

# Cyberspace and Sectarianism in Indonesia: The Rise of Shia Media and Anti-Shia Online Movements

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**Abstract:** The digital era of information technology appears to be a new space for the Indonesian Shiite communities to express their existence and conceal their “cloak” in the country. Responding to this, the anti-Shia movements have created their online publications and fan pages to counter those Shia’s publications. This article discusses the online media battles on sectarianism issue in the cyberspace of Indonesia in the last three years. Using a critical cultural studies tradition and textual approach, this study tries to examine the rise of Shia and anti-Shia new media as well as the meanings and contexts in which violent actions occurred amongst the Sunni-Shia Muslim communities on it.

**Keywords:** Shia media, anti-Shia movement, online media, sectarianism, intra faith conflict.

**Abstrak:** Era digital teknologi informasi nampaknya menjadi ruang baru bagi masyarakat Syiah Indonesia untuk mengekspresikan keberadaan mereka dan menyembunyikan “jubah” mereka di negara ini. Menanggapi hal ini, gerakan anti-Syiah telah menciptakan publikasi *online* dan halaman penggemar mereka untuk melawan publikasi Syiah tersebut. Artikel ini membahas perdebatan di dalam media online perihal isu-isu sektarianisme dalam tiga tahun terakhir di Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan *critical cultural studies* dan analisis teks, penelitian ini mencoba untuk mengkaji kebangkitan media baru Syiah dan anti-Syiah, termasuk untuk memahami makna dan konteks dimana tindakan kekerasan tersebut terjadi di dalam media online mereka.

**Kata kunci:** Media Syiah, gerakan anti-Syiah, media online, sektarianisme, konflik intra-agama

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## Introduction

Intra-faith conflict between the Sunni and the Shia Muslim communities in Madura<sup>2</sup>, Indonesia, has become a never-ending story. The clash between Sunni and Shia communities has been occurring for many years. However, just like other religious and ethnic violence in Indonesia, the Sunni-Shia incidents have been less reported publicly by the state, especially during the New Order era of Indonesia<sup>3</sup>. In the era of post-*reformasi*, several immense incidents of Sunni-Shia conflicts have happened, particularly in the East Java province, where Sunni Islam (or more noticeably the *Ahlussunnah wal jamaah* followers, which is associated to Nahdlatul Ulama/NU<sup>4</sup>) is the majority of the population. The Sunni-Shia mayhem in 2007 occurred in the particularly conservative Sunni areas such as in Madura Island and Bangil<sup>5</sup>, and became the first conflict in a series of Sunni-Shia clashes in the province. It started on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007, when the house of Shiite cleric in Sampang, Madura Island, was attacked by a mob of anti-Shia followers. The anti-Shia group angrily visited the home of the cleric with sharp

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<sup>2</sup> Madura is an Island located in the northeastern coast of Java and is part of regional administration government of East Java Province. It is separated from Java by the narrow Strait of Madura. The island comprises an area of approximately 4.078.68 km<sup>2</sup> and has five major districts. Sampang, where the majority of Shiites live, is one of major populated districts in the island.

<sup>3</sup> Varshney has noted that during the New Order era the religious and ethnic violence in Indonesia were not absent, instead the regime “often used *state-perpetrated* violence to bring order” (Varshney, Panggabean, Tadjoeidin, 2010: 21). During thirty years of ruling the country, the New Order government never published any figures on deaths or losses in “ethnocommunal violence.” After the New Order period, the conflicts between the social groups in Indonesia have become more common.

<sup>4</sup> Nahdlatul Ulama, known as NU, is one of the largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia. More detail see e.g. Ricklefs (1981), Barton & Fealy (1996), Barton (2002)

<sup>5</sup> Bangil is a district town in Pasuruan regency in East Java. Bangil town is also known as a region that has a very strong Islamic culture, including the presence of Islamic (Shia) educational institutions. As such, Bangil has its own label as ‘town of *Santri*’. *Santri* is the pupil of traditional Islamic boarding school. It is because the presence of quite few traditional and modern Islamic boarding schools (locally known as ‘*Pesantren*’) established in the town.

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weapons, and attempted to enter the cleric's house, however, they were prevented by the local police.

Another conflict happened on December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2011, when a group of people set fire to one Shia *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) in Sampang. This tragedy resulted in members of the Shia community losing their homes and belongings. Since the attack, the local Sampang government has planned to relocate all Shia communities to places outside Sampang. However, the Shia communities refused the government's plan. The Sampang government remains persistent with its plan to relocate Shia communities outside of the Sampang regency in order to prevent further conflict in the area. The Sampang government has maintained that the plan was a response to the demands of the majority of the Sunni community in Sampang (*The Jakarta Post*, 18/6/2013); however, according to investigations conducted by Kontras Indonesia, not everyone within the majority of the Sunni community had demanded this plan.

