wawasan
JURNAL ILMIAH AGAMA DAN SOSIAL BUDAYA

The Challenges of Islamic Organisations in Promoting Moderation in Indonesia

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Abstract: Islamic moderation has become a strategic agenda in Indonesia, yet the threats that can slow its implementation are often left implicit. Two leading Islamic organisations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), place moderation at the core of their missionary vision to foster a tolerant, open, and civilised society. This paper examines the challenges of realising Islamic moderation in Indonesia, focusing on initiatives associated with Muhammadiyah and NU. Using a qualitative design, the study combines in-depth interviews with organisational figures from both Muhammadiyah and NU with document-based analysis of organisational narratives and relevant written sources. The interview and documentary materials are analysed interpretively to identify recurring patterns in how moderation is articulated and contested. The findings indicate that a major obstacle is the growing prominence of conservative groups, which increasingly gain wide space. This conservative turn is accompanied by weakening respect for other groups and a tendency to resist Islamic groups outside one's own circle. By making explicit how the rise of conservative groups constrains moderation work within mainstream Islamic organisations and shapes social recognition dynamics, this study contributes an evidence-based explanation of why moderation efforts can stall even when moderation is embedded in organisational missions.

Keywords: Challenges; conservatism; Islamic moderation; Islamic organisation; social recognition.

Abstrak: Moderasi Islam telah menjadi agenda strategis di Indonesia, namun ancaman yang dapat menghambat implementasinya seringkali tidak diungkapkan secara eksplisit. Dua organisasi Islam terkemuka, Muhammadiyah dan Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), menempatkan moderasi sebagai inti dari visi misionaris mereka untuk membangun masyarakat yang toleran, terbuka, dan beradab. Artikel ini mengkaji tantangan dalam mewujudkan moderasi Islam di Indonesia, dengan fokus pada inisiatif yang terkait dengan Muhammadiyah dan NU. Menggunakan desain kualitatif, studi ini menggabungkan wawancara mendalam dengan tokoh-tokoh organisasi dari Muhammadiyah dan NU dengan analisis berbasis dokumen terhadap narasi organisasi dan sumber tertulis yang relevan. Materi wawancara dan dokumen dianalisis secara interpretatif untuk mengidentifikasi pola-pola berulang dalam cara moderasi diartikulasikan dan diperdebatkan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa hambatan utama adalah meningkatnya dominasi kelompok konservatif, yang semakin mendapatkan ruang yang luas. Pergeseran konservatif ini disertai dengan melemahnya rasa hormat terhadap kelompok lain dan kecenderungan untuk menentang kelompok Islam di luar lingkaran sendiri. Dengan menjelaskan secara eksplisit bagaimana kenaikan kelompok konservatif membatasi kerja moderasi dalam organisasi Islam mainstream dan membentuk dinamika pengakuan sosial, studi ini memberikan penjelasan berbasis bukti mengapa upaya moderasi dapat terhenti meskipun moderasi tertanam dalam misi organisasi.

Kata Kunci: Tantangan; konservatisme; moderasi Islam; organisasi Islam; pengakuan sosial.

1. Introduction

Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the two most prominent Islamic organisations in Indonesia (Darajat, 2017), have made moderation a missionary vision from the start with a different *da'wah* model. Although both *da'wah* is based on the Qur'an and Hadith and the noble values of the nation, efforts to realise religious moderation are not free from obstacles that come from internal Islam. Various intolerant actions occurred in the name of Islam targeting minority religious groups, for example, became an alarm for the challenges to these efforts. The Setara Institute in 2019 released the development of cases of intolerance in Indonesia, showing violation cases concerning religious rights. From 2014 to 2019, 655 topics were reported as legal violations against religious rights. These cases involved Islamic groups with various arguments, such as enforcing Islamic *da'wah*. Not a few experts see that these actions are the impact of the strengthening of conservative Islam (Burhani, 2016; Juliandi, Ibrahim, & Herlambang, 2018; Mudzakkir, 2017; D. Wahid, 2014), which is placed as one of the triggers for the growth and development of these actions of intolerance in the last decade in Indonesia. Najib Burhani (Burhani, 2016), for example, sees the incident not as a representation of the Indonesian Muslim, but as the result of a coalition of conservative groups that have different, even contradictory, theological orientations.

