



# The Contestation of Contemporary Islam: Conservative Islam versus Progressive Islam

This article analyzes the articulation of Islamic thought in the 2014 and 2019 General Elections in Indonesia, both of which were marked by efforts by progressive and conservative Muslims to dominate public spaces. Contestation was evident in these political discourses, with progressive Muslims advocating for moderatism, political ethics, and tolerance in narratives of inclusivism, pluralism, and tolerance while conservative Muslims disseminating extremism, the formalization of sharia law, and intolerance in narratives of exclusivism and homogenization. The analysis questions the continuity-discontinuity, motives, and actors of both progressive and conservative Muslim movements and investigates the challenges for progressive Muslims in disseminating their narratives in Indonesia. The result argues that massive religious organizations in Indonesia articulate, internalize, and institutionalize progressive thought within their organizations and educational institutions. This article encourages progressive Muslims to reckon with and countermeasure conservatism among religious and political elites whose narratives exploit religious sentiments for practical purposes.

**Keywords:** Islamic conservatism; Progressive muslim; Religious contestation; Post-Soeharto; Transnational movements

Artikel ini menganalisis peta pemikiran Islam pada Pemilu Indonesia tahun 2014 dan 2019, yang keduanya ditandai dengan upaya kelompok Muslim Progresif dan Muslim Konservatif untuk mendominasi ruang publik. Kontestasi terlihat dalam wacana politik dengan Muslim progresif mengadvokasi moderatisme, etika politik, dan toleransi dalam narasi inklusivisme, pluralisme dan toleransi sementara Muslim Konservatif menyebarkan ekstremisme, formalisasi syariah, dan intoleransi dalam narasi eksklusivisme dan homogenisasi. Analisis menelusuri kontinuitas-diskontinuitas, motif, dan aktor gerakan progresif dan konservatif dan menyelidiki tantangan bagi Muslim progresif dalam menyebarkan narasi mereka di Indonesia. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa organisasi keagamaan besar Indonesia mengartikulasikan, menginternalisasi, dan melembagakan pemikiran progresif dalam organisasi dan lembaga pendidikan mereka. Artikel ini turut mendorong Muslim Progresif untuk menimbang dan melawan konservatisme di kalangan elit agama dan politik yang narasinya mengeksploitasi sentimen agama untuk tujuan praktis.

**Kata Kunci:** Konservatisme Islam; Muslim Progresif; Kontestasi agama; Pasca-Soeharto; Gerakan transnasional

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## Introduction

Moderate Islam in Indonesia, as represented by Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), has often been identified as dominant. Members of these two massive organizations tend to be inclusive and moderate. Yet more conservative and non-mainstream paradigms have emerged over time, creating what Hefner (2019) identifies as civil Islam. Such conservative movements, which trace their roots to the 1980s and 1990s, rose to prominence in The 2014 and 2019 General Elections in Indonesia.<sup>1</sup> These movements differ at a glance from NU and Muhammadiyah; being informed by Wahhabism and Salafism, the conservatives produce, circulate and disseminate discourses of exclusivism, intolerance, and anti-pluralism through which they influence the majority-Muslim populace of Indonesia.<sup>2</sup>

Progressive and/or moderate Islam has gone head-to-head with conservative Islam in its efforts to dominate public spaces. This article argues that both transnational movements have constructed their own concept of piety and public piety which concepts have manifested in each of their activities.<sup>3</sup> Some major organizations such as the Indonesian Mujahedeen Council [Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia], the Front of Defenders of Islam [Front Pembela Islam, FPI], Forum of the

Ahl as-Sunna wa al-Jamā'a Brotherhood [Forum Ukhuwah Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah, FKAJ] and Ansharu Tauhid act to propagate their ideals to the public sphere.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the discussion questions why religious organizations' centers and educational institutions become the heart of conservatives and progressives in disseminating, internalizing, and institutionalizing their ideals through sermons prayers, and rites. The analysis mentions that such headquarters, be they secular or religious, have spread narratives on *jihād* or *da'wa*.<sup>5</sup> Other organizations, such as The Party of Prosperity and Justice [Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS], have followed the teachings of The Muslim Brotherhood, manifesting their ideology through political and practical means.<sup>6</sup>

Public contestations of Islam in Indonesia reflect the increased diversification of the religion in the nation since the policymakers began their political reform and applied General Elections. Such diversifications ignite certain socio-political behavior thus society tends to relive debates on the progression and conservation of religion.<sup>7</sup> The Indonesian Progressive Muslims, on one hand, promote narratives and discourses on political Islam, Islamic moderation [*wasatiyah/wasatiyya*],<sup>8</sup> pluralism, inclusivism, and religious freedom while the Indonesian Conservative Muslims, on the other hand, disseminate the formalization of

<sup>1</sup> Vedi R. Hadiz, "Imagine All the People? Mobilising Islamic Populism for Right-Wing Politics in Indonesia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48, no. 4 (2018): 566–583.

<sup>2</sup> R W Hefner, "Religious Resurgence in Contemporary Asia: Southeast Asian Perspectives on Capitalism, the State, and the New Piety," *The Journal of Asian Studies* (2010): 1031–1047; Masdar Hilmy, "Whither Indonesia's Islamic Moderatism?: A Reexamination on the Moderate Vision of Muhammadiyah and NU," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 7, no. 1 (2013).

<sup>3</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, "Piety, Politics, and Post-Islamism: Dhikr Akbar in Indonesia," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 50, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>4</sup> David M. Bourchier, "Two Decades of Ideological Contestation in Indonesia: From Democratic Cosmopolitanism to Religious Nationalism," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 49, no. 5 (2019).

<sup>5</sup> Alexander R Arifianto, "Rising Islamism and the Struggle for Islamic Authority in Post-Reformasi Indonesia,"

*TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* (2019).

<sup>6</sup> Alexander R Arifianto, "Indonesia's Ideological Convergence: Emerging Trend in Islamic Regulations?," no. 032 (2018).

<sup>7</sup> Zuli Qodir et al., "A Progressive Islamic Movement and Its Response to the Issues of the Ummah," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 10, no. 2 (2020).

<sup>8</sup> M. Zaidi Abdad, "Analisis Dan Pemetaan Pemikiran Fikih Moderat Di Timur Tengah Dan Relasinya Dengan Gerakan Fikih Formalis," *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 12, no. 1 (January 22, 2011): 39–62; Arifinsyah Arifinsyah, Safria Andy, and Agusman Damanik, "The Urgency of Religious Moderation in Preventing Radicalism in Indonesia," *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 21, no. 1 (April 27, 2020): 91–108; Ahmad Zainal Abidin et al., "Between Conflict and Peace: The Government Policies and Sunni-Shia Relationship in Sampang and Yogyakarta," *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 21, no. 2 (October 30, 2020): 135–150.





sharia, exclusivism, homogenization of religion, and religious extremism.

Within the sociopolitical context of Indonesia post-New Order, this article argues the nation is experiencing contestation between conservative and progressive Islam; between the formalization and/or substantialization of Islamic law.<sup>9</sup> Both discourses offer specific understandings of Islam and believe that their understanding best reflects prophetic traditions, national identity, common grounds, and universal values.<sup>10</sup> Various models of da'wa have been offered to the Indonesians, be they rich or poor, urban or rural.<sup>11</sup>

The article discusses the contestation of being "Islamic" in Indonesia, with a particular focus on how ideological movements enter the nation, mobilize political actors, and incorporate their beliefs into practical politics.<sup>12</sup> Such mobilization of the faithful is highly visible in contemporary Indonesia post-Soeharto.<sup>13</sup> The political Islam in Indonesia differs from that of the Arabic Muslim world. The main emphasis of political Islam in the Indonesian context rather departs from the various understandings of Islam, being (un-)Islamic, and different means to embrace such diversities. Particular interpretations and understandings of Islam become motor for fulfilling its political and societal actors.