The tragedy of religious violence involving Shia community members and an anti-Shia group conflict in the Sampang regency on Madura Island, East Java on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012, was the latest Sunni-Shia clash on the Island. The anti-Shia mob set alight dozens of houses belonging to Shiites in the Karang Gayam village of the Sampang district. Thousands of people took part in the burning and destruction of property belonging to the Shiite community in the village. Those Shiite members, whose houses were burned, were sheltered inside the primary school in the village, whilst other members were being chased by the anti-Shia group, who were planning to kill them. It was reported that there were around 500 Shiite followers in Sampang living in the area (*The Jakarta Post*, 27/08/2012). To date, there are more than hundreds of displaced Shiites, who were sheltered formerly in the primary school, before then moving out of the Madura Island to a place provided by the East Java province government in Sidoarjo, a neighbouring town of Surabaya, the capital city of East Java. To this day, 225 Shia families – the victims of the 2012 clash – remain at the Puspa Agro low-cost apartment units in Sidoarjo.

Madura Island has a history of conservatism in terms of their Islam religiosity. The majority of Muslims in Madura identified themselves as Sunni (*Ahlussunnah Wal Jamaah*), which has close ties to the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Islamic tradition. For Muslims who identify as Shia, they are regarded with suspicion and rejection by the Sunni majority on this Island. The number of Muslim Shia in Madura, and Indonesia at large, is unknown due to fears of reprisal, and being underreported by the media in the country.

In addition, the existence of the Muslim Shia community as a minority among the Sunnis has long become the latent intra-faith clash in Indonesia. The different ways these two Muslim groups perform their religious practices, values, and socio-cultural life in the community have resulted in social friction, creating tension between these two Muslim identities. Since the majority of Indonesians are Sunni, the Shia Muslim minority are targeted by the Sunni fundamentalists. The fundamentalists have repeatedly committed attacks against the Shiites in the country.

Statements and claims from Muslim scholars and conservative Muslim blogging communities about the Shia community have been overwhelming, following the Sunni-Shia conflict in Madura in 2012. Cynic comments call Shia '*komunis baru*' (a new communist) or 'similar to communists.' Others label Shia as '*minoritas*' (minority), "*agama minoritas*" (minority religion), '*aliran sesat*', or '*Syiah ajaran impor*' (imported Shia).

The digital era of information technology appears to be a new space and place for the Indonesian Shiite communities to express their existence in the country. The internet and social media have become the "new" medium of voices for their movements and "open their doors" to the public. Internet websites, Facebook pages, Blog spots, and Twitter are utilized by these Shiite followers and supporters (as well as the Sunnis, the *Wahabi-Salafis*, and the *Wahabi-Takfiris* supporters who have created their own online publications and fan pages to counter Shia's publications) to show their presence, interactivity, and thoughts about Islam. Online magazines, news portals, and other publication pages related and oriented to Indonesian Shiites and Shia religion can be found in large quantities these days. An Iran Indonesian Radio (IRIB

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Indonesia) is, for instance, a popular online radio and news portal covering issues on Shia communities in Indonesia and other countries. This raises an issue as to whether or not it is a sign of an uprising for a more “exposed and approachable Shia,” and their identity to the Indonesian public.

Responding to the spreading of Shia in Indonesia and the emerging online media, the Sunni conservative groups and the anti-Shia movements have established several websites and news portals against Shia and its followers. In fact, those websites are not only intended to attack Shia in Indonesia, but also to support other Islamic militancy movements like the war in Gaza, online Jihad, and the recent issue of ISIS and global terrorism. This new militancy form in the era of digital online has become remarkable in Indonesia. That is why this study is interesting to investigate.

This study tries to look at the presence of activism on online media, particularly on the issues of anti-Shia movements and Shia-phobia, post-Sunni and Shia conflict in 2012. The research questions are: how has the online media been used by the so-called ‘conservative and militant’ groups of Islam to counter the existence of Shia communities and identities in Indonesia? What kinds of activism have been initiated by those conservative and militant groups of Islam online?

This research project aims to investigate the phenomenon of media and sectarian activism, post-intra-faith conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslim communities in Indonesia, which left hundreds of communities displaced. This study focuses on how online media representations discuss the presence of Shiites and Shia Islam in Indonesia. Thus, the project looks deeply at the meanings constructed within this intra-faith conflict, for Sunni and Shia communities, and the media, how this religious conflict has triggered an online media war, and the sectarian activism in the new era of political democracy in Indonesia.

This study also attempts to provide data on the rise of intra-faith conflict movements and the activism of online ‘anti-Shia’ jihad through the establishments of the Sunni, Shia, and anti-Shia websites. The rise of technology has tremendously impacted the growing religious political movement by the so-called ‘conservative’ groups of Islam, by using

online media as the medium to counter emerging sects and various religious practices considered abnormal in the country.

## Research Method

This study starts from investigating how the local and national media (particularly online media) represents and discourses Sunni and Shia Islam in Indonesia, and the conflict in Madura in 2012, before moving on to the national media discourse regarding the issues, looking closely at the emerging alternative online media and the existing ones.

