

RECLAIMING MODERATE ISLAM IN NAHDLATUL ULAMA

Challenging the Dominant Religious Authority in Digital Platform

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Abstract: This article examines Nahdlatul Ulama's attempts to face three challenges, its internal dynamic within the elite religious circle, the influence of its leadership at the grassroots level, and the rise of the new religious authorities who employ social media to enlarge their influence. Amidst the growth of internet users bridging the gap between rural and urban areas, this rise of new religious authority has steeply eroded NU's domination, which bases Islamic traditionalism in rural areas. This article contends that NU cannot be viewed as a singular face of religious orientation. However, in the level of ideology, NU's *aswaja (abl as-sunnah wa al-jamā'ah)* brings its followers into a moderate view. This religious orientation has been contested respectively amidst organizational structure and different geographical landscapes of NU's people. Meanwhile, the dominance of Islamic conservative groups in the digital platform appears to be quite strong. Because of these challenges, NU struggles to reclaim its religious authority at the level of the youngest circles.

Keywords: Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), digital platform, religious authority, moderate Islam.

Introduction

NU has dominated moderate Islamic narratives in the Indonesian society as the oldest Islamic group with Muhammadiyah. NU portrays the face of Indonesian Muslim tolerance among other religious organizations, notably for that Islamic resurgence, by fusing local tradition and Islamic principles. NU's strong religious stance has been backed up by a sizable population. The number of Indonesian Muslims

connected with NU is estimated to be 79,04 million, out of a total population of 231 million Indonesian Muslims.¹ Meanwhile, NU has 28.958 kindergartens, 59.650 *Majelis Taklim* (Islamic teaching activities), 99 universities, 23.000 Islamic boarding schools, and 30 hospitals in terms of human resources and educational facilities.² Because of these vast influences, NU has become omnipresent in every Indonesian Muslim society study. Indeed, after September 11, there was a massive critique of American Muslim society, which was deemed to fail to adjust to the secularization life. On the other hand, American Muslims and their practices were perceived not to be compatible with American liberal democracy. To respond to the critique, Hefner proposed Muhammadiyah and NU as role models of Islamic organizations to prove this compatible relationship between Islam and liberal democratic principles. Specifically, Hefner proposed the thesis of *Civil Islam*.³ This term was from his observation and interview dealing with Indonesian Muslim scholars such as Abdurrahman Wahid, Jalaluddin Rahmat, Nurcholish Majid, Syafi'i Maarif, and Amien Rais.

Nonetheless, NU's function as the guardian of moderate Islam is criticized by many scholars. Mencik, for instance, criticizes the NU's elite circle response dealing with religious minorities such as the group of Ahmadiyya, Shia, and the LGBT community. For Mencik, many of the NU's members are resisting these minorities group. In contrast, dealing with the different religious expressions, living together in harmony with them, and grasping the diversity of ethnicities and cultures are generally a warm welcome for NU people. Within the liberal democracy perspective, this religious orientation has faced ambiguity while they have selected to intervene in the option for whom are allowed and not. If they choose tolerance values, they should accept the different cultural expressions. Because of this

¹ Hasanuddin Ali, "Menakar Jumlah Jamaah NU Dan Muhammadiyah," [hasanuddinali.com](https://hasanuddinali.com/2017/01/19/menakar-jumlah-jamaah-nu-dan-muhammadiyah/), 2017, <https://hasanuddinali.com/2017/01/19/menakar-jumlah-jamaah-nu-dan-muhammadiyah/>. World Population Review, "Muslim Population by Country 2021," [worldpopulationreview.com](https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/muslim-population-by-country), 2021, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/muslim-population-by-country>.

² NU Online, "Inilah Puluhan Ribu Amal Usaha Muslimat NU." NU Online, 2019, <http://www.nu.or.id/post/read/52377/inilah-puluhan-ribu-amal-usaha-muslimat-nu>.

³ Robert W. Hefner. *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000; Robert W. Hefner. "Whatever Happened to Civil Islam? Islam and Democratization in Indonesia, 20 Years On." *Asian Studies Review* 43, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): pp. 375–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2019.1625865>.

ambiguity, Menchik reconstructs the NU's image as "tolerance without liberation".⁴ Meanwhile, specific to Shiite people, Arifianto examines the case of Sampang, Madura, and East Java generally as the prove that NU has intolerance face. It is shown by NU's religious elite in Madura who have attacked Tajul Muluk and his followers in Sampang, Madura.⁵ This attack caused them to be the internally Displaced Person (IDP) for nine years (2012-2021) in the local government's Public Housing in Jemundo, Sidoarjo, East Java. In addition, by resulting the survey, both Mietzner and Muhtadi found exciting points between the NU leadership and their followers at the grassroots level who are experiencing the "mismatch perception." Even though NU leadership nationally advocates pluralism and religious minorities issues, most of their followers are intolerant of other religious minorities in the grassroots.⁶ Furthermore, the backdrop of Islamic series mobilization from the period of 2016-to 2017 to insist Basuki Thahaja Purnama (Ahok) as the Jakarta Governor is another reason to criticize this guardian of moderation Islam. NU and Muhammadiyah are perceived to be not significant institutions to stem this movement even though these two leaders were appealing to their followers not to attend, as explained by Burhani and Arifianto.⁷

This Islamic mobilization becomes a key reason among scholars to evaluate these moderate groups internally and examine other Islamic

⁴ Jeremy Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Jeremy Menchik, "Moderate Muslims and Democratic Breakdown in Indonesia," *Asian Studies Review* 43, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): pp. 415–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2019.1627286>.

⁵ Alexander R. Arifianto. "Practicing What It Preaches? Understanding the Contradictions between Pluralist Theology and Religious Intolerance within Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama." *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 55, no. 2 (December 15, 2017): pp. 241–64, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2017.552.241-264>.

⁶ Marcus Mietzner and Burhanuddin Muhtadi. "The Myth of Pluralism: Nahdlatul Ulama and the Politics of Religious Tolerance in Indonesia." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 42, no. 1 (2020): pp. 58–84, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs42-1c>.

