that often issue an Islamic jurisprudence easily by quoting a verse or an argument without being followed by in-depth study or analysis. They also criticize the tendency of urban Muslim groups to seek and trust religious references on internet sites and social media that cannot be justified. They also actively counter Islamist narratives that often appear on social media such as: Islamic

²² Marta Dynel, *Developments in Linguistic Humour Theory*, Vol. 1 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2013).

political system, Islamic supremacy, *jihad*, and intolerance.

In social media, NU Garis Lucu is not the only NU platform. Despite appearing late, the NU network has been very active on the internet, recently. NU's earliest platform was the *website nu.or.id* (NU Online) which has survived for almost two decades. In the last three years, it has become the most read Islamic website in Indonesia. The success of NU Online was followed by the emergence of a number of websites from other NU networks aimed at spreading moderate Islamic narratives such as *islami.co* and *alif.id*.

On social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, many communities and influencers from the NU network are also actively campaigning for the same thing, for example Habib Husen Ja'far Al Hadar, Gus Miftah, Ulama Nusantara, Ala NU, and so on. These NU platforms usually present theological narratives to emphasize NU's moderate position. Taking a different path, NU Garis Lucu is one of the largest platforms in the NU network, which consistently uses satire and jokes approaches.

Counter-Narratives Strategies

Counter-narratives are understood as attempts to confront the worldview of violent Islamist groups and movements. Counter-narratives efforts often use the terms CVE (Countering Violent Extremism) or PVE (Preventing Violent Extremism). In the case of NU Garis Lucu, counter-narratives did not always target acts of violence or terrorism but against the ideology of Islamism. However, according to Tibi, jihadis and nonviolent Islamists who want to establish a global Islamic state governed by sharia actually share the same goal; only their means differ.²³

Following Braddock and Horgan's framework, there are several counter-narrative strategies namely: identifying target themes, developing effective counter-narratives based on targeted themes, and disseminating

²³ Bassam Tibi, *Islamism and Islam* (London: Yale University Press, 2012).

counter narratives.²⁴ In identifying its counter-narrative targets, Islamism is the central theme that NU Garis Lucu seeks to counter. From identifying the target themes of Islamism, NU Garis Lucu carried out a number of counter narratives strategies as follows.

The first strategy is challenging the legitimacy of Islamist religious authority. As previously mentioned, Islamism finds its space in urban environments where a vacant social space is present and characterized by anomie or alienation, a condition in which society provides little moral guidance or authority. NU Garis Lucu pays attention to the phenomenon of urban preachers that have the potential to shift the authority of *ulama* with more adequate knowledge. Regarding the phenomenon of those new preachers NU Garis Lucu wants to delegitimize their position as a reference for Islamic education, especially for urban communities. NU Garis Lucu challenges the authority of those new preachers by questioning their scientific epistemology, an important issue that is very substantial for NU community. In addition, NU Garis Lucu also criticized the content of their *dakwah* which was considered merely sensational and full of propaganda. On the tweets below NU Garis Lucu criticizes the preachers who do not master the classical Islamic book “*Kitab Kuning*.”

Gak pernah mondok di pesantren, belum punya karya untuk masyarakat, tapi pinter bicara agama, namanya: Ustaz Honoris Causa. (March 29, 2017)

Never stayed in a *pesantren*, had no contribution for the community, but was good at speaking about religion, its name is *Ustaz Honoris Causa*.

Betul, syarat menjadi ustaz itu gak harus pabam Kitab Kuning. Sebab kitab ini sudah mulai langka sekarang. (November 13, 2017)

Yes, the requirement to become *ustaz* does not have to understand the *Kitab Kuning*. Because it is getting rare now.

²⁴ Kurt Braddock and John Horgan, “Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 39, No. 5, 2016, pp. 381–404.

On another occasion, NU Garis Lucu also criticized a preacher who measured a woman's piety by her weight.

Sebagai dai millenial, saya setuju dengan pendapat yang mengatakan berat badan wanita salihah adalah 55kg. Jika ada yang keberatan, silakan cek IG kami @Penurun_beratbadan. Dijamin seminggu langsung ada hasilnya. Buruan, sis. (July 20, 2018)

As a millennial preacher, I agree with the opinion that the weight of a righteous woman is 55kg. If anyone has objections, please check our IG @Penurun_beratbadan. It is guaranteed a week there will be immediate results. Hurry up, sister.