Goran Larsson (2005) states that in the emerging field of media (Internet) and religion, researchers are enquiring for more empirical data before formulating grand theories, and propositions how the media (the Internet) have impacted the changing religious environment and discourses. According to Larsson, it is necessary to ask basic questions, such as “what kind of web pages are out there? What kinds of information can be found on religion? In what ways is cyberspace being used to perform online rituals? What is the relationship between online and offline activities?” (Larsson, 2005: 2). In order to achieve the purpose of the research, and to answer these questions, the researchers have to compile more data from the Internet, and refine the theories and methods for analyzing information in cyberspace. Larsson’s formula is adopted in this current research project to select and eliminate the number of websites used as samples of this study.

This study also underscores the wider significance of the media and public discourses about Sunni and Shia Muslims, their beliefs and identities, and understanding the discourse of the legitimate placement of Shia communities and their right to practice their beliefs in multicultural societies like Indonesia. These issues are significantly discussed, at the end of this research, for the future prospect of curtailing further violence, such as improving peace, increasing neighborhood resettlement solutions, and building small communication forums within local communities.

Using a critical cultural studies tradition and textual approach, this study explores the meanings and contexts in which violent actions occurred amongst the Sunni-Shia Muslim communities. This study tries

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to examine the rise of Shia and anti-Shia media that published online and look closely at the way the media writes, covers, and build opinions and attitude to inform and provoke the public.

Most of the data collection process occurs in Indonesia, by conducting Internet searches and media documentations. There are 8 (eight) websites, including four websites that have shown close links to Shia communities and four websites are linked to the Sunni conservative groups. Alongside these websites, there is also selection of radio stations, news portals, online magazines, and Facebook communities related to the issue.

As Gary Bunt (2011) examines, the abundance of cyber Islamic environments has made researchers select different topic of analysis. This makes the selection of websites and Internet data different from one researcher to another depending on the academics interests and purposes.

It should be stressed early on that a *complete* analysis of Cyber Islamic Environments is a task beyond the single writer and his resources, especially given the radical expansion in the number of websites, e-mail lists, chat rooms and other forms of electronic communication; there is a substantial increase in languages other than English being applied on the Internet, and this is reflected in the discussion where possible [...] (Bunt, 2011: 7).

Taking Bunt's (2011) analysis into consideration, this research states its limitation by only choosing particular websites that are considered relevant, and contain the issues discussed and linked to Sunni-Shia conflict in Indonesia in recent years, and the issues related to the existence of Shia as a religion in Indonesia and the debates around the formation of identities of the Shiites after the Sunni-Shia conflicts in 2012.

The data gathered in this study is categorized in terms of the topic of the chapter written in the research results. Each chapter is organized under a theme that is fit into every step of data collection, ranging from national media discourse, content analysis of Shia media and Sunni

(anti-Shia) media online, and debates and discussions occurring in social media, i.e. the Facebook groups of Shia and Sunni communities. This data will then be used to discuss intertextuality between common media and other academic resources, research, and literatures to answer the research questions that have been stated previously. The analysis of the data uses a qualitative descriptive and putting some media narratives within the analysis of the research.

### **Shia Muslim in Indonesia: a brief note**

Shia Muslim is perceived to be practicing different Islam and holds a different version of Holy Qur'an. Such misperception held by some Sunni Muslims in Indonesia has become widely spread. Jalaluddin Rahmat, a retired professor from School of Communication, Padjajaran state University in Bandung, West Java, is one of the prominent leaders of Shiite in Indonesia. Kang Jalal, as he is commonly known, graduated with his doctoral from an American university and has changed his career from lecturer to head cleric of Shia in West Java. Jalaluddin has established a modern bilingual (English-Indonesia) *pesantren* (boarding school) in Bandung city, namely *Muthahari* modern *pesantren* for middle and high school students.

Jalaluddin Rahmat is also *Ketua Dewan Syuro Ikatan Ahlul Bait Indonesia* (chairman of the supreme committee of *Ahlul Bayt* Indonesia) or known as IJABI, and has claimed that the Shia Islam population in Indonesia has reached 2.5 million people (*Hidayatullah*, 30/08/2012<sup>6</sup>). However, according to Jalaluddin, mostly Shia members in Indonesia are practicing *Taqiyah*, a person who is practicing Shia Islam in privately and does not show the practice publicly. Many Shia members are doing *Taqiyah* in order to shield their identity to preserve the unity among Muslims. According to him, many Shia members become clerics or imam in diverse mosques in the country. Jalaluddin also suggests that the majority of Shia Muslims in Indonesia is "*Shia Itsna Ashariyyah*," or

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.hidayatullah.com/read/24518/30/08/2013/jalaluddin-rahmat-klaim-syiah-indonesia-2.5-juta,-tapi-taqiyah.html>

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“*Shia Imamian*”<sup>7</sup>, and on the Bali Island, he claims Shia Muslims are identified as “*Shia Ismailiah*.”