⁷ Ahmad Najib Burhani, "Plural Islam and Contestation of Religious Authority in Indonesia," in *Islam in Southeast Asia: Negotiating Modernity*, ed. Norshahril Saat (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak, 2018); Alexander Arifianto, "Quo Vadis Civil Islam? Explaining Rising Islamism in Post-Reformasi Indonesia," *Kyoto Review*, 2019, <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-24/rising-islamism-in-post-reformasi-indonesia/>; Wahyudi Akmaliah, "The Demise of Moderate Islam: New Media, Contestation, and Reclaiming Religious Authorities," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 10, no. 1 (May 29, 2020): pp. 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v10i1.1-24>.

groups significantly as the new religious authorities in reshaping Public Islam.⁸ Regarding the rise of other religious leaders, such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), Laskar Jihad, Front Pembela Islam/Islamic defender front (FPI/Islamic defender front), Salafi communities, and the new face of MUI, their dominant narratives as representing of the true Islam are a significant factor. Furthermore, the intense distrust of the Islamic political parties and both Muhammadiyah and NU's interaction with the Indonesian governments have caused the Indonesian Muslims to listen to their voices as the Islamic preference.⁹ Amidst this situation, the combination of the growth of Indonesian internet users every year and the significant function of social media among the new religious authorities is an unavoidable factor to consider in this change of the religious authority's landscape.¹⁰

⁸ 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 (May 10, 2020): pp. 37–50, <https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2019.10>; Noorhaidi Hasan, "The Making of Public Islam: Piety, Agency, and Commodification on the Landscape of the Indonesian Public Sphere," *Contemporary Islam* 3, no. 3 (October 24, 2009): pp. 229–50, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-009-0096-9>; Noorhaidi Hasan, "New Media, Post Islamist Piety, and Cyber Islam: Islamic Knowledge Production in Indonesian Muslim Society," in *Commerce, Knowledge, and Faith: Islamisation of Modern Indonesian and Han-Speaking Muslim Ummahs*, ed. Nabil Chan-Kuan Lin (Tainan: Center for Multicultural Studies. College of Liberal Arts, National Cheng Kung University, 2020), pp. 1–16; Burhani, "Plural Islam and Contestation of Religious Authority in Indonesia."

⁹ Vedi R Hadiz, *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Vedi R. Hadiz, "Imagine All the People? Mobilising Islamic Populism for Right-Wing Politics in Indonesia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48, no. 4 (August 8, 2018): 566–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2018.1433225>.

¹⁰ Akmaliah, "The Demise of Moderate Islam: New Media, Contestation, and Reclaiming Religious Authorities"; Wahyudi Akmaliah, "The Rise of Cool Ustadz: Islamic Preacher, Subculture, and the Pemuda Hijrah Movement," in *The New Santri: Challenges to Traditional Religious Authority in Indonesia*, ed. Norshahril bin Saat and Ahmad Najib Burhani (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak, 2020), 239–57; Martin Slama, "Social Media and Islamic Practice: Indonesian Ways of Being Digitally Pious," in *Digital Indonesia: Connectivity and Divergence*, ed. Edwin Jurriens and Ross Tapsell (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak, 2017), 146–62; 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, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2017.1416758>; Annisa R Beta, "Commerce, Piety and Politics: Indonesian Young Muslim Women's Groups as Religious Influencers," *New Media & Society* 21, no. 10 (October 10, 2019): 2140–59,

Unlike the previous scholars, this article would like to understand the NU's obstacles in maximizing their role as the guardian of moderate Islam in the post of the authoritarian regime. Specifically, it examines the two fundamental points. Firstly, it is their internal dynamic within the elite religious circle that influences their followers at the grassroots. Secondly, it is the rise of the new religious authorities employing social media to enlarge their influence, causing them to erode NU's religious authority in the public sphere. Regarding this sense, this article proposes three questions; What are the roots of NU's elite circle problem that affect their followers at the grassroots and inflict them to contest from within in representing the NU image in public? Why could these new religious authorities dominate the digital platform, attracting Indonesian Muslim youths to place them as the alternative reference of Islamic teaching? How does NU reclaim its religious authority to represent true Islam? This article argues that NU has not been defined as the single face of *aswaja* (*abl al-sunnah wa al-jamā'ah*), bringing them into a moderate view. Even though they agreed on the ideology of *aswaja*, in the level of organizational structure from *jamā'ah* into *jam'iyah* is still in the making process. Amidst this condition, most of the NU's infrastructures belong to their religious elite circles, causing them to be the precariat people. Consequently, this religious orientation has been contesting respectively amidst the different landscapes of NU's people geographically, which is influenced by the relationship of NU's local religious leader's alliance at the grassroots and the face of local problems they face. Meanwhile, the religious right's dominancy in the digital platform through the rise of the new religious authority is due to the use of the vacuum power of structure after the Suharto presidency stepped down and to maximize their ability as technology savvy.

To strengthen the analysis, this article employs Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. The sociology of knowledge emphasizes the social basis of thought by examining the two essential structures of their relationship: notions and social-historical conditions, both of which have a strong influence on human thought development. In a

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819838774>; Hamdani Hamdani, "New Religious Preacher in the Changing Religious Authority: The Offline and Online Preacher of Ustadz Abdul Somad," in *The New Santri: Challenges to Traditional Religious Authority in Indonesia*, ed. Norshahril Bin saat and Ahmad Najib Burhani (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak, 2020), 258–77.

detailed explanation, ideas and how people obtain their thinking do not come from their knowledge in the isolated structure of society. In contrast, it stems from the social and historical context in which they live. There is a social group they live in that intervenes in their social life with various influences and decrees of power within society. As a result of this social group factor, individuals and society have been imprinted with perspective and orientation. These conditions shape the knowledge mechanism when deciding what to argue and stand for.¹¹ By applying this approach, this article seeks to understand NU, specifically at the level of the youngest circles. In this circle, they struggle to reclaim their religious authority by making three aspects; employing Islamic websites to influence their power, proposing an alternative interpretation of *hijrah* as religious discourse, and the rise of NU's preachers in the digital platform.