This article investigates the deprivatization and contestation of being "Islamic" in the public sphere of contemporary Indonesia within the last

decade. The data is curated from the contestations of progressive-conservative Indonesian Muslims during the 2014 to 2019 General Election periods. The analysis reconsiders the discourse devices and discursive apparatuses of both transnational movements and their consequences for Islamic politics in contemporary Indonesia. The analysis questions the continuity-discontinuity, motives, and actors of both progressive and conservative Muslim movements and investigates challenges for progressive Muslims in disseminating their narratives in Indonesia.

### Islamic Conservatism in Indonesia

The conservative movements in Indonesia emerged during the Suharto regime.<sup>14</sup> However, such transnational activism gained steam after Indonesia began political reform in 1998, after the fall of Suharto government. Several subsequent presidents of the Republic of Indonesia, including the sixth, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY), cultivated these movements and facilitated their growth.<sup>15</sup> His government established centers of Islamic education [majelis taklim], many of which were led by preachers from Salafist leanings and backgrounds. Others such as Arifin Ilham and Abdullah Gymnastiar were provided platforms for expressing their understanding of Islam.<sup>16</sup>

During this period, FPI and its leader Riziek Shihab became close to the SBY government and 'green military'—i.e., militant Muslims.<sup>17</sup> State-

<sup>9</sup> Vedi R. Hadiz, "Indonesia's Missing Left and the Islamisation of Dissent," *Third World Quarterly* 0, no. 0 (2020): 1–19.

<sup>10</sup> Hadiz, "Imagine All the People? Mobilising Islamic Populism for Right-Wing Politics in Indonesia." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48, no. 4 (2018): 1–19Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> M. C. Ricklefs, *Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java: A Political, Social, Cultural and Religious History, c. 1930 to the Present* (Singapore: NUS Singapore, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, "The Failure of the Wahhabi Campaign Transnational Islam and the Salafi Madrasa in Post-9/11 Indonesia," *South East Asia Research* 18, no. 4 (2010): 675–705.

<sup>13</sup> Alexandre Pelletier, "Competition for Religious Authority and Islamist Mobilization in Indonesia," *Comparative Politics* 53, no. 3 (2020).

<sup>14</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, "Genealogies of Islamic Radicalism in Post-Suharto Indonesia," *South East Asia Research* 10, no. 2 (2002): 117–154.

<sup>15</sup> Sri Yunanto and Angel Damayanti, "The Root Causes and Nexus of Militant Islamic Movements in Indonesia: Case Studies of Darul Islam and Jemaah Islamiyah," *Asia Pacific Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017).

<sup>16</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen, *Postscript: The Survival of Liberal and Progressive Muslim Thought in Indonesia in "Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the "Conservative Turn,"* ed. Martin Van Bruinessen, 1st ed. (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen, *Selayang Pandang Organisasi, Sarikat, Dan Gerakan Muslim Di Indonesia Dalam "Consevative Turn: Islam Indonesia Dalam Ancaman Fundamentalisme"* Terj. Agus Budiman, *Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)*, 1st ed. (Bandung: Al-Mizan, 2014).





run universities became common destinations for movements seeking to propagate their conservative understandings of Islam. They invited preachers to deliver sermons; held Islamic-themed book festivals, and invited youth Muslims to become closer to PKS—one of SBY's strongest supporters during his two terms as president.<sup>18</sup>

Conservative Islam in Indonesia received significant support from religious elites who held Salafist or Wahhabi views of Islam, who sought to capitalize on the support of the faithful for practical political purposes. The emergence of celebrity *ustadz* during the SBY era provided clear evidence of the rapid rise of conservative Islam in Indonesia.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, campuses associated with SBY amplified the spread of conservative Islam.<sup>20</sup> Large conservative movements spread through the University of Indonesia, the Agricultural Institute of Bogor, the Bandung Institute of Technology, the Surabaya Institute of Technology, and Brawijaya University. Such state-associated universities were primary drivers of conservative Islam, offering scholarships to students who had memorized the Qur'an.

At the same time, political parties also spread conservatism throughout Indonesia. PKS, Party of Union and Development [Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, PPP], Crescent Moon Party [Partai Bulan Bintang, PBB] were all closely associated with conservative Islam.<sup>21</sup> All of these

parties contributed to the rapid spread of conservatism following the fall of the Suharto regime.

It may thus be concluded that conservative forces were able to readily cultivate the social, cultural, economic, and political support of the masses, many of whom were sympathetic to their ideals.<sup>22</sup> Conservative Islam thus became an integral part of Islamic discourses in Indonesia, as seen in the 2014 and 2019 elections,<sup>23</sup> as well as the ongoing tensions between conservative and progressive Islam.

However, there have also been discontinuities in conservative Islam in Indonesia, especially as the issues of extremism and terrorism have drawn increased international scrutiny. Facing pressure from national and international actors, conservatives began favoring cultural and social activities over political ones.<sup>24,25</sup> Several accommodated national culture and acknowledged the national political system, resulting in fragmentation between those who approve of the accommodative approach and those who reject it.<sup>26</sup> In the face of such fragmentation and polarization, the pro-sharia and pro-*tarbiyah* movements stagnated.<sup>27</sup>

However, as politics normalized, conservative movements again rose to prominence with their alternative understanding of Islam. Their ongoing growth has been facilitated by a conducive political arena, wherein diverse religious and political ideologies

<sup>18</sup> Kikue Hamayotsu, "The Limits of Civil Society in Democratic Indonesia: Media Freedom and Religious Intolerance," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 4 (2013): 658–677.

<sup>19</sup> Hasan, "Piety, Politics, and Post-Islamism: Dhikr Akbar in Indonesia." 376.

<sup>20</sup> Ahmad-Norma Permata and Najib Kailani, *Islam and the 2009 Indonesian Elections, Political and Cultural Issues: The Case of the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS)*, ed. Reprint, *Institut de Recherche Sur l'Asie Du Sud-Est Contemporaine*, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Diego Fossati, "The Resurgence of Ideology in Indonesia: Political Islam, Aliran and Political Behaviour," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 38, no. 2 (2019).

<sup>22</sup> Thomas B Pepinsky, R William Liddle, and Saiful Mujani, "Indonesian Democracy and the Transformation of Political Islam" (2010).

<sup>23</sup> Alexander R. Arifianto, "Rising Islamism and the Struggle for Islamic Authority in Post-Reformasi Indonesia," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 8, no. 1 (2020): 37–50.

<sup>24</sup> Delphine Alles, *Transnational Islamic Actors and Indonesia's Foreign Policy, Transnational Islamic Actors and Indonesia's Foreign Policy*, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Johan Meuleman, "Dakwah, Competition for Authority, and Development," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 167, no. 2–3 (2011): 236–269.

<sup>26</sup> Cahyo Pamungkas, "Religious Identification and Social Distance Between Religious Groups in Yogyakarta," *Jurnal Humaniora* 27, no. 2 (2015).

<sup>27</sup> Thomas P. Power, "Jokowi's Authoritarian Turn and Indonesia's Democratic Decline," *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 54, no. 3 (2018): 307–338.





may develop without meaningful interference. Salafi and jihadi ideologies thus continued to enter Indonesia from the Middle East,<sup>28</sup> often spreading their ideologies by providing financial and social support—i.e. funding the construction of mosques, giving scholarships to children, and providing humanitarian aid after disasters.<sup>29</sup>

The continuities and discontinuities of conservative Islam have shaped their activities, including their use of prayer groups, social media, seminars, and print media. Conservative Islam has experienced continuity in the support it has received from Indonesia's politicians and institutions of higher learning (both religious and non-religious). At the same time, conservative Islam has faced discontinuity as political support has faltered, government officials have regulated print media, and moderate organizations have protested its activities.