The second strategy is maintaining moderate face of NU. As an account that emerged because Islamist threat within NU, NU Garis Lucu seeks to maintain moderate stand of NU. Moreover, in the context of the growing development of Islamist movements both at the national and global levels, NU Garis Lucu wants to show that NU remains committed to preserving diversity. NU Garis Lucu wants to show that NU's main concerns are on the integrity of the nation and peace rather than supporting Islamic supremacy. By showing disinterest in the Islamist movement, NU Garis Lucu implies that what the Islamist movement stands for is not a necessary, especially the desire to change the state system.

Santri NU berikhtiar memperbaiki bangsa dengan menghidupkan ngaji di pesantren dan mushola bukan sibuk mengubah sistem bernegara. (March 30, 2017)

NU students are trying to reconstruction the nation by studying in boarding schools and mosques, not busy changing the state system.

The third strategy is supporting democracy as an ideal political system. As an antithesis to the desire of building *khilafah* and implement sharia formally, NU Garis Lucu show their support to democracy. NU Garis Lucu denies that *khilafah* is a form of state which rigidly regulated in Islam. Substantially, they argue that democracy guarantees every citizen to worship. Democracy is also said to be the result of founding fathers'

agreement including the *ulamas*.

Nanti kau gak akan ditanya sistem negaramu apa, tapi bagaimana sikapmu pada sesama. Tinggal di Indonesia, dengan sistem demokrasi itu gak dosa. (February 22, 2017)

Later, you will not be asked what your country's system is, but what is your attitude towards others. Living in Indonesia, with a democratic system, is not a sin.

NU Garis Lucu joked about the desire to replace state ideology with sharia, just like a bank (conventional vs sharia).

NKRI Bersyariah

NKRI Konvensional

NKRI Simpan Pinjam (August 13, 2019)

NKRI with-Syariah

Conventional NKRI

NKRI Savings and Loans (a poll).

The fourth strategy is promoting equality among citizens. In contrast to the Islamic supremacy supporters, NU Garis Lucu stands for equality among citizens. NU Garis Lucu rejects the paradigm that placed Islam in the highest social structure. Therefore, excessive respect for Muslim worship like closing food stalls on Ramadhan is deemed irrelevant. Equality also means that every citizen has the same opportunity to become a public official. NU Garis Lucu refuses some Muslims who refuse to be led by other than Muslims.

The Islamic supremacy paradigm is also often in line with the narrative of Islam being suppressed, where Islamist supporters easily accuse others committing blasphemy. This state of mind eventually gave birth to many Islam defense actions. NU Garis Lucu rejects those actions considering that it leads to exclusivism and polarization.

NU Garis Lucu levelled a lot of criticism related to the “Aksi Bela Islam” (Islam Defence Action). This movement triggered by the accusation of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), former Governor of DKI

Jakarta, insulting Islam as he cited QS. Al Maidah 51 about electing non-Muslim leader. The action was associated with the Islamic revolution in which a picture of Sultan Al Fatih (Mehmed II, former Constantinople conqueror) was circulating following the action.

“Mas, ada apa sih orang-orang itu kok rame bahas Al Maidah 51?” “Sudablah Dik, gausah ikut2. Mending kita bicara An-Nisa ayat 3 ajah” (October 11, 2016)

“Brother, what a matter all those people talking about Al Maidah 51?”
“Never mind sister, don’t bother joining. Let’s talk verse 3 of An-Nisa (verse about marriage).”

Hari ini banyak beredar foto Sultan Al Fatih solat Jumat di jalan raya. Orang NU gak kaget, lawong Potret Walisongo foto bersama aja mereka punya. (November 28, 2016)

Many picture of Sultan Al Fatih Friday prayers on the road are circulating massively now. NU were not surprised, they even have a picture of *Walisanga* pose together.

Selamat pagi, wahai umat akhir jaman... Sudah siap ngopi? Siap bela kopi? Siap belai istri? Traktiir!!! (May 13, 2017)

Good morning, O people of the end times ... Are you ready for coffee? Ready to defend coffee? Ready to defend your wife? Treat!!!

The fifth strategy is campaigning tolerance and building dialogue. In promoting tolerance NU Garis Lucu seeks to normalize differences between groups inside and outside Islam. Relate to the principle of equality that mentioned before, among these differences, NU Garis Lucu calls for eliminating superiority. They argue that diversity is a blessing in Islam. Therefore, there is no need to be suspicious of other worship or other religious symbols or even committing intolerance acts. In campaigning tolerance, NU Garis Lucu shows a lot of warm interactions with various other religious groups.