Many experts have conducted various studies on religious moderation. Existing studies, in general, can be seen in three trends. First, the research emphasises the efforts made by multiple parties to support the religious moderation, including those carried out institutionally by Islamic organisations such as Muhammadiyah and NU (Al-Rasyid, 2014; Faiqah & Pransiska, 2018; Harto & Tastin, 2019; Mubarok & Rustam, 2018; Purwanto, Qowaid, Ma'rifataini, & Fauzi, 2019). These studies emphasise the importance of involving all elements, especially non-state elements, in efforts to realise moderation. Second, studies see opportunities to discover religious moderation in multicultural Indonesia (Akhmadi, 2019; Amin, 2014; Deny Irawan, 2018; Mubarok & Rustam, 2018; Syifa, 2019). One of the great opportunities here is the fact of diversity of the nation that enables the studies to explore various forms of moderation. This diversity is a substantial capital for a more open religious life amid various cross-interests, including strengthening ethnic and religious identities. Third, studies place moderation as a medium/means to support or guarantee a more harmonious and open life (Corbett, 2016; Subkhan, 2019; Widodo, 2019; Yahya, 2020). In this case, Islamic moderation can be a common path in realising a more egalitarian, balanced, and inclusive life. The three trends of the study conceptually and paradigmatically have provided a strong foundation for efforts to learn religious moderation. However, these studies have not explicitly provided predictions on various threats that could hinder the pace of this strategic effort.

This paper aims to provide an explanation that conservatism hinders the realisation of religious moderation in Indonesia. Martin van Bruinessen (2013) has discussed Islamic conservatism, which can reduce the spiritual authority of Islamic organisations, but has not comprehensively explained the threat of Islamic conservatism to the realisation of Islamic moderation, especially in Indonesia. In this regard, several questions are answered sequentially in this article. First, how do Muhammadiyah and NU in Indonesia promote religious moderation? In this case, what are the efforts made by both of them in realising religious moderation? Second, how can conservatism (Islam) hinder the pace of the two Islamic organisations' actions? What is the impact of strengthening Islamic moderation by NU-Muhammadiyah on the future of Indonesian Islam?

Methodologically, this article adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on interview evidence and document study. The primary data consist of interviews recorded as personal communications with figures from Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), including organisational leaders, youth leaders and academics, conducted between late July and early October 2020. These interview accounts are read alongside documentary materials used throughout the discussion, including organisational narratives and wider contextual reports on intolerance and freedom of religion that help situate internal organisational dynamics within Indonesia's broader religious landscape. In particular, the analysis engages with publicly available reporting on religious rights violations and intolerance, such as the Setara Institute's 2019 reporting and the Wahid Institute's 2019 annual report, as part of the

documentary basis for interpreting shifts in recognition, authority and intra-Muslim contestation. The interview and documentary materials are then analysed interpretively to trace how moderation is articulated through da'wah and social programmes, and how conservative currents are perceived to reshape relations with other groups.

2. Religious Moderation Discourse

The concept of moderation in religion has a broad spectrum. While aspects of religion are often associated with religious symbols and practices at the current social level, moderation emerges from the phenomena that preceded it. Moderation in Tezcur's view (Brocker & Künkler, 2013, p. 171) is an adaptation of public elections, peace, and non-confrontation strategies that seek compromise and peaceful dispute resolution at a non-electoral, provocative, and aggressive approach that avoid violence but may require controversial action. Meanwhile, in Islam, religious moderation appears in the teachings of *Wasatiyah* Islam (Islamic moderation). *Wasatiyah* Islam has become a direction or school of Islamic thought that has become an essential discourse, considering that Muslims are always accused in every incident of violence committed personally by Muslims who do not understand the character and teachings of Islam (Arif, 2020).

In addition, *Wasathiyah* Islam or Islamic Moderation emerged as a counterweight to groups that often accused other groups of being heretical and apostate (*takfiri*). *Wasathiyah* education itself is an understanding of moderate Islam, with the idea of opposing violence, fanaticism, and extremism, defending the oppressed, and rejecting intimidation, and terrorism (Fitri, 2015). Moderation is an option to fight radicalism or extremism as Ibrahim (2018) wrote:

> The issue of moderation has been chosen to counter the pressing issue today, which is extremism. This is crucial since, at present, religion and tradition have been accused of hosting the idea of extremism and held responsible for infusing its 'idea' to the extremist followers.

Furthermore, Kamali (2015) asserts that moderation or *wasatiyyah* (Arabic synonym: *tawassuṭ, iʿtidāl, tawāzun, iqtiṣād*) is very much in line with the concept of justice, which means choosing a position in the middle between the points of extremities. Kamali (Kamali, 2015) further states that moderation or *wasaṭiyyah* is defined as "an attitude that is recommended for people of reason, which can be distinguished from their aversion to extremism or the manifestation of neglect."