NU's Religious Elite Circle and Contestation from Within

Most scholars criticize the NU's position due to their less influence in guarding moderate Islam to stem the conservative Islamic group on their religious orientation in the post of the authoritarian regime. Nonetheless, their critics seem to examine NU as the single face representing moderate Islam. There is religious contestation among NU's elite circles in responding to many issues. For instance, many of NU's senior religious leaders criticized the JIL (Liberal Islamic Network), initiated by the young intellectual NU such as Ahmad Muqsid Ghazali, Ulil Abshar Abdalla, and Ahmad Sahal.¹² Furthermore, even though they have a similar religious ideology as *aswaja*, many Islamic traditionalism groups in the out of java criticize the idea of *Islam Nusantara*, which has been popularized by the official staff of NU formally.¹³ This criticism shows that NU has diverse religious

¹¹ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

¹² E. Katharine McGregor and Greg Fealy, "Nahdlatul Ulama and the Killings of 1965-66: Religion, Politics, and Remembrance," *Indonesia* 89, no. 89 (2010): pp. 37-60, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20798214>; Muhamad Ali, "The Internet, Cyber-Religion, and Authority: The Case of the Indonesian Liberal Islam Network," in *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia*, ed. Andrew N Weintraub (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), pp. 101-22.

¹³ Ridwan Benny et al., "Islam Nusantara, Ulemas, and Social Media: Understanding the Pros and Cons of Islam Nusantara among Ulemas of West Sumatera," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 9, no. 2 (December 25, 2019): pp. 163-88,

orientations in responding to some issues. Therefore, to understand the diversity of NU's religious orientation, I discuss three points by giving examples to emphasize the explanation; the development of *aswaja* ideology, the organizational structure of NU, and the economic support to this organization and its members.

K.H Hasyim Asyari, the founding father of NU, had constructed the ideology of *aswaja*. In this sense, the *aswaja* doctrine has been implemented within the three aspects of religious practices. Firstly, Islamic theology (*ʿaqīdah*), by following the school of thought from Abu Hasan al-Asy'ari on Islamic traditionalism and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi made a combination of Islamic rationality and interpretation of Islamic text sources. Secondly, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is followed by the four of Islamic thought (Ḥanafī, Mālikī, Shāfiʿī, and Ḥabālī). Even though NU has recognized these four madhabs as a part of their Islamic practices, most of the Shāfiʿī thought is predominantly used by the NU's religious elite circles and their members. These four madhabs use four Islamic sources regarding religious practices, mainly the Qurʾān, Sunnah (Ḥadīth), *ijmāʿ* (consensus), and *qiyās* (analogy). Specifically, to answer social and political problems and contextualize Islamic sources within Indonesian Muslim society, some of NU's clerics proposed the social of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh* emphasizing social solution). It became the objective of Islamic law (*sharīʿah*), known as *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*, as the third aspect. Precisely, it consists of *al-darūrīyat al-khams*—protecting the basic needs of every person, such as protection of life, religion, reason, progeny, and property. These objectives of Islamic law become a part of the primary reference to NU, bringing them to combine genuinely between tradition and modernity (Islamic renewal).¹⁴

Nevertheless, NU is not the only Islamic organization that claims *aswaja* as a part of their religious orientation. Most Indonesian Islamic organizations announce that they also have this religious orientation, such as Salafi, MMI (Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia), and

<https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v9i2.163-188>; Ahmad Najib Burhani, *Islam Nusantara as a Promising Response to Religious Intolerance and Radicalism*, Trends in (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak, 2018).

¹⁴ Budi Harianto and Nurul Syalafiyah, “Aswaja an-Nahdliyah sebagai Representatif Teologi Islam Nusantara Perspektif Kiai Said Aqil Siroj,” *Kontemplasi: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 7, no. 2 (2019): pp. 262–65, <https://doi.org/10.21274/kontem.2019-7.2.252-281>.

FPI (Islamic Defender Front). Specifically, to FPI, Rizieq Shihab, the FPI's religious leader, often claimed to the Indonesian public that his organization was based on *aswaja* as their religious orientation. Shihab and his members often practiced violence in Islam on verbal and physical levels. For instance, they were sweeping some of the Indonesian discotic bars, attacking the religious minorities of Ahmadis and Shiite people in some of the Indonesian provinces, and delivering hate speeches to attack other Islamic figures that they assume bring liberalism and communist thought. To some extent, Rizieq Shihab often insulted the Islamic figures from NU, such as Gusdur and Said Aqil Siraj. In addition, in the name of *aswaja*, the Salafi-Wahhabism organization explains other Indonesian Muslims who do not have a similar religious orientation as the unbeliever, while this stereotype is often delivered within their Islamic teaching.¹⁵

In order to distinguish FPI from Salafi and underline their religious orientation, NU's religious leader in the East Java branch released a book guideline for its followers in 2007. This updated guideline included the term *Aswaja* with the *An-Nabdliyah* refereeing for the NU members.¹⁶ Within the *Aswaja An-Nabdliyah*, there are four characteristics as the NU's values in their religious practices. Firstly, it is *tawassuṭ* (moderate), which takes the position in the middle without supporting the left or the right groups. Secondly, it is *tawāzun* which is the act of balancing their everyday life, specifically in using both rational reference and Islamic references from the Qurʾān and Hadith. Thirdly, it is *al-iʿtidāl* which has the just principle by supporting the truth for Muslim society. Lastly, it establishes *tasāmuh*, accepting the tolerance values among other religious persons and diverse social and cultural backgrounds of society.¹⁷ These characteristics of NU's *aswaja* eased their elite religious circle to accept the Pancasila as the sole ideology for all Indonesian Muslim society during the Suharto

¹⁵ Tim PWNU Jawa. *Aswaja An-Nabdliyah: Ajaran Ablussunnah Wa Al-Jamaah Yang Berlaku Di Lingkungan Nahdatul Ulama*. Surabaya: Lajnah Taʿlif Wan Nasyr (LTN) NU Jawa Timur, 2007