### Islamic Progressivism in Indonesia

Progressive thought has emerged amongst Islamic organizations, driven in part by institutions of higher Islamic learning. State-affiliated institutions have been primary drivers of progressive Islam since the 1980s, when Abdul Mukti Ali (later an important figure in the history of Islamic education in Yogyakarta) served as Minister of Religion under President Suharto; in Yogyakarta, he had established the "Limited Studies Group" for comparative religious studies. In Jakarta, meanwhile, the State Islamic University of Jakarta became a major force for progressive Islam under Rector Harun Nasution

and Minister of Religion Munawir Sjadzali.<sup>30</sup> All of these men created policies that facilitated Muslim scholars' efforts to continue their studies abroad.<sup>31</sup> In subsequent years, progressive Islamic discourses spread through much of the Indonesian archipelago.

Since the 1980s, when Indonesia's Muslim scholars began studying in Europe and the United States, progressive ideals have entered the country unabated. Their progressive discourses have been widely consumed by Indonesia's Muslims.<sup>32</sup> Three of the most prominent intellectuals to shape progressive discourses in Indonesia were students of Fazlur Rahman who studied in Chicago: Nurcholish Madjid, Amien Rais, and Ahmad Syafii Maarif. The Three Fighters of Chicago [Tiga Pendekar Chicago],<sup>33</sup> or so they called, ignited the spirit of reforming Islam and Indonesian muslim societies from its scholars and intellectuals.<sup>34</sup> In the end, Rais fights the political arena while Madjid and Ma'arif focused primarily on the cultural arena.<sup>35</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, Muslim intellectuals continued to advance progressive Islam in Jakarta and Yogyakarta. For example, at UIN Jakarta the work of Nurcholish was continued by M. Quraish Shihab (an expert exegete from Al-Azhar University, Egypt), Komaruddin Hidayat, Azyumardi Azra, Bahtiar Effendy, and Masykuri Abdillah, and later by Saiful Mujani, Ali Munhanif, Jamhari, and Fuad Jabali. At UIN Yogyakarta, meanwhile, progressive Islam was promoted by intellectuals such as M. Amin Abdullah, Faisal Ismail, and Akh. Minhaji in the

<sup>28</sup> Mark Woodward et al., "'Modeling Muslim Social Movements: A Case Study of Indonesian Salafism' Paper Presented at the 10th Annual Conference on Islamic Studies Banjarmasin Indonesia," n.d., 1–16.

<sup>29</sup> Hilman Latief, "Philanthropy and 'Muslim Citizenship' in Post-Suharto Indonesia," *Southeast Asian Studies* 5, no. 2 (2016); A Fauzia, "Islamic Philanthropy in Indonesia: Modernization, Islamization, and Social Justice," *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* (2017).

<sup>30</sup> Carol Kersten, *Islam in Indonesia The Contest for Society, Ideas and Values* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>31</sup> Carol Kersten, "Islam, Cultural Hybridity and Cosmopolitanism: New Muslim Intellectuals on

Globalization," *Journal of International and Global Studies Int* 4, no. 1 (2016): 90–113.

<sup>32</sup> Carol Kersten, "Islamic Post-Traditionalism: Postcolonial and Postmodern Religious Discourse in Indonesia," *Sophia* 54, no. 4 (2015): 473–489.

<sup>33</sup> Three Warrior from Chicago.

<sup>34</sup> Qodir et al., "A Progressive Islamic Movement and Its Response to the Issues of the Ummah."

<sup>35</sup> H L Beck, "Islam in Indonesia. The Contest for Society, Ideas and Values, Written by Carol Kersten," ... *Taal-, Land-En Volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities* ... (brill.com, 2016).





1990s. They were followed in the 2000s by Yudian Aswin, Syafaatun Mirzanah, Norhaidi, and Al-Makin.<sup>36</sup>

Progressive Islam has regenerated primarily through institutions of higher learning, both Islamic and non-Islamic, where many intellectuals have incorporated progressive views into their studies. Over time, such studies have become increasingly interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary.<sup>37</sup> Such inter- and/or multidisciplinary are essential for creating a moderate and tolerant Islam that is open to diverse possibilities.<sup>38</sup> Similar inter- or multidisciplinary studies have been conducted at non-Islamic campuses, which have likewise employed diverse perspectives.

Also important for the continuity of progressive Islam have been Muhammadiyah and NU, the two largest religious organizations in Indonesia.<sup>39</sup> Both have avoided politics since they failed to win Indonesia's 1955 election, having instead focused on intellectual approaches to realize their goals. Muhammadiyah and NU have contributed extensively to the development of Islamic thought through the thousands of *pesantren* and other schools/universities that they operate throughout Indonesia<sup>40</sup>

Progressive/moderate Islam has also been advocated by independent intellectuals, those active Islam not in Muhammadiyah and NU, but the Association of Muslim Students (Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam, HMI) and the Student Movement of Indonesian Islam (Pergerakan Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia, PMII). One of the more prominent members of HMI was Nurcholish Madjid, who promoted progressive Islam during his two terms as the organization's chairperson.<sup>41</sup> Another intellectual, Abdurrahman Wahid (popularly known as Gus Dur) was first involved in PMII before rising to prominence in NU.<sup>42</sup>

Also promoting the ideals of progressive Islam have been study groups and non-governmental organizations, both of which have contributed importantly to the discourses of progressive Islam.<sup>43</sup> Non-governmental organizations actively advocated the spread of progressive Islam in civil society, using moderate discourses to promote inclusivity and tolerance.<sup>44</sup>

Seminars, conferences, and academic writing (journal articles and books) have all been used by progressive Muslims to spread moderate discourses.<sup>45</sup> Prayer groups established by progressive Muslims have promoted moderation and understood the Indonesian nation as marked by religious, ethnic, racial, and class diversity.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Carol Kersten, "Cosmopolitan Muslim Intellectuals and the Mediation of Cultural Islam in Indonesia," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 7, no. 1-2 (2013).

<sup>37</sup> M. Amin Abdullah, "Islam as a Cultural Capital in Indonesia and the Malay World: A Convergence of Islamic Studies, Social Sciences and Humanities," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 11, no. 2 (2017).

<sup>38</sup> Jajat Burhanuddin et al., *The Modernization of Islam in Indonesia: An Impact Study on the Cooperation between the IAIN and McGill University*, Canadian International Development Agency (Canada, 2000).

<sup>39</sup> Mujiburrahman, *Intra- and Inter-Religious Dialogue in Contemporary Indonesia: A Participant's Point of View*, Paper Presented at the Center for Asia-Pacific Studies, Nanzan University (Banjarmasin, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> Burhanuddin et al., *The Modernization of Islam in Indonesia: An Impact Study on the Cooperation between the IAIN and McGill University*.

<sup>41</sup> Alexander R Arifianto, "Faith, Moral Authority, and Politics: The Making of Progressive Islam in Indonesia," *Political Science* (2012).

<sup>42</sup> Syarif Hidayatullah, "The Consolidation of The Islamic Traditionalism: A Case Study of The Nahdatul Ulama," *Prosiding the 4th International Conference on Indonesian Studies: "Unity, Diversity, and Future"* 4 (2012).

<sup>43</sup> M. Nakamura, "Prospects for Islam in Post-Soeharto Indonesia," *Asia-Pacific Review* 6, no. 1 (1999): 89-108.

<sup>44</sup> M Hilmy, "Whither Indonesia's Islamic Moderatism? A Reexamination on the Moderate Vision of Muhammadiyah and NU," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* (2013).

<sup>45</sup> Ali Maksum et al., "Ideological Conflicts Between Radical and Moderate Islamic Organizations in Indonesia," *Talent Development & Excellence* 12, no. 1 (2020).