Responding to the Sunni-Shia clash in Sampang in 2012, Jalaluddin made a public release in Jakarta and showed the Qur’an, which has been claimed as “Shia Qur’an.” He showed to the public that the Shia’s Qur’an is not different in any form to the Qur’an used by Muslims in the world, except the paper used is thicker and looks expensive with an exclusive hard cover. According to Jalaluddin, Shia’s Qur’an has a higher quality than the “common” Qur’an, because the Shia community is respectful and places a greater value on the Holy Qur’an.

The anger of the Sunni community toward Shia Islam in Indonesia has not only stemmed from the issue of ideological and Holy Qur’an differences, but it is also based on the way Shia clerics and communities are considered to be spreading deviant Islam. The former Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) leader, Hasyim Muzadi, advised Shiites in Bangil, Pasuruan, East Java, after the incident of the attacking of Shia *pesantren* in April 2007<sup>8</sup>, to not say bad things about the Prophet Muhammad’s companions like Abu Bakar, Umar bin Khatab, and Usman, nor any early sheikhs such as Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jaelani, Imam Bukhori and Imam Muslim, who are respected strongly by NU members.

There are few Shia Islam scholarly centers established in Indonesia. Yayasan *Albayyinat* (Albayyinat foundation) is one of institutes that intensively study Indonesian Shia Islam. In 2012, young Shia scholars established an Islamic Cultural Centre (ICC) at Buncit Raya Street, Jakarta, to provide information and references such as books, journals, and literature about Shia in Indonesia and the global

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<sup>7</sup> *Shiah Imammiah* is Shia Islam with the centre of its political ideology is controlled by Iran (see <http://www.hidayatullah.com/read/20325/22/12/2011/%93gerakan-syiah-indonesia-diremote-dari-iran%94.html>) This Shia Islam is also considered as the most radical Shia that has also been involved in Suriah conflict (see <http://www.hidayatullah.com/read/23554/09/07/2012/nushariyah:-ideologi-di-balik-krisis-suriah.html>)

<sup>8</sup> [www.indonesianmatters.com/1249/shia/](http://www.indonesianmatters.com/1249/shia/)

world. This centre is also an attempt by the Shia community to open its doors to the public that are willing to learn and know more about Shia Islam. They also have a discussion forum for public dialogues concerning Sunni and Shia differences.

The media coverage about the Sunni-Shia conflicts in Indonesia has claimed to have worsened the image of Sunni and Shia Muslims. The media has shaped public opinion to place the Sunnis and Shiites in *vis-à-vis* position. From a preliminary search, the national media, including some commercial Islamic tabloids and magazines such as Hidayatullah and Sabili, present a strong voice against the Shia, rather than a strong voice for Shia communities.

### **Virtual Islam: Studies on Critical Islam and Media**

Virtual Islam is a concept introduced by Gary Bunt, who has written books and journal articles on Islam in the Internet era. Bunt is concerned about the rise of religion, Islam particularly, in dealing with the emergence of digital media in the twenty-first century of the world. He has started to write journal articles, book chapters, and published his own writings on Islam and the Internet since the popularity of internet usage increases among society, including the Muslim communities in Europe, Middle East, and many South-Asian countries.

New media and digital technology are transforming the world we live in. The adoption, adaptation, circulation, and distribution of this technology have reshaped and reformed the spheres of politics, culture, and religion. The use of the Internet in Islamic communities has been utilized not only to spread information about what Islam is and the culture of Islam, but also used as the new medium of *dakwah*, online *Fatawa*, communal discussions, and propagation on Islamic religion as well as cultural and political matters. The popularity of Internet use has also stimulated the spread of Islamic influence, including the spread of political Islam, and the more recent cases of global jihad and terrorism in the world. The internet, alongside digital technology, is transforming how religion is practiced worldwide and has since become a playing field where politics, culture and religion intersect (Dawson & Cowan, 2004, cited in Tartoussieh, 2011).

Following the events of September 11, 2001, the cyber Islamic environment has become crowded and complex. The increasing numbers of Islam and anti-Islam movements in the online media have been tremendous. There are websites, chat-rooms, news portals, blogs, and the increase in the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter has made the cyber Islamic environment overwhelming. Gary Bunt (2011) has noted that the transformation of the cyber environment has influenced studies on Islam and cyberspace. He mentions that “it is important to emphasize that the studies of Islam and cyberspace must transcend the so-called “Arab world” and be representative of a broad range of Muslim sources and Islamic interests, drawing on different beliefs and academic interests” (Bunt, 2011: 12). The changing nature of the Islamic cyber environment has also resulted in the application of methodology within critical Islam and media studies. With so many websites, chat rooms, online news, and social media, the academics in this research area have been overwhelmed by the abundance of data to be collected and analysed. “Cyber Islamic Environments, an umbrella term which can refer to a variety of contexts, perspectives and applications of the media by those who define themselves as Muslims” (Bunt, 2011: 5).