¹⁶ Tim PWNU Jawa. *Aswaja An-Nabdliyah: Ajaran Ablussunnah Wa Al-Jamaah Yang Berlaku Di Lingkungan Nahdatul Ulama*. Surabaya: Lajnah Taʿlif Wan Nasyr (LTN) NU Jawa Timur, 2007

¹⁷ Ahmad Najib Burhani, "Al-Tawassuṭ Wa-l Iʿtidāl: The NU and Moderatism in Indonesian Islam," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 40, no. 5–6 (2012): pp. 570–71, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685314-12341262>.

presidency. Previously, within Indonesian history, NU, which Hasyim Asy'ari represented, announced for Jihad resolution (*resolusi Jihad*) to fight against the Dutch colonization to defend their homeland from the enemy by coordinating with other local religious leaders in East Java in 1945.¹⁸

In terms of organizational structure, NU resembled other Islamic organizations, which have body institutions and branches in each Indonesian province at the national and local levels. Nonetheless, they had a more fluid coordination level than Islamic modernist organizations like Muhammadiyah and Persis. Their organization's spirit, in particular, could be mobilized via solidarity and cultural networks. As a result of this, the establishment of NU attempted to unite all Islamic clerics who shared similar religious beliefs into a single organization. Most of these Islamic clerics were prominent figures in their places, while mostly they had *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) with huge members and economic activity to sustain their lives. This condition was then processed to create NU from *jama'ah* into *jam'iyah* as the form of organization that had the coordination structure that could support one voice, easing them to mobilize themselves to gain their interests.¹⁹ Nevertheless, even though NU could be *jam'iyah* in the structure of their organization, the form of *jama'ah* to gain their interests still exists now. The geographical location is the dominant factor in understanding why *jama'ah* structure has been embedded among the NU's people, causing them to respond to different opinions from one place to another. Alexandre Paquin-Pelletier examines that this geographical location determines the political alliance and economic status among NU's people, encouraging them to have different opinions.²⁰ For instance, in responding to the two religious minorities issues, the local NU's religious authorities had different responses dealing with Shiite people in Madura, East Java, and Ahmadi in West Java. Most of the NU's clerics in Madura fought against Tajul Muluk with the Shiite people who led the local Muslims

¹⁸ Kevin W. Fogg, *Indonesia's Islamic Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

¹⁹ Ikhwan Ikhwan and Abdullah Alawi, "NU Harus Bertindak Sebagai Jam'iyah, Bukan Jamaah," NU Online, 2015, <https://www.nu.or.id/post/read/64247/nu-harus-bertindak-sebagai-jam039iyah-bukan-jamaah>.

²⁰ Alexandre Paquin-Pelletier, Alexandre. "Radical Leaders: Status, Competition, and Violent Islamic Mobilization in Indonesia." University of Toronto, 2019.

in Sampang. The primary cause of why the cleric in Madura attacked Tajul Muluk and his members was not strongly related to his belief in Shia, but Tajul became the reformer to change the ritual practice of *tahlilan* and celebrate the birth of Muhammad's prophet. Specifically, Tajul had changed the method of organizing tradition from making personal in every local Muslims' house into collective action by practicing in the mosque at one time.²¹ This collective method disturbed the local cleric's income that they would earn by coming into every local Muslims' house to practice the ritual events. In contrast, most of NU's youngest generation became the human rights defender in advocating for Ahmadi's community rights from local Islamic conservative groups. These youngest generations between NU and JAI (Jamaah Ahmadiyah Indonesia) collaborated intensively to establish their trust. Moreover, JAI's social events in West Java which care for the members of NU at the grassroots, strengthened this mutual relationship.²²

NU has many human resources, education institutions, and business charities. Sadly, these conditions could not support their members' economic backgrounds to sustain their daily lives. The primary factor of why it happens is that many of NU's infrastructures belong to their religious leaders' ownership, specifically education institutions from kindergarten and higher education. These personal properties could be a more complex factor for other NU members to establish their professional careers within the educational institution. Nonetheless, the struggle to establish an educational institution in the name of NU had been initiated since the Soesilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) Presidency (2004-2014), amidst the rise of the figure of NU's circle elite to become the Indonesian education ministry. Within this period, NU could have established its higher education by establishing a university in many Indonesian provinces under the flagship of Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama. Nevertheless, it is still challenging to gain economic benefits from this education business, which is needed to be

²¹ Wahyudi Akmaliah, "Menjadi Pengungsi Di Negara Sendiri: Perkusi, Perjuangan, Dan Daya Tahan Sosial Komunitas Syiah Sampang Sebagai Pengungsi Internal," in *Mereka Yang Terusir: Studi Tentang Ketabanan Sosial Pengungsi Ahmadiyah Dan Syiah Di Indonesia*, ed. Cahyo Pamungkas (Jakarta: Obor, 2017).

²² Wahyudi Akmaliah, "Proses Berlawan' Di Tengah Homogenisasi Islam: Respon Jamaah Ahmadiyah Indonesia (JAI) Terhadap Persekusi Dan Kekerasan," in *Meredam Permusuhan, Memadamkan Dendam: Pelajaran Bina-Damai Dari Ketabanan Minoritas Keagamaan Dari Tasikmlaya Dan Bangil*, ed. Cahyo Pamungkas (Jakarta: Obor, 2019).

both professional management and modern system under the formal education within the Indonesian national education structures. These conditions establish the precariat condition among NU's people to sustain their life. Furthermore, those who could not apply as the government office staff into education institutions under the religious ministries affairs structure as both teachers and lecturers should engage in the two areas; political practices by joining within the PKB or establishing/joining into non-government organizations (NGOs). This structure creates a political arena within NU's religious elites' circles and their members to gain their powers and interests, though, in the level of idea, they had total support for the *Aswaja An-Nahdliyah* as their religious orientations, which are in line with the Pancasila ideology.