<sup>46</sup> Ahmad Zainul Hamdi, "Radicalizing Indonesian Moderate Islam from Within: The NU-FPI Relationship in Bangkalan, Madura," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 7, no. 1 (2013); A Z Hamdi, "Radicalizing Indonesian Moderate





In recent years, many such conferences have been held online, often inviting panels of experts to discuss themes that are intertwined with inclusivism, tolerance, and pluralism.<sup>47</sup> The conference held by the Women Ulamas of Indonesia (Konferensi Ulama Perempuan Indonesia, KUPI) at Ciwaringin Pesantren, Cirebon, in 2019 provides a clear example of how progressive Islam has operated in Indonesia.<sup>48</sup>

However, progressive Islam has also been marred by discontinuity, including a relative dearth of public support compared to conservative Islam.<sup>49</sup><sup>50</sup> Progressive Islam has often been perceived as elitist, inaccessible to anyone but intellectuals.<sup>51</sup> Average Indonesians, raised outside the tradition of academic reading and writing, cannot easily become involved in activities such as seminars and conferences.<sup>52</sup> Progressive Muslims' discussions have been seen as too far removed from the problems of the faithful, whose economic and political needs are marginalized.<sup>53</sup>

Islam From Within: The Nu-Fpi Relationship in Bangkalan, Madura," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* (2013).

<sup>47</sup> Nostalgawan Wahyudhi, "The Pattern of Islamic Moderate Movement in Java under Political Fluctuations in Early 20th Century," *International Journal of Nusantara Islam* 03, no. 02 (2015); Wahyudi Akmaliah, "The Demise of Moderate Islam: New Media, Contestation, and Reclaiming Religious Authorities," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1–24.

<sup>48</sup> 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* 46, no. 134 (2018): 24–43; Eva F. Nisa, "Muslim Women in Contemporary Indonesia: Online Conflicting Narratives behind the Women Ulama Congress," *Asian Studies Review* 43, no. 3 (2019): 434–454.

<sup>49</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, "The Making of Public Islam: Piety, Agency, and Commodification on the Landscape of the Indonesian Public Sphere," *Contemporary Islam* 3, no. 3 (2009): 229–250; Yuyun Sunesti, Noorhaidi Hasan, and Muhammad Najib Azca, "Young Salafi-Niqabi and Hijrah: Agency and Identity Negotiation," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 8, no. 2 (2018): 173–198: 173-197

<sup>50</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, *Islamist Party, Electoral Politics and Da'wa Mobilization among Youth: The Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) in Indonesia* (Singapore, 2009).

<sup>51</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, "Reformasi, Religious Diversity, and Islamic Radicalism after Suharto," *Journal of Indonesian Social Sciences and Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2018): 23–51.; Winfried

Another discontinuity in progressive Islam is the fact that its proponents have been limited in their use of social media to spread their moderate ideals, despite said medium's openness to religious discourses.<sup>54</sup> As a result, the moderate themes of progressive Islam have little currency on social media,<sup>55</sup> being drowned out by the militant conservatives who regularly use social media to promote exclusivism, intolerance, and hatred.<sup>56</sup>

At the same time, few have responded to the progressive ideals articulated by Indonesia's institutions of higher learning. Some institutions have balked, being unwilling to deal with the conservative threats that they may face for teaching progressive ideals. Proponents of progressive ideals are often branded anti-Muslim or identified as deviants and infidels.<sup>57</sup> Some conservative groups have even been willing to commit acts of terror against campuses

Weck, Noorhaidi Hasan, and Irfan Abubakar, *Islam in the Public Sphere: The Politics of Identity and the Future of Democracy in Indonesia* (Jakarta: CSRC UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, 2011).

<sup>52</sup> Rahel Kunz, Henri Myrntinen, and Wening Udasmoro, "Preachers, Pirates and Peace-Building: Examining Non-Violent Hegemonic Masculinities in Aceh," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 24, no. 3 (2018).

<sup>53</sup> Qodir et al., "A Progressive Islamic Movement and Its Response to the Issues of the Ummah." 336-338. Zuly Qodir et al., "Muhammadiyah Identity and Muslim Public Good: Muslim Practices in Java," *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 19, no. 1 (2021).

<sup>54</sup> Fatimah Husein and Martin Slama, "Online Piety and Its Discontent: Revisiting Islamic Anxieties on Indonesian Social Media," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, no. 134 (2018).

<sup>55</sup> Aqida Nuril Salma, "Politics or Piety? Understanding Public Piety and Political Expressions of Indonesian Muslim in Social Media," *Sosiologi Reflektif* 13, no. 2 (2019).

<sup>56</sup> Jeremy Menchik, "Productive Intolerance: Godly Nationalism in Indonesia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, no. 3 (2014); Saiful Mujani, "Religion And Voting Behavior: Evidence from the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial Election," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 58, no. 2 (2020).

<sup>57</sup> IPAC, *Anti-Ahok to Anti-Jokowi: Islamist Influence on Indonesia's 2019 Election Campaign*, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (Jakarta, 2019).





and NGOs that promote progressive Islam.<sup>58</sup> Such issues have been particularly problematic during elections; those institutions that promote inclusivism are commonly accused of supporting the Joko Widodo – Amin Ma'ruf government, and thus of supporting an allegedly anti-Islamic regime.<sup>59</sup>

These continuities and discontinuities have posed serious hurdles to progressive Islam during the liberal democracy era, during which information has become easier to access. As such, proponents of progressive Islam must seek to minimize these discontinuities. Social media must not be ignored, as many Indonesians consult it when seeking religious insights.<sup>60</sup>

### Conservative Responses to Democracy, Tolerance, and Pluralism

Conservative Muslims in Indonesia have responded strongly to the topics of democracy, tolerance, and pluralism. Many have viewed democracy negatively, rejecting it as a man-made system incongruent with the teachings of Islam.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, however, they live and spread their teachings in a society that has adopted democracy as its political system. As such, they exist within a state of political ambiguity.<sup>62</sup> Such ambiguity distinguishes conservative Muslims from progressive ones.

Take, for example, the aforementioned Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) which views democracy as violating the teachings of Islam.<sup>63</sup> Indonesia, the organization holds, must employ a system that reflects (its specific understanding of) Islam; anything that does not must be rejected.<sup>64</sup> Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia and the Islamic Defenders' Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI) likewise desire the establishment of a state-based on Islamic law, one that adheres to and reflects sharia law.<sup>65</sup> Such sort of system would replace Pancasila and its democratic implications. For these conservatives, democracy is a western political system that has been forced upon the Muslim world, much to its detriment.<sup>66</sup>

The intolerance advocated by conservative groups has been reinforced by the ongoing public discourse on religious pluralism. When the Council of Indonesian Ulama (Majlis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) issued a *fatwa* declaring religious pluralism *haram* in 2003–2004, it framed heterogeneity (pluralism) as a challenge to the faithful and a threat to their beliefs.<sup>67</sup> Pluralism became a problem to be solved, and its practitioners implied to be religious deviants. Consequently, many conservative Muslims

<sup>58</sup> Marcus Mietzner, "Populist Anti-Scientism, Religious Polarisation, and Institutionalised Corruption: How Indonesia's Democratic Decline Shaped Its COVID-19 Response," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 39, no. 2 (2020).

<sup>59</sup> Merlyna Lim, "Freedom to Hate: Social Media, Algorithmic Enclaves, and the Rise of Tribal Nationalism in Indonesia," *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017).

<sup>60</sup> Kikue Hamayotsu, "Moderate-Radical Coalition in the Name of Islam: Conservative Islamism in Indonesia and Malaysia," *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, no. 23 (2019); Wahyudi Akmaliah, "The Demise of Moderate Islam: New Media, Contestation, and Reclaiming Religious Authorities," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 10, no. 1 (2020).

<sup>61</sup> Eve Warburton and Edward Aspinall, "Explaining Indonesia's Democratic Regression: Structure, Agency and Popular Opinion," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (2019).