Various studies and methodologies have been used by different researchers in the study of religion and the media. Bunt has noticed different methods, with a focus on research in the context of cyber Islamic environment. His interest in the subject is associated with the many approaches available for Islamic knowledge and expression, and how methods of communication have adjusted and influenced forms of dialogue and self-understanding, in local, regional and global contexts (Bunt, p. 6). Bunt tries to make some linkage with cyber-cultural studies, although his approach is based more deliberately in the area of phenomenology and the study of religions through symbolism, authority, diversity, experience and expression whilst observing cyber Islamic environments. Other studies may apply different avenues and methodologies to explore these elements of cyberspace, and may continue to contribute to a developing field. As such, the appropriate intellectual tools and rarefied conceptual frameworks may emerge within such studies.

### Shia Indonesia Media Forms and Formats

The Indonesian Shiite community has used publications to spread their existence and *da'wah* in the country alongside their development of *madhhab* in the country (Zulkufli, 2013). Zulkifli's work (2013) on Indonesian Shia shows the number of publications that have been used by Shiites to spread their teaching and thoughts for the Shiite community, as well as many publications sold commercially for the public. Hundreds of Shiite publications published during the 1990s were Islamic literatures mainly written (and translated) by the local Shiite preachers and scholars. These literatures covered mainly Shi'ism and Shiite's thoughts.

The growth of Shia publications in the Islamic literature market has been supported by the establishment of publishers known as "Shia publishers." According to Zulkifli (2013), there have been more than 60 publishers that publish Shia books owned and run by Shiite followers. One of them is Mizan Publishing, a well-known publisher for Islamic literature in Indonesia, owned by Hadar Bagir, a leading Shia believer and ex-chief editor of the national press publication *Republika*. Mizan Publishing also publishes non-Shia Islamic literature and fiction, and is a publishing company that is able to compete with other major publishers in the mainstream book market. Yet others, particularly those small publishers (usually organized by local Shiite organizations or institutions), can only produce a small number of titles, and cannot appear in the mainstream market.

Apart from Zulkifli's work on Shia publications, my present study looks mainly at the establishment of media both commercial and non-commercial senses, ranging from printed magazines, bulletins, radio broadcastings, and online media, that have been initiated by Shiite communities, organizations, or institutions, and those that have been labeled by Sunni-dominated followers as being associated to Indonesian Shia. This study also examines the format and trend in contents of those media.

Alongside the increasing number of Shia followers in Indonesia, the number of printed and electronic media associated with Shiite and Shi'ism has grown steadily. In his book about the facts and data about

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Shia in Indonesia, Farid Ahmad Okbah (2012) examines the number of magazines and bulletin titles associated with Shia Indonesia, and FM radio stations considered as broadcasting *da'wah* about Shi'ism in several regional areas of Indonesia.

The magazines and bulletins are mostly published monthly and circulated in West Java cities like Bandung, Jakarta and Pekalongan, controlled by Indonesian Shia institutions such as IJABI, Al-Muthahari Foundation, and Shiite communities. *Al-Mawaddah* magazine is managed by the Bandung chapter of the All-Indonesian Assembly of Ahlul-Bayt Association (*Ikatan Jamaah Ahlul-Bait Indonesia*, IJABI). Meanwhile, Al-Muthahari Foundation, which was established by Prof. Dr. Jalaluddin Rahmat, ex-lecturer of Communication in Padjajaran State University Bandung and currently the chairperson of IJABI, produces the *Al-Hikmah* magazine and *At-Tanwir* Bulletin. The Al-Jawad Foundation in Jakarta publishes the *Al-Jawad* Bulletin and *Al-Ghadir* magazine, and circulated among Shiite followers within Jakarta and its neighbouring cities. Other magazine publications such as Al-Huda magazine, Al-Musthafa magazine, and *Babim* magazine, are published by unknown Shia organizations, mainly in Jakarta. Some of the magazines are commercial and others are free-gifts for any reader. The circulation of some bulletins can be seen in some major Masjid/mosque areas, mainly in Jakarta and Bandung, especially during or after the Friday prayer. Some periodicals have also been circulated and sold in several Islamic university campuses.

*Al-Hikmah* (Wisdom) magazine is the oldest periodical among other Shia magazines published monthly by Al-Muthahari Foundation in Bandung, West Java. The magazine was initially published between 1990 and 1997 in the form of an academic journal; but then in early 2000, the periodical took the form of a popular magazine that can be read by middle class Muslims. This magazine contains scholarly works on traditional Islamic studies, which discusses issues such as Qur'an, Hadith, *fiqh*, Islamic philosophy, Sufism, and knowledge. The contributors of the magazine are not only limited of the Shiite followers, some Sunni writers are welcome to contribute as well. Jalaluddin Rahmat stated in his interview with *Ulumul Qur'an* (1995) magazine, that Al-

Hikmah was not limited only to Shi'ism thoughts and ideology, with no Shia *fiqh* written in the magazine; rather, the perspective of Shiites are used in the magazine. Yet, since Jalaluddin Rahmat, alongside his Al-Muthahari Foundation, is a Shia believer, many call *Al-Hikmah* as Shia magazine.