Wasathiyah is an Islamic teaching that directs its people to be fair, balanced, beneficial, and proportional, often referred to as "moderate" in all dimensions of life. *Wasathiyah* manifests itself in Islamic attitudes and is inclusive, humanist, and tolerant (Anshori, Prasojo, & Muhtifah, 2021; Niam, 2019). The concept of *ummatan wasathan* and *wasathiyah* Islam in the Middle East emerged as a response by intellectuals to the increasing trend of extremism that emerged among Muslims in the region (Diyani, 2019). In line with that, the concept of Islamic moderation or *wasathiyatul Islam* emerged due to concerns about two schools of thought and movements in the name of Islam. The first idea and movement are rigid ones that perceive Islam as a textual and constant religion that does not accept changes and discussions in its teachings, especially in matters of faith, worship, law, and *muamalat* This thought triggered terrible stigma against Islam as a complex, closed, radical, intolerant, and inhumane religion. Meanwhile, the second thought and movement are the Islamic liberation movement that carries rationalist narratives and beliefs and complete freedom of Islam, which results in Islam having to change and keep up with the times, especially in terms of sharia, worship, law, *muamalat*, and even faith (Arif, 2020). These thoughts and movements are inclusive and tolerant and position Islam as a responsive and adaptive religion to changes in society.

3. Islamic Conservatism and Social Recognition

The phenomenon of religious conservatism has a firm historical and sociological footing (Mudzakkir, 2017). Martin van Bruinessen (van Bruinessen, 2013) defined conservative Islam as a school of thought that rejects reinterpretation of Islamic teachings liberally and progressively and maintains a standardised interpretation and social system (D. Wahid, 2014). *Al-Muhafidz* is generally

defined as conservative; maintaining the prevailing circumstances, habits, and traditions (Kurniawan, 2019). Conservative terminology also refers to an understanding that stops at the realm of literalist understanding and is reluctant to accept differences in interpretation and encourages a person or group to convert that conservative insight into radical behaviour or actions (Maghfuri, 2019). Philosophically, conservative thinkers oppose legal change and the application of the law through more liberal interpretations. The ideas promoted by the conservatism group contradict the beliefs that tend to be liberal and progressive.

Conservative groups have a goal to return to the Qur'an and Sunnah, improve Islamic beliefs and morality, and revitalise the Islamic world intellectually, economically, and politically. They also attempted to strengthen Islamic communities and protect them from attacks of internal and external enemies and ensure the relevance of Islam in Muslim life in all dimensions (Manan, 2017). In Indonesia, Bruinessen cited several explanations for why conservatism has reappeared; first, the relationship between democratisation and the fading influence of liberal and progressive Islamic views; second, the strengthening of Middle Eastern power. In this case, alumni of universities in the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, spread a literal and scripturalist style of understanding Islam to the public in Indonesia (van Bruinessen, 2013).

Human life is constantly faced with plurality phenomena such as ethnic and religious plurality, which often triggers divisions. With this reality, a strategy is needed to bridge the existing gaps with various accommodation types to bring together the two poles to understand and recognise a culture (Muslim, 2013). Social recognition is significant to overcome multiple forms of injustice that befall the subject in the social order (Runesi, 2015). Social recognition is a broad concept that people give to each other in all social interactions (Rottiers, 2010). Social recognition, such as that based on Taylor's thinking, is generally built on socially derived identities based on the fact that recognition is based on social categories (Taylor, 1994). Everyone has the right to be given and to receive (M. Wahid, 2018).

Taylor (Taylor, 1994) added that social recognition is carried out with two actions: (1) respecting an individual by giving him several public awards, (2) equal treatment to protect one's dignity and right to be respected (M. Wahid, 2018). Social recognition is also shown in the respect and equal treatment of marginalised and demeaned identities. Social recognition is significant in multicultural societies to avoid discrimination. Discrimination that often occurs in multicultural societies, such as what happened in Indonesia, is the loss of rights of non-mainstream religious groups, especially indigenous religious groups in the Indonesian archipelago (Sudarto, 2019), as in the case of the group of *Sunda wiwitan* teachings in Cigugur, Kuningan which experienced discrimination by the adherents of other religion such as the prohibition of conducting religious activities of the *Sunda Wiwitan* teachings, systematic conditioning so that its followers converted to a religion recognised by the state, and even acts of physical harassment (Jubba, Pabbajah, H Prasodjo, & Qodir, 2019; Sabandiah & Wijaya, 2018). Likewise, attacks on Ahmadiyah congregations in West Java occurred where their rights as religious adherents are disrupted by claims of "being heretical" or “being apostate” against the congregations (Sajari, 2015).