<sup>62</sup> Luthfi Assyaukanie, "Religion as a Political Tool: Secular and Islamist Roles in Indonesian Elections," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 13, no. 2 (2019).

<sup>63</sup> Khusnul Khotimah, "Hizbut Tahrir Sebagai Gerakan Sosial (Melihat Konsep HT Mengenai Negara)," *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 15, no. 1 (April 22, 2014): 59–88.

<sup>64</sup> Hasbi Aswar, "Destructing the Islamist in Indonesia: Joko Widodo Policy and Its Controversy," *International Journal of Malay-Nusantara Studies* 1, no. 1 (2018).

<sup>65</sup> Robert W. Hefner, "Which Islam? Whose Shariah? Islamisation and Citizen Recognition in Contemporary Indonesia," *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 4, no. 3 (2018).

<sup>66</sup> Jeremy Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism*, 2016.

<sup>67</sup> Syafiq Hasyim, "Majelis Ulama Indonesia and Pluralism in Indonesia," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (2015).







mobilized themselves to defend the Islamic creed.<sup>68</sup>

As noted by Jeremy Menchik, Indonesia has become a country that claims democracy but fails to provide adequate space for minorities to conduct their religious activities freely.<sup>69</sup> This can be seen, for example, in religious minorities' difficulty establishing new houses of worship (i.e. churches, temples), which have only been exacerbated by the rising tide of intolerance and conservative Islam in Indonesia.<sup>70</sup> Minorities often face discrimination when trying to establish a house of worship, and many times their efforts are fruitless.<sup>71</sup> Religious majorities' ongoing discrimination against minorities, as shown by the above example, has been detrimental to Indonesian democracy. It has swung the pendulum towards tyranny and authoritarianism,<sup>72</sup> thereby abrogating the religious freedoms promised by the Constitution.

Intolerance has become a major part of the discourses involving religious conservatives in Indonesia, and acts of intolerance have become increasingly prevalent since 2014 (as seen, for example, in areas that supported Joko Widodo and Ma'ruf Amin). Such intolerance has undermined Indonesian democracy, resulting in stagnation.<sup>73</sup> Acts of intolerance have primarily targeted people with different religious views. At the same time, sermons and aid programs have identified themselves as rectifying social

inequalities.<sup>74</sup> Intolerance has thus marked the tensions between conservatives and progressives.

The seeds of intolerance are rooted in distrust of other religions and their practitioners. Religious minorities—particularly Christians—are blamed for the economic inequalities and injustices experienced by Muslims<sup>75</sup>. The economic crisis experienced by Indonesia between 1997 and 1998, which ultimately resulted in the resignation of President Suharto, ultimately led to violence against the country's Christians and ethnic Chinese population<sup>76</sup>. Non-mainstream Muslims—predominantly Indonesia's Ahmadi and Shia minority—have likewise experienced violence and other acts of intolerance at the hands of religious conservatives.<sup>77</sup>

These acts of intolerance are commonly associated with pluralism, which is argued by religious conservatives to pose a clear and present danger to Indonesia's Muslims. Conservatives understand pluralism as a deviant belief, one that poses a significant threat to public piety because it undermines Muslims' faith<sup>78</sup>. In a plural democracy such as Indonesia, the problems of intolerance and extremism must be resolved. However, rather than rely on democratic means, the country has shifted toward authoritarianism, and this has only aggravated existing social inequalities.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Syafiq Hasyim, "The Council of Indonesian Ulama (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) and Religious Freedom," *Irasc's Discussion Papers*, no. 12 (2011): 1–26.

<sup>69</sup> Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism*.

<sup>70</sup> Menchik, "Productive Intolerance: Godly Nationalism in Indonesia." 42–43.

<sup>71</sup> Ahmad Najib Burhani, "'It's a Jihad': Justifying Violence towards the Ahmadiyya in Indonesia," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia*, no. 9 (2020).

<sup>72</sup> Warburton and Aspinall, "Explaining Indonesia's Democratic Regression: Structure, Agency and Popular Opinion." 261–262

<sup>73</sup> Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, "Southeast Asia's Troubling Elections: Nondemocratic Pluralism in Indonesia," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 4 (2019): 104–118.

<sup>74</sup> Marcus Mietzner, "Fighting Illiberalism with Illiberalism: Islamist Populism and Democratic Deconsolidation in Indonesia," *Pacific Affairs* 91, no. 2 (2018).

<sup>75</sup> Robert W Hefner, *Journal of Law and Religion* 33, no. 1 (2018): 117–121

<sup>76</sup> K Telle, "Vigilante Citizenship: Sovereign Practices and the Politics of Insult in Indonesia," ... *Taal-, Land-En Volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities* ... (brill.com, 2013).

<sup>77</sup> Burhani, "'It's a Jihad': Justifying Violence towards the Ahmadiyya in Indonesia." 101–105

<sup>78</sup> Ahmad Najib Burhani, "Pluralism, Liberalism, and Islamism: Religious Outlook of Muhammadiyah," *Studia Islamika* 25, no. 3 (2018): 433–470.

<sup>79</sup> E. Aspinall, "Democratization and Ethnic Politics in Indonesia: Nine Theses," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 11, no. 2 (2011): 289–319; Edward Aspinall et al., "Elites, Masses, and Democratic Decline in Indonesia," *Democratization* 27, no. 4 (2020): 505–526; Aspinall and Mietzner, "Southeast





There almost seems to be a desire to cultivate intolerance in Indonesia, creating an illiberal democracy that is nonetheless civilized and reflects the desires of the people.<sup>80</sup> Indonesian democracy emerged and developed within a communitarian society, one marked by ethnic and religious sectarianism, and thus it differs significantly in comparison to the ideal models of democracy employed in Europe.<sup>81</sup> Religious conservatives in this context are likely to reject a pluralistic form of democracy which attitude becomes the most significant challenge facing Indonesian democracy today.

### Progressive Responses to Democracy, Tolerance, and Pluralism

Progressive Islam's greatest strength lies in its ability to promote democracy, tolerance, and pluralism in Indonesia, as well as address the humanitarian issues that continue to plague Indonesia.<sup>82</sup> In principle, progressive and moderate Islam sees democracy as inexorably intertwined with the political project of nation-building.<sup>83</sup> It hopes that democracy can promote egalitarianism and social justice, both necessary to create a society that is free of discrimination.<sup>84</sup> Recognizing democracy and positioning it as fundamental for Indonesian politics, moderate Muslims seek to use legal and institutional

means (including both religious and non-religious political parties) to realize their aspirations. Formal channels, thus, are important for their political expression.<sup>85</sup>

Progressives have drawn the support of Indonesia's largest Muslim organizations, i.e. Muhammadiyah and NU.<sup>86</sup> Through the universities and *pesantren* that they operate, both organizations have strived to promote progressive understandings of Islam.<sup>87</sup> Unlike conservative Muslims, neither organization has called for the implementation of formal sharia law or the establishment of an Islamic state. Muhammadiyah and NU agree that Pancasila is the ideology that best reflects the particular characteristics and needs of the Indonesian people.

Muhammadiyah and NU as moderate organizations have sought to counter the ongoing efforts to promote the formal implementation of sharia law in Indonesia, which have been supported by conservative Muslims and local political elites throughout Indonesia.<sup>88</sup> These organizations understand the shariatization of Indonesia as a political project designed to obtain the support of the Muslim electorate, rather than as a means of realizing the humanitarian

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Asia's Troubling Elections: Nondemocratic Pluralism in Indonesia." 24-30

<sup>80</sup> Mitsuo Nakamura, "Anthropology of Civilization: Personal Reflection on Anthropological Approach in the Study of Muslim Societies in Southeast Asia (Antropologi Peradaban: Renungan Pribadi Atas Pendekatan Antropologis Dalam Studi Tentang Masyarakat Islam Di Asia Tenggara)," *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 13, no. 1 (January 22, 2012): 123-138; Bouchier, "Two Decades of Ideological Contestation in Indonesia: From Democratic Cosmopolitanism to Religious Nationalism.," 23-24.