Semakin beriman seseorang maka dia akan semakin peka dengan kehadiran salib di sekelilingnya. (August 13, 2020)

The more faith a person is, the more sensitive he will be to see cross signs around him.

Kenapa kata “Tuhan” harus ditulis dengan huruf kapital? Sebab kalau ditulis dengan “t” kecil sekilas seperti ada tanda salib. (August 17, 2020)

Why should the word “Tuhan” (God) be written in capital? Because if it is written with a small “t” it looks like a cross sign.

Beragamlah seperti perokok aktif. Meski beda merek tak pernah saling hina. Sambil bercengkrama mereka menikmati rokok sesuai selera. (August 1, 2018)

Be religious as active smokers. Although smoke different brands they never insulted each other. Chatting and enjoy cigarettes according to their own taste.

The sixth strategy is delegitimizing arguments of *jihad*. NU Garis Lucu criticized both *jihad* actions and the narrative on the urgency of *jihad* that spreading recently. They name what is called *jihad* like several bombing actions as an act of terrorism which is excluded from Islamic teaching. Calls to *jihad* as it appears in the midst of presidential elections are also considered irrelevant. NU Garis Lucu delegitimizes the argument of jihadists by saying that they do not have sufficient understanding in interpreting the holy book.

In the tweet below, NU Garis Lucu satirized poetry reading from Neno Warisman, former Indonesian artist and currently activist in an event namely Munajat 212. During the momentum which is still related to the “Aksi Bela Islam,” she recited a poem which contained a prayer for the winning of Muslim candidate in gubernatorial election of DKI Jakarta. Because otherwise, she was worried that no one would worship Him anymore. Besides, NU Garis Lucu also responded to a viral video showing the addition of the words “*hayya ala jihad*” (let’s do the *jihad*) in the *azan*.

Ya Tuhan, menangkanlah Liverpool esok hari. Jika kau tak memenangkannya, aku khawatir. Aku khawatir tidak akan ada yang mengikuti MU setelah ini. (February 22, 2019)

God, please win Liverpool tomorrow. If You don't win them i'm worried. I'm afraid no one will follow MU (Manchester United) after this.

Maklum anggota baru, biasanya dia suka takbir jadi keterusan deh. (tentang lafaz jihad dalam azan) (December 1, 2020)

It is understandably as a new member he likes *takbir* so he keeps going.

The seventh strategy is evaporating polarization. NU Garis Lucu does not want to go too deep into an issue in order not considered as sympathizers.

“We have concentration on these issues. But we don't want to be like some people who because of their focus on one issue end up becoming sympathizers. For example, if we focus on countering the issue of the *khilafah* and then we continue to tweet and attack, people will eventually accuse us of being anti-*khilafah* sympathizers.” (Interview anonymous admin of NU Garis Lucu)

Choosing to not become sympathizers is motivated by the awareness that polarization has led to unhealthy communication in the social media. NU Garis Lucu assesses that this happened after the accusation of religious blasphemy against Ahok which was followed by waves of “Aksi Bela Islam.” Instead of sharpening polarization, NU Garis Lucu aims to open up a dialog for various groups both inside or outside Islam. This approach is different from, for example, Abu Janda, who consistently counters Islamist narratives with a humorous way that tends to mock and create a clear distance. Abu Janda, who tried to represent Banser several times, often made a blunder which became an easy target for Islamist backlash.

From those themes and communication strategies identification, NU Garis Lucu then chose humour as their way of counter-narrative Islamism dissemination. Humour was chosen because they see that the

efforts made by a number of NU parties and medias in countering NU Garis Lurus' narratives have actually exacerbated the conflict. NU Garis Lucu chooses to use humour because humour is considered will prevent polemic. It is also through humour that NU Garis Lucu can indirectly delegitimize the arguments of the NU Garis Lurus.

After the counter-narrative to NU Garis Lurus' Islamist narratives managed to get attention in the social media, NU Garis Lucu used the same method (humour) to respond towards Islamism narratives outside NU. NU Garis Lucu then made Gus Dur an inspiration in responding many issues as well as put attention to tolerance, humanity, by using humourous delivery.