The Dominant Discourse of Islamic Resurgence in the Digital Platform

The Islamic resurgence consisting of the new and old Islamic groups articulates their Islamic identities significantly in the Indonesian public. With public morality as a pretext, they assert their group as the true Muslim in representing Islamic authenticity as projected by both the Qur'an and Sunnah. To prove this authenticity, they organize and practice through diverse activities in public, such as Islamic teaching at the grassroots level, the act of demonstration to respond to the social and political issues at the level of national and international and negotiating with the predatory politic to issuing Islamic law in some of the Indonesian provinces.²³ At the same time, most Islamic political parties represent the negative image of their political elites' behavior. The two most significant hostile acts that emerge in public are corruption and conflict between internal elite leaders. These conditions then established a strong distrust of this Islamic party, specifically the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). In addition, due to not being a solid Islamic identity and an act of avoidance to emerge the disappointment of Islamic groups, the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) presidency indirectly groomed their influence. This orientation stabilized his powers for ten years (2004-2014) from these Islamic groups'

²³ Michael Buehler, *The Politics of Shari'a Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316417843>.

challenges.²⁴ This part examines the dominant voices of the Islamic resurgence in the digital platform that has altered the landscape of Indonesian society. This change intervenes both Islamic resurgence relationship with the predatory politic by indicating the presence of the Islamic series mobilization in 2016-2017 and threatens NU's religious authority.²⁵

The dominant discourse of Islamic resurgence has employed the vacuum of power in the post of the authoritarian regime and mutual relationship with the predatory politic at both national and local levels amidst the implementation of regional autonomy. Unlike during the Suharto presidency, which had significantly centralized power, easing control and cleaning their political opponents, the reform era has provided them to articulate their Islamic identities incredibly. In addition, because they would like to win local and national elections, predatory politics have used diverse issues as a political campaign tool. These two pieces of evidence create a mutual relationship to achieve their political interest. Because of this issue, the Shariah Law, as part of the local government's regulation in some Indonesian provinces, is legitimized by secular parties such as PDIP, Golkar, and Demokrat. Compared to Islamic political parties, those parties have a robust

²⁴ Greg Fealy, "Overview of the Politics of Religious Intolerance," in *Religion, Law and Intolerance in Indonesia*, ed. Tim Lindsey and Helen Pausacker (London: Routledge, 2016); Wahyudi Akmaliah, "'Saya Indonesia, Saya Pancasila': Islamisasi, Konteks, Dan Diskursus Pancasila Pasca Rejim Orde Baru," *Tashwirul Afkar* 37 (2018): 104–19.

²⁵ One of their influence, for instance, is attacking religious minorities, such as Shi'i and Ahmadiis people, as a part of the strengthening power in the Indonesian public. Furthermore, the close partnership between Muhammadiyah-NU and the government in many projects supports this pessimistic view. Consequently, this growth of the Indonesian Muslim middle class in population after the post-authoritarian regime Inaya Rakhmani, "The Personal Is Political: Gendered Morality in Indonesia's Halal Consumerism," *TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 7, no. 2 (November 5, 2019): pp. 291–312, <https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2019.2>. creates their personal preference for this Islamic resurgence. The existence of new media allows the Muslim middle class to be the self-learners in studying Islam, in which the new Islamic preachers mainly are predominantly in the digital platform contents Nadirsyah Hosen, "Online Fatwa in Indonesia: From Fatwa Shopping to Googling a Kiai," in *Expressing Islam, Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. Greg Fealy and Sally White (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2008), pp. 159–73; Slama, "Social Media and Islamic Practice: Indonesian Ways of Being Digitally Pious"; Nisa, "Social Media and the Birth of an Islamic Social Movement: ODOJ (One Day One Juz) in Contemporary Indonesia"; Akmaliah, "The Rise of Cool Ustadz: Islamic Preacher, Subculture, and the Pemuda Hijrah Movement."

capitalist economy and a robust social network at the grassroots, which could be the fundamental factor in bargaining power with the Islamic resurgence.²⁶ Nonetheless, these times occurred between the years 2000 and 2013. At the same time, the number of Indonesian internet users remained limited, and the form of the digital platform did not evolve in both creative and inventive ways in comparison to the current situation.

Currently, the rise of new media consisting of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and other platforms of communication chatting has placed the user as both producer and a consumer in the same way. With the form of interaction quickly, those platforms propose diverse user experiences. This communication structure establishes the new authority from the different fields as long as every user can influence their followers with exciting content. The more engaging content the users create, the more they have to establish their influence by adding their followers significantly. Even though this structure benefits public figures, it allows ordinary people to become micro-celebrities.²⁷ In Indonesian Muslim society, this new media has been employed considerably by the new religious authority to attract the Islamic audience. Those new religious authorities who use this digital platform consist of the individual and collective society.

Concerning religious orientation, they mostly come from the Islamic resurgence, though some also come from traditionalism and modernist Islam. From the Islamic revival, they are, for instance, Hanan Attaki with the Shift Movement, Felix Siauw from HTI, and Salafi movement, consists of their preachers and their collective work that consists of websites, radio, and video content on YouTube. Meanwhile, although he comes from traditionalist Islam, Abdul Shomad has a different emphasis on communication with his roots from West Sumatra, such as speaking frankly, straightforwardly, and in style combination between provocative thought and funny expression.²⁸ Nevertheless, his bachelor's degree in Islamic Studies from Egypt strengthens his religious authority. Adi Hidayat, like Abdul Shomad, received his high school education from Modernist Islam,

²⁶ Buehler, *The Politics of Shari'a Law*.

²⁷ Theresa M. Senft, *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

²⁸ Hamdani, "New Religious Preacher in the Changing Religious Authority: The Offline and Online Preacher of Ustadz Abdul Somad."

Muhammadiyah, and then went on to pursue a bachelor's and master's degree in Islamic studies in Tripoli, Egypt. Most Indonesian Muslim audiences follow his Instagram and YouTube account because of his detailed explanations and thoughtful communication.