<sup>81</sup> Mietzner, "Fighting Illiberalism with Illiberalism: Islamist Populism and Democratic Deconsolidation in Indonesia." 263-264.

<sup>82</sup> Najib Burhani Ahmad, *Between Social Services and Tolerance: Explaining Religious Dynamics in Muhammadiyah, Between Social Services and Tolerance*, 2019.

<sup>83</sup> Haedar Nashir et al., "Muhammadiyah's Moderation Stance in the 2019 General Election: Critical Views from Within," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 57,

no. 1 (2019).23-38 ; Qodir et al., "Muhammadiyah Identity and Muslim Public Good: Muslim Practices in Java."

<sup>84</sup> Greg Barton, Ihsan Yilmaz, and Nicholas Morieson, "Authoritarianism, Democracy, Islamic Movements and Contestations of Islamic Religious Ideas in Indonesia," *Religions*, no. 12 (2021).

<sup>85</sup> Robert W. Hefner, *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Robert W. Hefner, *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Indonesia* (New York : Routledge, 2018.: Routledge, 2018). 117-121

<sup>86</sup> Abdullah, "Islam as a Cultural Capital in Indonesia and the Malay World: A Convergence of Islamic Studies, Social Sciences and Humanities."

<sup>87</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen, "Indonesian Muslims and Their Place in the Larger World of Islam," *Indonesia Rising: The Repositioning of Asia's Third Giant* (2012).

<sup>88</sup> Aulia Nastiti and Sari Ratri, "Emotive Politics: Islamic Organizations and Religious Mobilization in Indonesia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 40, no. 2 (2018).





substance and teachings of Islam.<sup>89</sup> Muhammadiyah and NU, thus, are distinct from those conservative groups that promote the formal implementation of sharia in Indonesia.

Progressive Muslims have thus responded positively to democracy, viewing it positively as both the best possible political system and congruent with the teachings of Islam. Likewise, they recognized that Indonesia's founding fathers had agreed to embrace Pancasila as the national ideology.<sup>90</sup> Being the country's largest Muslim organizations, Muhammadiyah and NU have contributed significantly to the democratization of the world's largest Muslim-majority country. Together, they have provided Indonesia with one of the healthiest democracies in the Muslim world, stronger than that in Egypt, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Morocco, Algeria, and Malaysia.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Indonesia continues to be plagued by corruption, weak law enforcement, socio-economic injustice, discrimination, and human rights violations by conservative vigilantes. At the same time, national and local elections in the country continue to be undermined by sectarian money politics.<sup>92</sup>

It was hoped that the 2014 and 2019 elections would produce visionary leaders capable of eradicating corruption, sectarianism, and political discrimination.<sup>93</sup> There were also hopes that, with intellectuals from Muhammadiyah

and NU promoting moderate Islam, Indonesia would be able to stave off authoritarianism and discrimination.<sup>94</sup> Ultimately, however, the democratic values espoused by these intellectuals were curtailed by the realities of practical politics. Conservative Muslims, acting through opposition parties and Muslim elites active outside the power structure, continued to place pressure on progressives.<sup>95</sup> Whether moderate Islam will be able to rise to the occasion remains to be seen. If progress Muslims prove capable of contesting Indonesia's political and public spaces, then tolerance and inclusiveness may yet find a place in the country.

Progressive Muslims have embraced the principle of tolerance, believing that all citizens should be free to express their religious and political views without the threat of physical or verbal terror. Many progressive Muslims have sought to work collaboratively with others, creating mutual understanding and responding effectively to humanitarian problems.<sup>96</sup> The philanthropic activities of Muhammadiyah and NU provide clear evidence that progressive Muslims' humanitarianism and nationalism are not rooted in religious sentiments.<sup>97</sup> Moderates have embraced the principles of political tolerance and accommodation, seeking a substantial (rather than formalistic) understanding of political Islam.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Edward Aspinall, "The New Nationalism in Indonesia," *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016); Aspinall and Mietzner 2019a, *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, p. 295-317

<sup>90</sup> Leo Suryadinata, "Pancasila and the Challenge of Political Islam: Past and Present," *The Southeast Asian Review*, no. 14 (2019); Yudi Latif, "The Religiosity, Nationality, and Sociality of Pancasila: Toward Pancasila through Soekarno's Way," *Studia Islamika* 25, no. 2 (2018).

<sup>91</sup> E. Aspinall, "Oligarchic Populism: Prabowo Subianto's Challenge to Indonesian Democracy," *Indonesia* 2015, no. 99 (2015): 1-28; Minako Sakai and Amelia Fauzia, "Islamic Orientations in Contemporary Indonesia: Islamism on the Rise?," *Asian Ethnicity* (2013); Power, "Jokowi's Authoritarian Turn and Indonesia's Democratic Decline."

<sup>92</sup> Edward Aspinall and Ward Berenschot, *Democracy for Sale: Elections, Clientelism, and the State in Indonesia*, Cornell

*University Press*, 1st ed. (New York: Cornell University Press Ithaca and London, 2019).

<sup>93</sup> Aspinall et al., "Elites, Masses, and Democratic Decline in Indonesia"; Aspinall, "Oligarchic Populism: Prabowo Subianto's Challenge to Indonesian Democracy."

<sup>94</sup> Jeremy Menchik, "Muslims Moderate and Democratic Breakdown in Indonesia," *Asian Studies Review* 43, no. 3 (2019).

<sup>95</sup> Nashir et al., "Muhammadiyah's Moderation Stance in the 2019 General Election: Critical Views from Within."

<sup>96</sup> Hilman Latief, "Islamic Charities and Social Activism: Welfare, Dakwah and Politics in Indonesia" (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2012); Latief, "Philanthropy and 'Muslim Citizenship' in Post-Suharto Indonesia."

<sup>97</sup> N. B. Ahmad, *Between Social Services and Tolerance: Explaining Religious Dynamics in Muhammadiyah*.

<sup>98</sup> Pepinsky, Liddle, and Mujani, "Indonesian Democracy and the Transformation of Political Islam";





It is hoped that Muhammadiyah and NU, as Indonesia's largest Muslim organizations, will help cultivate a culture of democracy and tolerance in Indonesian politics. These organizations must propagate an understanding of citizenship that acknowledges pluralism, thereby challenging the hatred and intolerance spread by conservatives.<sup>99</sup> Muhammadiyah and NU must also continuously strive to create tolerance and pluralism within their institutions.<sup>100</sup> By doing so, they will be able to maintain their understanding of Indonesia as a mature nation founded upon the principle of Pancasila, rather than enter politics—as with conservative Muslims, whose intolerance, anti-pluralism, and campaign to formally implement sharia law in Indonesia has undermined Indonesian democracy.<sup>101</sup>

Muhammadiyah and NU's support for tolerance is sorely needed, as tolerance is not only foundational for progressive Islam but also necessary for social cohesion in religiously diverse Indonesia. Tolerance is a core teaching of Islam, one that has been continually promoted by the discourses of progressive Muslims.<sup>102</sup> Only by promoting the values of tolerance and pluralism can progressive Islam gain traction and successfully challenge the conservative discourses that exist in public spaces.<sup>103</sup> Muhammadiyah and NU must be able to bridge

civil society (i.e. civil Islam) with the State—which conservatives have branded non-Islamic. As noted previously, conservative Muslims have often politicized sharia law to advance their political ideals, while Muhammadiyah and NU have used sharia to advocate for marginal communities. Through the support of Muhammadiyah and NU, Saiful Mujani argues, tolerance for minorities has continued to play a part in Indonesian politics.<sup>104</sup>