“Gus Dur’s way in responding many issues is interesting for us to pay attention to. Gus Dur has been known as a figure who can solve problems. So, we really want to present the figure of Gus Dur in our social media that getting dry or has started to lose humanism.” (Interview anonymous admin of NU Garis Lucu)

Gus Dur indeed consciously used humour as a communication strategy and even a “tool of resistance.” He admits that protest by jokes is ineffective from a political point of view.²⁵ There are no major political movements or political manifestos based on jokes. However, jokes as a vehicle for political expression have their own uses. At a minimum, it will unify the languages of the masses and identify the problems that are complained of and are concerned about. Gus Dur described several functions of humour: 1) a subtle means of protest, 2) a vehicle for political expression, 3) means to promote unity, and 4) criticism of unpleasant circumstances in one’s own place.

On its dissemination strategy, NU Garis Lucu chose Twitter as the main platform to deliver their counter-narrative. Twitter was chosen because it is considered as the most appropriate medium to generate two-way dialogue and exchange of ideas, as they aim to open

²⁵ Abdurrahman Wahid, *Melawan Melalui Lelucon in Tuhan Tidak Perlu Dibela* (Yogyakarta: LKiS Pelangi Aksara, 1999).

up communication spaces. However, eventually NU Garis Lucu also expands to other platforms namely Instagram. Content on Instagram is basically just screenshots of their tweets on Twitter. Instagram as an image-based platform serves as a storefront of NU Garis Lucu because it an archive their tweets from time to time. Indeed, what is lacking from Twitter is that it can't archive past tweets. While Instagram allows that but it can't provide broader interaction space as Twitter has. In the end these two platforms complement each other.

One aspect that needs to be considered in dissemination of counter-narrative according to Braddock and Horgan, is cultivating trust among anonymous communicators.²⁶ The most effective way for NU Garis Lucu to keep the trust of its followers is to maintain its counter-narrative strategy through humour and keep its distance from pretentious attitudes that risk emphasizing polarization. Keeping the administrators' identity secret is one way to distance this account from personal preferences.

So far, NU Garis Lucu has been quite successful in cultivating trust among netizens, as evidenced by the consistently increasing followers that now reaching 695K on Twitter and 731K on Instagram. This many followers can provide a wide audience that allowing messages to be echoed by many people so that they can reach another important aspect of counter-narrative dissemination according to Braddock and Horgan, namely virality.²⁷

One of the ways to establish virality is by leveraging trusted other by involving legitimate accounts or accounts with many other followers. In the context of NU Garis Lucu, virality is often achieved through interactions with other Garis Lucu accounts such as Muhammadiyin Garis Lucu (@MuhammadiyinGL) or Katolik Garis Lucu (@KatolikG).

²⁶ Kurt Braddock and John Horgan, "Towards a Guide for Constructing...

²⁷ *Ibid.*

@KatolikG: *Pagi2 dibangunin @NUGarisLucu agak kaget ternyata diingetin untuk ke gereja... Yowis siap-siap misa terpagi.. Enaknya rumah dekat masjid...*

@MuhammadiyahGL: *Kok tahu kalo yang bangunin @NUGarisLucu emang azan subuhnya gimana?*

@KatolikG: *Nada azannya ada langgam Jawanya.*

@NUGarisLucu: *Ah bisa aja. Coba gimana bunyi azan bait kedua?*
(September 14, 2020)

@ KatolikG: In early morning I was a bit surprised that I was reminded to go to church by @NUGarisLucu... Alright, getting ready for the morning mass... The perk of living in a house near the mosque...

@MuhammadiyahGL: How do you know if the one who woke up was @NUGarisLucu? How is the dawn call to prayer?

@KatolikG: The tone of the prayer call has a Javanese style.

@NUGarisLucu: How about the sound of the second verse *azan*?

In addition to the above interactions, on the NU Garis Lucu account, virality often occurs in responsive tweets in commenting on actual issues and tweets that show “togetherness” between different groups. NU Garis Lucu’s tweet laughing at their selves (NU) in front of various sects in Islam when facing a pandemic, managed to reach the highest level of virality on Instagram seen from the number of likes.