*Al-Mawaddah* is another periodical connected to the Shia community, circulated in East Java and Jakarta. This publication is sold to the public either by subscription or by buying direct from selected Islamic book stores or general book stores. *Al Mawaddah* is positioned as a family-friendly magazine that covers issues such as household problems, women, children, and Islam.

*Syi'ar* magazine is published by the Indonesian Cultural Centre (ICC), a Shia institution sponsored by the Iranian government in Indonesia. The magazine is circulated for internal and external Shia communities. It is weekly periodical that discusses more on Shi'ism, philosophy, and *madhhab*.

Radio *Silaturahim* (RASIL) is a commercial broadcasting radio station using AM and FM frequencies located in Jakarta (AM 720 Khz), Semarang (AM 720 Khz), Sukabumi (FM 96.9 Mhz), and Batam (FM 104.3 Mhz). Using the tagline "*Untuk Islam yang Satu*" (For One Islam), Radio RASIL is a radio *da'wah* for Shia. Radio RASIL also has streaming content on its radio website ([www.radiosilaturahim.com](http://www.radiosilaturahim.com)).

Another radio station that is openly promoting Shia is IRIB Indonesia. IRIB Indonesia is broadcast by the Iranian embassy in Jakarta in Bahasa, and is part of the IRIB networks in the Asia Pacific. The Ministry of Religion Affairs (Kemenag) of the Republic of Indonesia has warned and monitored this radio, since the aim of this radio station is concerned with promoting the Shia of Iran, and the ideologies behind the Iran revolution in 1979 in Indonesia.

The Iranian embassy in Jakarta also publishes a monthly magazine, *Yaumul Quds*, in Bahasa. *Yaumul Quds* is a daily periodical, and is usually circulated for the Shia community and the public in Jakarta. Some of them are sent to other embassies of Islamic countries in Jakarta, as well as Shia organizations outside Jakarta. This daily publication contains current affairs from around the world, especially

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Islamic countries, and the struggles of Shiites and war against Shia in the Middle East and other countries.

### **Shia VS Anti-Shia Web Portals and the Contents**

Apart from the printed commercial and non-commercial media mentioned above, there are numerous “Shia Indonesia” online publications, which do not only contain news and current affairs, but also discusses Shi’ism, *fiqh*, Qur’an, Hadith, and knowledge on national and global Shia movements. Their online websites are mainly managed by Shia institutions in Jakarta, Bandung, Bogor, Pasuruan, and Sumatera.

The popularisation of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Path, have also been utilized to spread the existence of Shiite communities, institutions, and their activities. Those printed and radio stations have also used Facebook and Twitter to reach a wider audience in the virtual space. Moreover, Shia followers and supporters have established personal blogs, with contents mainly about Shia, the thoughts of Shi’ism, Shia activism in Indonesia and around the world, and copies of articles and sermon videos of Shiite *ulama* (clerics) in Indonesia and other countries.

Some websites and personal blogs even contain fanatical and conservative Shia thoughts and perspectives, as well as criticisms towards opinions made by Muslim Sunnis and their attacks to the existence of Shiite followers, particularly in Indonesia. Other web pages contain *da’wah* of Shi’ism. These websites usually provide the audience with articles and *da’wah* videos about Qur’an, Hadith, *fiqh*, and the history of Karbala war, whilst convincing the audience about who is considered as *Ahl Al-Bayt* (Upon whom be peace), and that Imam Ali’s family (Ali, Husain, Hasan and Fatimah) and *imammah* (leaders) are believed to be a Shiite’s guidance.

In several official Shia institution websites like [www.syiahindonesia.net](http://www.syiahindonesia.net), [www.ahlulbaitindonesia.com](http://www.ahlulbaitindonesia.com), and [www.ijabi.com](http://www.ijabi.com), the topics and news articles published in these sites tend to not put Shia *madhhab* against Sunni *madhhab*, nor does it defend their ideology and thoughts toward the Sunnis; rather these websites are

more likely to cover issues on the idea of Islam and pluralism as a whole, the idea of Islam as peaceful, and focusing on the thoughts and opinions of particular Indonesian ulama and prominent Muslim leaders, who see Shia is Islam, Shiites are Muslim, and that Shia is not a wrong or misleading religion, a stark contrast to the words of conservative Sunni's ulama, government officers, and traditional Sunni followers, who have so far condemned Shia.

Moreover, there are many Shia Indonesia websites launched on the Internet. Some of them openly state the ownership of the sites, but others do not identify the ownership of the website, known locally as "*laman bodong*" (unidentified/bogus website). Some of these unidentified owners have even tried to camouflage themselves by using the website address name '*Syiah Indonesia*,' even though the websites do not actually have any links to any Shia groups or communities in Indonesia. For example, *Syiahindonesia.com* is not owned nor operated by Shia adherents or any particular Shiite groups, instead the website is established to counter and criticise Shi'ism in Indonesia and the world. Using its tagline "*Membela Sunnah Menimbang Syiah*" (Defending Sunni Juggling Shia) and its banner "*Waspadalah Bahaya Syiah Mengancam Kita*"<sup>9</sup> (Beware of the Danger of Shia for Us), this *Syiahindonesia.com* website provides news articles that condemn the public and the government for its use of practicing Shi'ism in Indonesia, and news articles on the anti-Shia movements in the country.