Pluralism, likewise, has been continually articulated by progressive Muslims in Indonesia. It is the foundation for progressives' interactions with other religious communities—including Muslims with different religious beliefs.<sup>105</sup> Pluralism, as understood by progressive Muslims, is necessary for Indonesian politics to balance religion with its Pancasila ideology and provide a system suited to the nation's religious and ethnic diversity.<sup>106</sup> Had Indonesia not been founded upon the principles of Pancasila, it would be difficult—if not impossible—to achieve any political compromises. Fragmentation and conflict between the religious and ethnic communities have been commonplace. As such, Pancasila has played an important role in uniting the nation and creating a shared Indonesian identity.<sup>107</sup>

Muhammadiyah and NU seek to use religious and political pluralism to challenge the

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Michael Buehler, "Subnational Islamization through Secular Parties: Comparing Shari'a Politics in Two Indonesian Provinces," *Comparative Politics* 46, no. 1 (2013): 63–82; Saiful Mujani Thomas B. Pepinsky, R William Liddle, "Indonesian Democracy and the Transformation of Political Islam Thomas," *Journal of Chemical Information and Modeling* 53, no. 9 (2012): 1689–1699; Fossati, "The Resurgence of Ideology in Indonesia: Political Islam, Aliran and Political Behaviour."

<sup>99</sup> Marcus Mietzner and Burhanuddin Muhtadi, "Explaining the 2016 Islamist Mobilisation in Indonesia: Religious Intolerance, Militant Groups and the Politics of Accommodation," *Asian Studies Review* 42, no. 3 (2018).

<sup>100</sup> Menchik, "Muslims Moderate and Democratic Breakdown in Indonesia."

<sup>101</sup> Gustav Brown, "Civic Islam: Muhammadiyah, NU and the Organisational Logic of Consensus-Making in Indonesia," *Asian Studies Review* 43, no. 3 (2019): 397–414.

<sup>102</sup> Syafiq Hasyim, *State and Religion: Considering Indonesian Islam as Model of Democratisation for the Muslim*

*World, Colloquium on Models of Secularism* (Berlin, 2013); Mujiburrahman, "Intra- and Inter-Religious Dialogue in Contemporary Indonesia: A Participant's Point of View," *Paper presented at the Center for Asia-Pacific Studies, Nanzan University*, no. October 2011 (2011): 1–20.

<sup>103</sup> Hilmy, "Whither Indonesia's Islamic Moderatism? A Reexamination on the Moderate Vision of Muhammadiyah and NU."

<sup>104</sup> Saiful Mujani, "Explaining Religio-Political Tolerance among Muslims: Evidence from Indonesia," *Studia Islamika* 26, no. 2 (2019).

<sup>105</sup> Biyanto Biyanto, "Promoting and Practicing Religious Pluralism: Muhammadiyah Experience," *Journal of Social Studies (JSS)* 16, no. 2 (2020).

<sup>106</sup> Hasyim, *State and Religion: Considering Indonesian Islam as Model of Democratisation for the Muslim World*.

<sup>107</sup> Kevin William Fogg, "The Fate of Muslim Nationalism in Independent Indonesia" (Yale University, 2012).





conservative forces that seek the eradication of democracy and pluralism.<sup>108</sup> These organizations strongly support Pancasila as the ideology most capable of accommodating the religious diversity of Indonesia. They even hope that Pancasila can be used to protect the religious minorities who faced discrimination under Suharto and subsequent regimes. Suharto used Pancasila to mobilize the masses to support his political agendas rather than defend the interests of religious minorities.<sup>109</sup> He embroiled Indonesia in political violence and authoritarianism, and this limited the possibility of realizing the substance of Pancasila in the country.<sup>110</sup>

Through such articulation, progressive Muslims have challenged the discourses, thoughts, and practices of conservative Muslims. Through their Islamic thought and expression, Muhammadiyah and NU strive to shape mainstream thought in Indonesia, and thus—given the significant differences between Indonesian Islam and Middle Eastern Islam—global Islam. The question, then, is whether progressive Islam can continue to shape Indonesian Islam? The following sections, thus, will explore the challenges and opportunities.

### Challenges to Progressive Islam

Progressive Islam has faced significant challenges from the political elites who exploit religious sentiments for their own political

purposes. This is most clearly seen in Indonesia's local and national executive elections, during which conservatives and progressives vie for political influence.<sup>111</sup> Conservative religious views have been used to mobilize the faithful in favor of particular candidates.<sup>112</sup> The use of religion to mobilize voters was particularly blatant in Jakarta's 2017 gubernatorial election, during which Anies Baswedan and his running mate Sandiogo Uno challenged Basuki Tjahaja Purnama and his running mate Djarot Saiful Hidayat.<sup>113</sup> Similarly, a local election in West Kalimantan was marked by contestation between a Malay Muslim and Catholic Dayak<sup>114</sup>

Such polarization has had far-reaching implications.<sup>115</sup> For example, Muhammadiyah and NU—both known to represent mainstream Islam—have been opposed vehemently by the Salafist and Wahhabi movements.<sup>116</sup> Several of these movements have accelerated their use of universities and other institutions of higher learning to advance their conservative mission.<sup>117</sup> Social media has likewise become a major arena where Salafist and Wahhabi movements attempt to influence Indonesia's Muslim majority<sup>118</sup>

Conservative Islam, though not yet mainstream, has established strong networks amongst prayer groups, campuses, and political

<sup>108</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen, *What Happened to the Smiling Face of Indonesian Islam? Muslim Intellectualism and the Conservative Turn in Post-Suharto Indonesia* (Singapore, 2011).

<sup>109</sup> Mehmet A. Ugur and Pinar Ince, "Violence in the Name of Islam: The Case of 'Islamic Defenders Front' from Indonesia," *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations* 14, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>110</sup> Marc Edelman, "From 'Populist Moment' to Authoritarian Era: Challenges, Dangers, Possibilities," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 47, no. 7 (2020).

<sup>111</sup> Leonard C. Sebastian and Andar Nubowo, "The 'Conservative Turn' in Indonesian Islam: Implications for the 2019 Presidential Elections," *Asie.Visions*, no. 106 (n.d.).

<sup>112</sup> Mietzner and Muhtadi, "Explaining the 2016 Islamist Mobilisation in Indonesia: Religious Intolerance, Militant Groups and the Politics of Accommodation."

<sup>113</sup> IPAC, *After Ahok: The Islamist Agenda in Indonesia*, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (Jakarta, 2018).

<sup>114</sup> Ken Miichi and Yuka Kayane, "The Politics of Religious Pluralism in Indonesia: The Shi'a Response to the Sampang Incidents of 2011-12," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 8, no. 1 (2020): 51–64.

<sup>115</sup> Assyaukanie, "Religion as a Political Tool Secular and Islamist Roles in Indonesian Elections."

<sup>116</sup> Haedar Nashir and Mutohharun Jinan, "Re-Islamisation: The Conversion of Subculture from Abangan into Santri in Surakarta," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 8, no. 1 (2018).

<sup>117</sup> Arifianto, "Indonesia's Ideological Convergence: Emerging Trend in Islamic Regulations?"

<sup>118</sup> Hamayotsu, "The Limits of Civil Society in Democratic Indonesia: Media Freedom and Religious Intolerance."





parties.<sup>119</sup> As such, the influence of conservative Islam on public discourse in Indonesia cannot be denied. Indeed, the actors have penetrated the bureaucracy, military, governmental agencies, and government-owned corporations.<sup>120</sup> These conservatives have wielded their power to advance intolerance and exclusivism, as evidenced by the increasingly conservative approach to religious education.<sup>121</sup> Conservative Muslims have also taken advantage of political processes to intervene in elections through the Commission of General Elections (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, KPU).