This article will explore the mission and style of *da'wah* of Muhammadiyah and NU to realise a moderate religious life, not only for Muslims but also for all human beings. It also analyses the concept of Islamic conservatism to see whether this pattern of thinking impacts the order of religious life in Indonesia, including social relations between religious groups. The multicultural character of the Indonesian nation requires a medium that simultaneously bridges the growth and development of Islamic practices on the one hand and provides opportunities for the existence of other religious groups to practice their spiritual teachings on the other. Meanwhile, social recognition is intended to explain that Islamic conservatism impacts more generous social spaces.

4. The Mission to Realise Religious Moderation

Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama are the two main pillars of Indonesian civil society, which have continued to be wise to the nation for the benefit of humanity as a whole (Nashir, 2019). Muhammadiyah, through "Advanced Islam" and Nahdlatul Ulama with "Islam Nusantara," both have

big visions to present a more humanist Islam by placing it as a religion that protects all God's creation. Islam is a religion of tolerance, peace, and inclusion (Hasan, 2017). Islam is not only mercy for its worshipers but all creatures on earth. These two organisations even place "humanity" as the fundamental spirit in everyone. Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama promote engagement with other religions (Asroor, 2019). Islam that is promoted by these two organisations is Islam that accommodates the local context. What happened in Arabia in the early Islamic era was maintained by juxtaposing it with Indonesian society to create a distinctive form of Islamic practice. The commitment and efforts to spread the Islamic spirit of these two organisations gain a place in the community even though they are segmented into several small groups with different religious understandings and practices. The fact that moderation as a concept is found in other religions and traditions justifies the idea that moderation is, in fact, a universal idea (Nashir, 2019).

The 47th Muhammadiyah Congress in Makassar and the 33rd NU congress in Jombang in 2015 produced several important formulations to realise a more inclusive religious life in Indonesia. Muhammadiyah Congress held from the third until the seventh of August 2015 carried the theme "Renewal Movement towards a Progressive Indonesia", focusing on the praxis of the enlightenment movement to liberate, empower, and advance life. Liberation in this context means releases humans from ignorance, poverty, backwardness, and various other unfavourable conditions. As for enlightenment, it concerns how spiritually enlightened moral crises are resolved and violence and conflict are avoided. The Muhammadiyah enlightenment movement rests on how social relations are built in a just manner without discrimination, promoting human dignity, tolerance, and pluralism and creating major social institutions (Nashir, 2019).

Meanwhile, through the theme of "Strengthening Nusantara Islam for Indonesian and World Civilisation," NU is also committed to building a tolerant and peaceful civilisation (Mustofa, 2015). NU not only focuses on the textual affirmation of Islamic ideology but also on how Islamic values are manifested into real contexts. These two pillars of Islam position da'wah as a medium for disseminating teachings that cover all aspects through an encouraging and friendly method. In this case, both Muhammadiyah and NU move in the same direction, which is a human benefit without discrimination. Muhammadiyah's da'wah movement, known as the *Amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*, is focused on education and health, which are open to all people regardless of their religion. PKO (*Penolong Kesengsaraan Oemoen*) was established to help Muslims and all people and to help the poor.

> PKU (formerly PKO: *Penolong Kesengsaraan Oemoen/Umum*) was established in Surabaya in 1924 and was not at all aimed at Islamising non-Muslims. PKU is purely to help people, especially people who have difficulty getting treatment. PKU was standing with a lot of help from Dutch and Christian nurses at that time" (AM, Muhammadiyah Leader, Personal Communication, September 10, 2020).

> Dr. Soetomo stated in the opening speech of the PKO as follows.
> Tomorrow morning, we will open this clinic. Anyone, whether European, Javanese (native), Chinese or Arab, may come here, they will be helped [with] free of charge, as long as they are inferior" (Mulkhan, 2010, p. 84).

This affirmation proved that the health services were not limited to Muslims or Muhammadiyah members but were open to anyone who needed assistance and it did not have an ideological mission. Likewise, Muhammadiyah educational institutions such as schools and universities are not intended for only Muhammadiyah followers. For example, in various areas such as Papua, West Papua, and West Nusa Tenggara, Muhammadiyah College (PTM) has graduated many alumni from non-Muslim circles. One of the young Muhammadiyah leaders, FS, said, "*There are more non-Muslim students here. Those who are non-Muslims are mostly Papuans. Students are also not required to wear the hijab. They enjoy the learning process*" (FS, Personal Communication, October 02, 2020).