The rise of the new media and the above of the new religious authorities have challenged the establishment of religious authority. Even though those religious authorities are smaller in numbers and have poor infrastructure compared to both Islamic organizations, the use of the digital platform with its characteristic could be articulating their influence broadly. The contemporary significance of Indonesian internet users in the population contributes to their influences. The Indonesian Internet Provider Association (APJII, 2020) supports the data, while there are 196.7 million Indonesian internet users from the 266.91 million total population in 2020. This number has increased by almost 10 percent compared to 2019, while there were 171.17 million internet users from 264,16 million of the total population. According to the world population review, Indonesia has the largest Muslim population, with 231 million people, followed by Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. According to the data, those who significantly shape Islamic discourse have the potential to reshape the faces of Indonesian Muslims. Furthermore, the fragmentation and contestation of political-religious authority in the Muslim world has been aided by social media and new modes of communication.²⁹

These conditions eroded NU's religious authority. The new religious leaders have come into NU's grassroots and intervened in their religious teaching orientation, causing many of the NU's followers to follow them. Because of these influences, many of the NU's followers have felt threatened. Akmaliah has examined this feeling of threatened among NU's people by giving three example cases.³⁰ The first was the rejection of Hamid Basalamah as the Islamic preacher from the Salafi group in Islamic teaching in East Java (Lamongan, Sidoarjo, and Surabaya) and Jakarta. The second was the objection to Felix Siauw in Islamic teaching in Semarang and Jakarta.

²⁹ Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, "Redefining Muslim Publics," *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, 2003, 1–18; Bryan S. Turner, "Religious Authority and the New Media," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 2 (March 30, 2007): pp. 117–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407075001>.

³⁰ Akmaliah, "The Demise of Moderate Islam: New Media, Contestation, and Reclaiming Religious Authorities," pp. 6–7.

The third was the rejection of Hanan Attaki on his Islamic teaching that was planned in the hotel of Bahari Inn, Tegal, Central Java, on July 7, 2019. Most of the NU's grassroots people reject them due to their religious orientation as the Islamic resurgence with the Salafi-Wahhabism ideology as the form of struggle to purify Islam from their tradition and local culture. Meanwhile, NU's *Aswaja* ideology is the antithesis of this Islamic resurgence. It is similar to the HTI in that strives to implement Khilafah (Islamic State) as the foundation structure of the Indonesian state, as opposed to the NU's political orientation, which accepts Pancasila as the sole Indonesian ideology.

It is hard to calculate these new religious authorities statistically to measure their influence significantly on the Indonesian public. Nevertheless, the event of Islamic mobilization series during 2016-2017, with the enormous masses insisting the Indonesian government jailed Ahok because he was perceived to act religious blasphemy, could propose their significant movement. In addition, five Islamic organizations mobilized the movement, according to IPAC.³¹ First was the salafi-modernist network, which led the prominent Islamic figures, mainly Bachtiar Nasir in Jakarta and Zaitun Rasmin from Wahdah Islamiyah in Makassar, South Sulawesi. The FPI led Rizieq Shihab as a charismatic preacher of Hadrami's descent who recorded violence to secure their interest. The third was HTI as the Indonesian branch of a transnational organization committed to restoring the caliphate. The fourth was Forum Umat Islam (FUI), a coalition led by Muhammad Al-Khathath, a former HTI leader. The last was the Urban-based zikir "councils" (*majelis zikir*), a Sufi order affiliated with charismatic preachers and politicians seeking to boost their piety image amidst the middle-class Muslim constituency. Amidst these Islamic organizations, the new media containing much information and hoax dealing with Ahok's case had an abundance within Indonesian Muslims' smart-phones.³² Specifically, those new religious authorities supported it significantly through their Islamic teaching on the digital platform, creating the amplification of voices to organize the movement

³¹ IPAC (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict), "After Ahok: The Islamist Agenda in Indonesia," 2018, pp. 2–4.

³² Merlyna Lim, "Freedom to Hate: Social Media, Algorithmic Enclaves, and the Rise of Tribal Nationalism in Indonesia," *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): pp. 411–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2017.1341188>.

essentially which had intervened in the Jokowi presidency, insisting Ahok into jail for two years (2017-2018).

Reclaiming Religious Authority: The Young Circle of NU and Their Involvement with Digital Platform

The dominance of Islamic resurgence in the digital platform is locating Indonesian Muslims in the urban area and influencing the rural area. Specifically, this rural area is the basis of the NU's people, causing them to feel threatened significantly. NU has done two ways to respond to this Islamic resurgence, mainly at the official and cultural network levels. At the level of official, NU had rebranded its organization with the new spirit as Islam Nusantara (Islam of the Archipelago); specifically, it was adopted as the theme during the 33rd Muktamar NU in Jombang, East Java on 1-5 August 2015, "Affirming Islam Nusantara for Indonesian and World Civilization" (*Meneguhkan Islam Nusantara Untuk Peradaban Indonesia dan Dunia*). This new brand has been rooted for years within the dynamic of NU's organization. The Indonesian government accepted this brand as a cultural and ideological mechanism and the soft approach to resolving conservatism and extremism within the Indonesian Muslim society in 2018.³³ At the level of the cultural network initiated by the young NU people, they have established Islamic websites to counter the voices of the Islamic resurgence. This part deeply examines the second part as the NU's people aspiration to reclaim their religious authority.

Concerning cultural networks, the initiator in establishing an Islamic website to challenge the Islamic resurgence in the digital platform is Savic Ali (Muhamad Syafi' Alielha). Since 2009, Savic found a strategy to beat those Islamic websites.³⁴ With his substantial experience as an activist of 1998 and a former journalist, he successfully increased NU Online to a much better level.³⁵ Nevertheless, he seemed to know that using traditionalism to establish an Islamic website as the old media practices were not enough. As well,

³³ Burhani, *Islam Nusantara as a Promoting Response to Religious Intolerance and Radicalism*, pp. 2-3.

³⁴ Ali Savic, "4 Kunci Pembuatan Konten Moderat," PeaceGenID, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q14uCuZ_bxA.