Likewise, there are websites considered as 'radical' Islamic sites that contain strong conservative reporting and discussion about mainstream Islam, and especially on Shi'ism in Indonesia and Iran. Websites such as [www.arahmah.com](http://www.arahmah.com) , [www.nahimunkar.net](http://www.nahimunkar.net) , [www.voa-islam.com](http://www.voa-islam.com) , and [www.islampost.com](http://www.islampost.com), are examples of such provocative online sites that provide information, articles, opinions, and news about the danger of Shia and Shi'ism, and the influence of Iran in Indonesia. The provocative terms such as "*Syiah Sesat*" (Shia is misleading), "*Bahaya Syiah*" (the danger of Shia), "*Syiah Kafir*" (Shia is *kuffar*/a disbeliever), "*Syiah seperti Komunis*" (Shia is like communism),

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<sup>9</sup> Similar jargon that had been used to counter Communism in Indonesia during the New Order era

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and so forth, are examples sarcastic words used as banners and headlines on those websites. For instance, *VOA-Islam.com* –the name of the website was taken from Voice of America/VOA—maintains to accommodate opinions and comments of anti-Shia followers and supporters. It appears that *VOA-Islam.com* tends to speak strongly on the position of the conservative Sunni Islam. Its articles on the movement of several Shiite activists in Indonesian political parties were strongly provocative and written in with negative titles and comments. For instance, when a wife of a prominent Shiite leader stated that international Shia *ulamas* supported the presidential candidacy of Joko Widodo from the PDIP party, the website condemned the PDIP party as political party of “*preman* (hoodlum), *waria* (transgender), and *Syiah* (Shia),” ([www.voa-islam.com/6 June 2014](http://www.voa-islam.com/6 June 2014)).

During the 2014 presidential elections in Indonesia, one of the anti-Shia portals i.e. *Voa-Islam.com*, developed a negative campaign about one of the candidates, that is Joko Widodo, who is now the current Indonesian president. The picture of the campaign placed on the website contained pictures of Joko Widodo, Ahok (a former vice governor of Joko Widodo in Jakarta, now the current governor of Jakarta), and Jalaluddin Rahmat (the Indonesian Ahhlul Bayt/Shia prominent leader). The big title on the advert stated “*Problem Umat Islam hari ini jika Jokowi menjadi Presiden*” (Problems of Muslim today if Jokowi [a nick name of Joko Widodo] becomes the president). It was written in the advert that there would be two major problems faced by Muslims in Indonesia if Joko Widodo won: first, Ahok, a man of Indonesian-Chinese descent, will be the next governor of Jakarta, replacing Joko Widodo. This meant that Muslims, particularly in Jakarta, would be leaded by a Chinese non-Muslim, which was considered shameful for Muslims because a Christian person will become the leader of a Muslim majority. The following is the narrative quoted from the ad:

*If Jokowi becomes the president then Ahok will be the governor of Jakarta. In fact, since the Independent of Indonesia to the present, Jakarta has never been lead by a Christian. Therefore, Ahok will be the first Christian who leads Jakarta. Apart from*

*that, Ahok is popularly a Chinese descendant whose ancestors were Chinese military that supported ally collonisation of Indonesia wallahuallam.*

The terms of 'Christian' and 'Chinese' have long become the "enemy" for Muslims and Indonesians, especially during Suharto's New Order era. The New Order regime had placed Christian and Chinese people in *vis-a-vis* position to Islam and Javaese people. This notion has then been a stronghold in the public opinion in the country. Apart from the 'Christian' and the 'Chinese' identities, the term 'Shia' has become a new enemy discourse for Islam in Indonesia in the post-New Order era. Following the above mentioned texts, the advertisement published in *Voa-Islam.com* cited the second problem faced by the Indonesian Muslims today is Jalaluddin Rahmat, the prominent Shiite leader. The text's written excerpt:

*Who does not know this very well-known Shiite leader, when he was asked about Syiria, he answered critically, "Do you want Sunni-Shia conflict in Syiria brought here in Indonesia?" and when the Sampang's incident [Sunni-Shia conflict in Sampang in 2012] occurred, he came to some Muslim leaders and asked them to accept Shia. What happens if Jokowi becomes the president? The PDIP party will assign Jalal [a nick name of Jalaluddin] as the Indonesian Minister of Religion and indirectly, this will make Jalal continue to spread his Shia thought to all [bureaucracy] authorities, and as a result, this country will be led by those Shia Rofidho, and there might be a massacre for Muslims in here (Indonesia) as it happened in Syiria, led by Nurshariyyah.*