“Apa gua bilang”

Salafi: *dulu ngehina cadar sekarang pakai masker, kan?*

Muhammadiyah: *Habis sholat gak usah salaman baru tahu kan?*

LDII: *Habis dari masjid harus dipel, terbukti kan sekarang?*

NU: *Aku ra iso ngomong, sak ulan gak ono berkatan.* (April 8, 2020)

“What did I say”

Salafi: *used to insult the veil, now wear a mask, right?*

Muhammadiyah: *After praying, you don’t have to shake your hand?*

LDII: *Mop the mosque after use, it is proven right now, isn’t it*

NU: *Cannot speak, I miss berkatan.*

The Limit of NU Garis Lucu

On one hand, an influence that deserves to be highlighted from the efforts of NU Garis Lucu's counter-narratives is that they are able to transmit their humourous approach in viewing religious issues to their followers. From the interview, the anonymous admin said, on Twitter, a fun conversation circle can be formed between NU Garis Lucu and its followers.

But on the other hand, some of their followers precisely have become partisans and militants, something that NU Garis Lucu actually avoided. These partisan followers are often obscuring the image of NU Garis Lucu as a partisan account as well.

“Some parties identify us from our followers (who are partisans). Partisan followers are usually heated certain issues even without being asked. Or if the NUGarisLucu account was criticized or bullied by one account, they also push it back together even though we didn't ask them to reply. And what I regret is that the response is precisely what we avoided.”
(Interview anonymous admin of NU Garis Lucu)

A number of followers who became partisans showed that the concept of counter-narrative Islamism by NU Garis Lucu, which wanted to avoid polarization could not be completely accepted. Some people think that NU Garis Lucu's counter-narrative towards Islamism is not a dialogue but a face-to-face tension.

This condition is in line with what was said by Goodall that humour has a divisive potential. Some people may think humour as an offensive thing.²⁸ Moreover, a number of NU Garis Lucu's tweets seem serious and offensive that fail to deliver humour as below:

Meneriakkan ukhuvah Islamiyyah, merobek-robek ukhuvah Wathaniyyah. Itu bukan cara pandang Nabdhilyah. Tapi pemikiran ora nggenah. (December 2, 2017)

²⁸ Harold Lloyd Goodall Jr (et.al.), “Rhetorical Charms: The Promise and Pitfalls of Humor and Ridicule as Strategies to Counter Extremist Narratives,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2012, pp. 70–79.

Chanting Islamic brotherhood, tearing up the nation brotherhood. That is not a Nahdliyah perspective. But an unkind thought.

Tak perlu kau sebut dirimu “Pembela Islam”. Sebab jika kau berbuat dosa, Islamlah yang kena getahnya. (January 19, 2016)

You don’t need to call yourself “Defender of Islam.” Because if you sin, Islam will be affected.

Goodall also said that the use or “sense of humour” is context-dependent. Satirical message may succeed to elicit laughter in a culture but fail in another culture with different values.²⁹ The humour of NU Garis Lucu may be acceptable among moderate NU community or groups outside NU and Islam who share same inclusive views. But, these jokes wouldn’t work in an exclusive Islamist group. Thus, NU Garis Lucu’s humour serves more to protect moderate groups from Islamist narratives and has not been able to change Islamist groups’ perspective. In addition, the use of Javanese language and Javanese cultural background also makes their humour mostly can only relate to Javanese ethnic.

Conclusion

NU Garis Lucu is one of the moderate groups that try to counter Islamist narratives on the internet by using a humorous approach. Initially, NU Garis Lucu emerged because of anxiety over the threat of Islamist narratives within NU internally before they were concerned with broader issues of Islamism. They counter-Islamist narratives circulated on the internet by developing a number of counter-narrative strategies: challenging the legitimacy of Islamist religious authority, presenting moderate practice of NU, supporting democracy as an ideal political system, promoting equality among citizens, campaigning tolerance and building interfaith dialogue, delegitimizing arguments of *jihad*, and reducing polarization. NU Garis Lucu uses humour as a strategy for delivering their message. Making Gus Dur as a role model, humour is

²⁹ *Ibid.*

interpreted as a form of “resistance” to the narrative of Islamism. In disseminating its counter-narratives, they used Twitter and Instagram platform with their respective functions.

NU Garis Lucu have also succeeded in constructing awareness towards delighting religious expression amidst the high tension between religious groups. However, their humours are irrelevant to the exclusive group and are instead seen by their moderate followers to be offensive to Islamist groups. Their humours sometimes feel serious, serve more to protect moderate groups from Islamist narratives rather than shifting Islamist paradigm. In addition, their primordial humour character also limits their scope.

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