³⁵ Alamsyah M Dja'far and Aldilla Septerina, "Savic Ali, Gusdur, Dunia Digital, Dan Toleransi," *Majalah Pro:Aktif*, 2020, <https://proaktif.kail.or.id/2020/08/profil-savic-ali-gus-dur-dunia-digital-dan-toleransi/>.

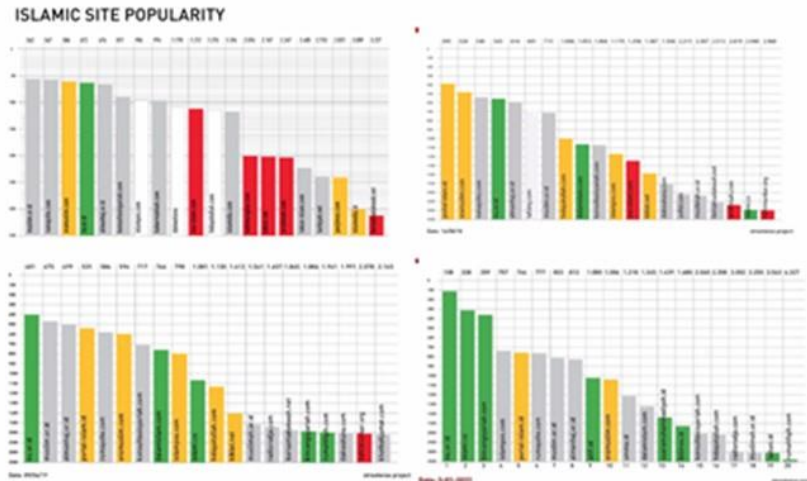
it needed more budget to support his planning. Therefore, collaborating with the other young NU's people was mandatory, specifically to contain their NU Online with the Islamic teaching based on NU's religious orientation. His position as the initiator in the so-called Gusdurian (followers of Abdurrahman Wahid) social network movement has strengthened his figure to establish a strong connection between the young of NU's circle and non-NU. This movement is inspired by Gusdur's values, has been led by Alissa Wahid since 2010.³⁶ Savic Ali then organized the young of NU's generation in the literacy movement, not only having consistency. This movement then has been mediated by himself and several young NU's people to establish another Islamic website, mainly *Islami.co* in 2013, containing any Islam information representing the NU's religious orientation (Savic, 2013). The establishment of this Islamic website inspired other young NU to make another Islamic website with diverse characteristics. They are, for instance, *alif.id*, which concerns Islam, tradition, and cultural activities, and *bincangsyariah.com* concerns sharia and Muslim activities in their everyday life.

Most Islamic websites follow the entire system of Salafi websites in terms of design, visuals, and writing style, such as *rumaysho.com*, *portal-Islam.id*, and *eramuslim.com*. In terms of content, the Islamic websites with the NU's religious orientation provide a moderate view, consisting of plurality, tolerance, and appreciation for another mode of religious expression. Most of these websites value their wealth of Islamic practices, which are supported by both the source of the Qur'an, Sunnah, and lessons learned from diverse Islamic stories. To some extent, due to the strong theme, most of these Islamic websites could not drive with another issue to counter the Islamic resurgence websites. Consequently, they ride the wave by making different interpretations of Islamic sources on the topic. For instance, the discourse of *hijrah* as a term to explain the shifting identity from lousy behavior into a positive attitude in Islamic life as a form of repentance and appealing to Syria for Islamic terrorism groups of Al-Qaeda and ISIS is produced by the Islamic resurgence, respectively. Meanwhile, the word *hijrah* refers to the similar meaning of *to bat* as the act of repentance. NU's Islamic website then intervenes in the definition

³⁶ Aziz Ahmad, "Savic Ali, Kultur Hibrida, Dan Sang Kiai Digital," *Alif.id*, 2020, <https://alif.id/read/aziz-ahmad/savic-ali-kultur-hibrida-dan-sang-kiai-digital-b226115p/>; Dja'far and Septerina, "Savic Ali, Gusdur, Dunia Digital, Dan Toleransi."

of *hijrah* as changing the identity of the Indonesian Muslim life by taking it steeply daily to improve their life as good Muslims. They also suggest prohibiting changing the Indonesian Muslim life drastically within the *hijrah* because they should learn many things about Islam and its practices. By doing this change considerably, Indonesian Muslims doing *hijrah* could avoid fanatical thoughts.

Figure 1. The table of Alexa ranking for Islamic website from 2018-2021
(Source: Savic Ali, 2021)



The above strategy is successful by achieving the NU's Islamic websites the top highest ranking as Islamic websites based on Alexa's ranking in 2021. In comparing the previous years, specifically in 2018, this Islamic resurgence' website dominated the Alexa ranking as the most website that most Indonesian Muslims read. There was, for instance, *Muslim.or.id*, *rumaysbo.com*, and *eramuslim.com*.³⁷ The three factors influence these achievements. The first is the form of ideological resistance. Historically, the establishment of NU in Java in the 1920s was NU's religious leaders' resistance amidst Saudi Arabia, which guided the Wahabi ideology to destroy graves and other cultural traditions in Mecca and Medina. This Wahabi ideology was then significantly influenced by Islamic trans-ideology, although they still practiced local Indonesian rituals such as Muhammadiyah and Persis.³⁸

³⁷ Ali Savic, "Countering Online Radicalism in Indonesia" (Jakarta, 2021).

³⁸ Akmaliah, "The Demise of Moderate Islam: New Media, Contestation, and Reclaiming Religious Authorities," pp. 19–20.

This Islamic resurgence has expanded their ideologies into the rural area, intervening in the NU's identity. These situations then articulate the young NU's people struggling significantly to fight against them.