This is a significant challenge for progressive Muslims' mission of promoting a moderate understanding of Islam in the Indonesian Archipelago.<sup>122</sup> Where conservatives have the power to control state institutions and influence elections, it may be certain that sectarian politics, intolerance, and exclusivism will continue to fester, undermining the tolerant traditions embodied by mainstream Muslim organizations such as Muhammadiyah and NU.

Outside of politics, conservatives have advanced their beliefs through popular preachers and their followers.<sup>123</sup> Conservatives have often mobilized the faithful through claims that President Joko Widodo is anti-Muslim, and that his government has persecuted the country's *ulamas* (particularly those involved in the

National Movement for Defending the Fatwas of the MUI [Gerakan Nasional Pembela Fatwa-MUI]). For example, Rizieq Shihab has often been used by Indonesia's political elites—particularly the political opponents of President Joko Widodo—to challenge the regime. Consequently, legal proceedings against Rizieq Shihab have been perceived as efforts to silence the president's political opponents. Indonesia, it has been feared, is experiencing a democratic decline and regressing to authoritarianism.<sup>124</sup>

Among the greatest challenges to progressive Islam is the fact that conservative Muslims involve themselves in a wide range of areas, including social, political, economic, cultural, and religious, that progressives tend to ignore.<sup>125</sup> Although progressive Muslims have significant support, they often fail to involve themselves in things that appear simple but have far-reaching implications. Meanwhile, conservatives involve themselves in all areas of society, and as such they are better able to influence the common people.<sup>126</sup> As conservatives and progressives vie for control of public spaces, Muslims find themselves torn between their particular ideologies.

Currently, moderate Islam continues to receive the support of the Government of Indonesia (i.e. through the Ministry of Religion; Ministry of Internal Affairs; and Ministry of

<sup>119</sup> Vedi R. Hadiz, "A New Islamic Populism and the Contradictions of Development," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 44, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 125–143.

<sup>120</sup> Achmad Zainal Arifin, "Defending Traditions, Countering Intolerant Ideologies Re-Energizing: The Role of Modin in Modern Java," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 55, no. 2 (2017).; Aspinall and Mietzner 2019b, *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 30, Number 4, October 2019, pp. 104–118

<sup>121</sup> IPAC, "Countering Violent Extremism in Indonesia: Need for a Rethink," no. 11 (2014): 25; Achmad Zainal Arifin, "Pesantren and De-Marginalisation of Local Culture A Case Study of Wiwit Tradition," *The SSEAR Journal* 1, no. 1 (2010): 132–153.

<sup>122</sup> Alexander R. Arifianto, "Islam with Progress: Muhammadiyah and Moderation in Islam," *RSIS Commentaries*, no. 213 (2017).

<sup>123</sup> Ugur and Ince, "Violence in the Name of Islam: The Case of 'Islamic Defenders Front' from Indonesia"; Anzar

Abdullah, Syamsu Kamaruddin, and Harifuddin Halim, "Networking Radical Islamic Group in Indonesia," *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change* 5, no. 2 (2019).

<sup>124</sup> Mietzner and Muhtadi, "Explaining the 2016 Islamist Mobilisation in Indonesia: Religious Intolerance, Militant Groups and the Politics of Accommodation." Vedi R. Hadiz, "Indonesia's Year of Democratic Setbacks: Towards a New Phase of Deepening Illiberalism?," *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 53, no. 3 (September 2, 2017): 261–278.

<sup>125</sup> Sumanto Al Qurtuby, "The Rise of Islamism and the Future of Indonesian Islam," *Journal of International Studies* 16 (2020).

<sup>126</sup> Hasan, "The Making of Public Islam: Piety, Agency, and Commodification on the Landscape of the Indonesian Public Sphere." *Cont Islam*, 3:229–250





Education, Research, and Technology).<sup>127</sup> If conservative forces ultimately emerge victorious, it may be surmised that Indonesian Islam will increasingly reflect the values espoused by Wahhabism and Salafism rather than the moderate/progressive views promoted by Muhammadiyah and NU.<sup>128</sup> Progressive Islam can only be maintained if progressives continuously promote a "middle-of-the-road" understanding of Islam. They must create solidarity and work towards realizing substantial change rather than simple image politics.<sup>129</sup>

Conservative Muslims tend to be more militant in promoting their ideology, while progressive Muslims generally limit their activities to humanitarian ones. Progressive Islam tends to be espoused by the country's elites.<sup>130</sup> Conservative Islam, meanwhile, spreads among the grassroots, and it relies heavily on religious symbols and easily understood platforms such as shariatization.<sup>131</sup> How, then, progressives can continue to spread their beliefs and contest the rotten narratives in Indonesia's public spaces?

## Conclusion

The contestation of Islam and being "Islamic" has played a significant role in Indonesian politics. The contest of discourses between conservative and progressive muslims that occurred post-New Order in 1998 is further intensified in the 2014 and 2019 General Elections of Indonesia. Two muslim largest organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, have faced off against non-mainstream conservative movements using their discursive apparatuses and institutions.

This article makes three important findings as follows; First, this study elaborates on the ways

Islamic discourses contribute to the rise of violence, discrimination, and uncivil politics. In contrast to previous studies that mentioned the stagnation of democracy in Indonesia and the peaking threat of religious authoritarianism, this article argues that future studies must consider the consequences of religious contestations to the homogenization of religion and the domination of extremism;

Second, religious organizations in Indonesia with their narratives on religious progressivism must countermeasure conservative forces from the grassroots and transnational movements who also carry discourses on the implementation of sharia law in the nation. Religion becomes a political tool and symbolic during the General Elections of 2014 and 2019 in Indonesia. Religious symbols attract and mobilize masses to gather political support for particular candidates. The strong influence of such symbols during political campaigns proves that the formalization of sharia among conservatives is successfully disseminated within the middle-class of religious communities;

Third, critical inquiries on the conservatives vis-à-vis progressives in the Indonesian context provide significant implications for future studies on Islamic theology and communal discernment in both theoretical and practical senses. As such, this article encourages practitioners, politicians, clerics, and intellectuals to recognize the necessity of re-challenging Islamic tradition and symbols in public spheres and political campaigns. Discursive apparatuses must acknowledge and participate in mobilizing masses from middle-class society and the youth in the digital media. The mobilization of a greater mass shall invite a good challenge to the "authentic" symbolism of Islam claimed by those conservative muslims.

<sup>127</sup> Ahmad Najib Burhani, "Pluralism, Liberalism and Islamism: Religious Outlook of Muhammadiyah," *Studia Islamika: Indonesian Journal for Islamic Studies* 25, no. 3 (2018).

<sup>128</sup> Ahmad Najib Burhani, "Al-Tawassut Wa-l I'tidāl: The NU and Moderatism in Indonesian Islam," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 40, no. 5-6 (2012): 564-581; Ahmad Najib Burhani, *Islam Nusantara as a Promising Response to Religious Intolerance and Radicalism* (ISEAS? Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018).

<sup>129</sup> Robert W. Hefner, "Which Islam? Whose Shariah? Islamisation and Citizen Recognition in Contemporary Indonesia," *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 4, no. 3 (September 2, 2018): 278-296., *Journal of Religious and Political Practice*, 4:3, 278-296

<sup>130</sup> Marcus Mietzner, "Indonesia's Democratic Stagnation: Anti-Reformist Elites and Resilient Civil Society," *Democratization* 19, no. 2 (2012): 209-229.

<sup>131</sup> Qodir et al., "Muhammadiyah Identity and Muslim Public Good: Muslim Practices in Java."





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All listed authors contributed to this manuscript. Qodir wrote the original draft and compiled the research. Bilveer Singh reviewed the manuscript, formed the theoretical framework, and gathered additional resources.

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This manuscript follows all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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