*And the relationship of Jalaluddin with the Iran State (the largest Shia country in the world) is very close and this could be the start of the Indonesian State uniting with the Iran State to establish the Shia State (with the thought of Jalaluddin and his influence to all Ministers in Indonesia), so that Shia State will replace the Indonesian State.*

This provocative advertisement placed in *Voa-Islam.com* has reinstated the war of the Islamic conservative groups to those so-called ‘secular (Joko Widodo), Christian and Chinese (Ahok), and Shia (Jalaluddin) leaders.’ This anti-secularism, anti-Christian, anti-Chinese, and anti-Shia movement strongly provoked Muslims in Indonesia to turn against these groups, or what Hefner (2011) has defined as the “non-standard Islam” practices and groups (Hefner, 2011: 73). With a big banner along the bottom of the advertisement stating: “*Sebarkanlah agar semua umat Islam mengetahui!!!!*” (Spread this out so that all Muslims know), the conservative group has tried to start the war against the sects via an online medium.

The ‘Shia-phobia’ groups have intended to develop such websites to propagate the public to against Shi’ism and the Shia adherents in Indonesia. Almost every day, those internet portals continue posting articles about the Shia, a deviant sect of Islam, and the historical false sense of Shi’ism in the post-Prophet Mohammad era through to present day. The anti-Shia propaganda has been used not only through name-calling techniques in their political communication strategies, but also through applying negative labels upon Shia.

The era of information technology seems to have created a new space for the Indonesian Shiite communities to express their existence. The internet and social media have become the “new” medium of voices for their movements, and “opens their doors” to the public, or to borrow Bunt’s claims, “This is not just a phenomenon linked to so-called jihadi militaristic factions. It is one that is located in the areas of belief, such as elements of Shi’ism where, for personal safety, followers must practice secrecy or dissimilitude—a circumstance that has a long-term historical resonance,” (Bunt, 2009: 2).

It appears here that the milieu of ‘new democracy’ in the post-New Order era has been translated by particular Muslim conservative groups as a means to attack various views and beliefs which are different to the so-called ‘Islam mainstream,’ or those not associated to the ‘Sunni mainstream.’ While street demonstrations in Indonesia today are considered radicals and controlled strongly by the state’s police and military apparatuses, the use of online media has been perceived by those

Muslim (and Sunni) conservative movements as a new and free space to attack and radically counter any views, opinion, and values of minority sects.

### Conclusion

Internet websites, *Facebook* pages, *Blog* spots, and *Twitter* are utilised by Shiite followers and supporters (as well as the Sunnis, the Wahabi-Salafi's, the Wahabi-Takfiri's supporters, who have created their own online publications and fan pages to counter those Shia's publications) to show their presence, interactivity, and thoughts about Islam & its practice in Indonesia.

In the struggle of articulating their identity as Muslim Shia, groups of Shiites have begun to introduce, promote, and circulate their existence and thought through "new" media (printed and/or electronic). To date, there are about 23 different mediums, including but not limited to: magazines, bulletins, news online, FM radio stations, and TV shows (online). Some have declared themselves as 'Shia Indonesia,' while others choose to be affiliated or support Shia

The magazines and bulletins are mostly published monthly. Major circulations occur mainly in West Java cities like Bandung, Jakarta and Pekalongan, are controlled by Indonesian Shia institutions such as IJABI, *Al-Muthahari* Foundation, *Ahlul Bait* Indonesia (ABI), Iran Embassy, and Shiite *pesantrens* & foundations. *Al-Mawaddah* magazine is published under the Bandung chapter of the All-Indonesian Assembly of *Ahlul-Bayt* Association (*Ikatan Jamaah Ahlul-Bait Indonesia*, IJABI). *Al-Hikmah* magazine & *At-Tanwir* bulletin are published by Al-Muthahari Foundation. *Al-Jawad* bulletin and *Al-Ghadir* magazine are published by Al-Jawad Foundation in Jakarta. *Al-Huda* magazine, *Al-Musthafa* magazine, *Babim* magazine are published by an unknown Shia organizations in Jakarta. In Sumatera and Java, a group of local Shiites has established network FM radio stations & live streaming channels on the internet. In Lampung (Sumatera), Pasuruan (East Java) & Makassar (South Sulawesi), the circulation of Shia bulletins are made regularly for the public, commonly during Friday prayers in particular Masjids (usually a voluntary contribution).

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The rise of global Islamist groups that actively call for jihad through online media activism has become popular in the internet world of Indonesia, and to a particular extent have influenced the Islamist activism in Indonesia. Moreover, the role of Iranian government and its aggressive movement through the engagement of the Embassy in Jakarta with some Shi'is scholars and Indonesian communities through the establishment of Iran's media and library corner, can also be seen as part of the support of the Iran government to the spreading of Shia in Indonesia, causing radicalism, where conservative members of the public attack and turn against Shia, particularly through the use of the online media.

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