The second is the culture of communal solidarity and persistence among the NU's youth circles. Geographically, those who manage these Islamic websites come from rural areas with poor knowledge of digital technology expertise. Nevertheless, this spirit of the rural people's enthusiasm is communal solidarity to learn and improve themselves in collective action. This communal solidarity also strengthens the young of NU's form of persistence. With voluntarily working, they struggle to increase the magnitude of the NU image in the Indonesian public.³⁹ The third is the historical background of the NU's activity that uses the media as their struggle representation. Hamzah Sahal, as the chief of *alif.com*, argues that most of the NU's media have a long history as a part of the dynamic of NU's struggle and activities. In order words, the function of media in every organization they built and every action they organized embodies their spirit. There were, for instance, the magazine of *Oetoesan Nahdlatol Oelama* (1928), the magazine of *Berita Nahdlatul Oelama* (1931), and the newspaper of *Duta Masyarakat* (1950).⁴⁰

Concerning video content, with the rise of Islamic preachers in the new media consisting of YouTube and Instagram, these young of NU's movement have left behind the Salafi organization with the diversity of collective religious authority. The collective of religious authorities about the YouTube channel, such as Yufid.TV (3,09 million subscribers and 14.858 of videos), Ammar TV (3,74 million subscribers and 2.869 of videos), and Rodja TV (449 thousand subscribers and 3.847 of videos) are reshaping the digital of public Islam predominantly. Meanwhile, the collective religious authority from the NU's channels on YouTube is smaller compared to them such as NU Channel (744 thousand subscribers and 4.460 videos), TVNU (190 thousand subscribers and 1.850 videos), and Aswaja Tube (210 thousand subscribers and 991 of videos). At the level of Instagram, this Islamic resurgence of Islamic preachers is also predominantly shaping public Islam's digital. For instance, Hanan

³⁹ Hamzah Sahal, "Mengapa NU Online Mengalahkan Web-Web Islam Puritan?," Alif.id, 2019, <https://alif.id/read/hamzah-sahal/mengapa-nu-online-mengalahkan-web-web-islam-puritan-b214962p/>.

⁴⁰ Sahal.

Attaki (8,8 million followers), Abdul Shomad (5,6 million followers), Felix Siauw (4,8 million followers), Adi Hidayat (3,3 million followers), Khalid Basalamah (2,6 million followers), Syafiq Riza Basalamah (1,7 million of followers), and Abu Bassam Oemar Mita (1,1 million of followers).

Nonetheless, the rise of three of NU's Islamic preachers in the digital platform with distinct characteristics may protect NU's followers and traditions. On Instagram, for instance, there are Gus Miftah (1,9 million subscribers) and Ahmad Muwafiq (266 thousand followers). Specifically, for Gus Baha, even though his Instagram account officially is only 123 thousand followers, his Islamic preaching videos have been repackaged and recirculated into various accounts. This circulation mode in his Islamic preaching videos supports his religious authority and provides a positive, vibrant significantly. Also, this circulation mode could attract other Indonesian Muslims to Baha's algorithm in social media, bringing them to deeply understand Baha performance. Moreover, his deep knowledge of Islamic tradition, good communication with simple rhetoric, and explaining many social problems within the Indonesian Muslim society with the comparing analog within Islamic resources have attracted the largest audience to observe him. Because of these factors, Deddy Corbuzier, one of the top Indonesian celebrities and a significant influencer through his YouTube channel, has been amazed at Baha's Islamic teaching.⁴¹ In addition, Sofyan Tsauri, a former terrorist, has become one of Baha's fans because many of his Islamic teachings are precisely in accordance with Islamic sources.⁴²

Conclusion

This article examines the dynamic of NU's struggle in guarding moderate Islam. Instead of accepting moderate Islam as something given within the NU's elite circle and grassroots level, proposing the moderate perspective is a part of contentious politics from within. Therefore, the fundamental point is understanding the NU's *asmaja* ideology, organizational structure, and economic support for their organization. In the level of ideology, NU's religious orientations align

⁴¹ Deddy Corbuzier and Gus Miftah, "Kena Covid Jadi Murdad!!!," Deddy Corbuzier, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FXJgGf_T3A&t=283s.

⁴² Robi Sugara and Sofyan Tsauri, "Gus Baha Di Mata Sang Teroris," INC TV, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFwWGHYQWBM>.

with the Indonesian constitution based on Pancasila which protect all Indonesian society, causing themselves to have similarity from within. Nevertheless, in the level of structure of the organization in which NU could not support their elite religious circles in sustaining economic benefits amidst the NU's religious leaders' ownership of institution education property have caused them to create their local alliance to respond to many social and political issues driving by their interests.

The aforementioned situation creates a precarious situation for NU members to gain economic benefit by engaging in practical politics through PKB that is aligned with their stream and engaging with NGOs advocating diversity and pluralism issues that are intertwined with their religious orientation. This interest could be reconciled to some extent, though, as previously stated, they could fight against it from within, dealing with their response to religious minorities in two places. Furthermore, the Islamic resurgence has challenged their religious authority as the voice of the ummah to assert their new religious authorities by deploying the vacuum power structure after Suharto's presidency stepped down in 1998. The rise of new media has primarily articulated the voices of the Islamic resurgence within Indonesian Muslim society, interfering with the NU's religious authority. This condition makes them feel threatened, as evidenced by the NU's grassroots rejection of new Islamic preachers in some Indonesian provinces.

The idea of the young people of NU to establish an Islamic website based on their religious orientation was led by Savic Ali, a prominent figure in the strengthening of NU Online and the establishment of Islami.co. This idea has inspired other young NU's people to establish Islamic websites such as *alif.id* and *bincangsyariah.com*. Most of the young NU's people have been participating in containing these websites through their writing. Savic and his collages have organized the workshop in some Indonesian provinces; specifically, it is often located in *pesantren*. These struggles to reclaim their religious authority in the digital platform are booming. It is represented by Alexa's website ranking that finds them as the top of Islamic websites, indicating that most Indonesian Muslim society has read their website. Nevertheless, these young NU's achievements are still beginning efforts. The other digital platform where Islam is making a comeback is new media. Regardless, Baha and Miftah, as the digital representation of NU's religious authority, could protect NU's

followers by preserving their Islamic tradition and religious orientation.[]

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