In Java itself, where Muslims dominate, not all PTM students have a Muhammadiyah background. This situation shows that Muhammadiyah's *da'wah*, which is manifested in lectures and recitations and business charity, does not form its exclusive line because the primary mission of Muhammadiyah's *da'wah* is how to give benefit and for humanity.

The Muhammadiyah *da'wah* movement is called *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* as the method of choice. *Amar ma'ruf* (inviting to the good deed) and *nahi munkar* (staying away from evil) are based on the call to always do good and stay away from wrong actions without discriminating against other people. *Da'wah's* target with this fundamental principle is for Muslims and all creatures to achieve a more harmonious-humanist life. Muhammadiyah's *da'wah* is more prominent with "Progressive Islam" as a style without reducing the basic principles. The arguments extracted from the Qur'an and Sunnah are understood both textually and contextually to be more flexible and readily accepted by the Muslim community. Muhammadiyah's da'wah is reflected in business charities, especially in education and health.

In education, the enemy of Islam is not certain groups such as groups outside Islam, but ignorance. In the health sector, the primary mission of establishing hospitals and clinics is to ensure health facilities are accessible to all groups and can heal illness quickly without questioning the patient's (religious) background. Therefore, educating and treating are not intended for specific groups but everyone in need without discrimination.

Meanwhile, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), through its cultural propaganda package, carries a similar theme to that of Muhammadiyah, which is realising a friendly, open, and tolerant Islam. NU's *da'wah* style combines Islam and local culture. This type of *da'wah* is not new to Islam in Indonesia. NU's cultural *da'wah* was inspired by Walisongo and later scholars in the Indonesian archipelago. Muslims who are still heavily influenced by the Hindu-Buddhist tradition face an approach that should not erase old habits and should combine Islamic values in the *da'wah* process instead. Previous scholars' thoughts and models influenced NU's *da'wah*. Those scholars are Shaykh Abd Rauf al-Singkili al-Jawi, Shaykh Yusuf al-Makassari, Shaykh Abd al-Muhyi Pamijahan, Hamzah Fansuri, Muhammad Nawawi al-Bantani, Muhammad Nafis al-Banjari, and others. Hasyim Asy'ari and several other prominent scholars then continued the mission.

NU's cultural *da'wah* is driven by the reality that Islam and community traditions live together. This *da'wah* pattern was also an option as accommodation for Islam towards the culture by making changes. Hence, the people could accept Islam at that time. This cultural *da'wah* rests on the mainstreaming of Islam which has those characteristics since cultural da'wah requires high tolerance, moderation, cooperation, equal rights, and justice. The basic principles of NU's cultural *da'wah* are based on *tawassuth* (moderation), *tawazun wa i'tidal* (balance), *tasamuh* (tolerance), and *Amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (Asmar, 2018). These four principles are the basis for their da'wah to this day. Of these four principles, Fealy (1997, p. 225), citing KH. Ahmad Shiddiq, stated that radicalism and criticism of the government are not a tradition at NU because it does not follow *tawassuth* (moderation). Although this statement explains NU in the 1970s, moderation, and disagreement with radicalism have been running for a long time.

NU's moderation attitude is *Jam'iyah Diniyah Islamiyah*. In fiqh, NU follows the four schools (*madhhab*) of Syafii', Hanafi, Maliki, and Hambali. Meanwhile, in *aqeedah*, NU follows Abu Hasan al-Asyari and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (Almu'tasim, 2019). The cultural *da'wah* movement in society has strong roots in classical *turats*. Therefore, *turats wal hadatsah* (tradition and modernity) became the key in cultural *da'wah* movements by NU. It later became known as the adage *al-muhafadzah ala al-qadim al-shalih wa al-akhdu bi al-jadid al-ashlah* (maintaining good old traditions while adopting new and better practices) (Sunarto, 2013). This adage emphasises that NU is placed in the middle position in developing its *da'wah*.

Both Muhammadiyah and NU have introduced and practiced Islamic *wasatiyah* in *da'wah* and social movements to various societal levels without distinction of status and social identity, including religion. The mission is the same: to prove Islam as a religion of grace. Islam is a source of inspiration for life, including social and even political life. What is shown by both of them not only confirms the

commitment to manifest Islam in real terms in various aspects of life but also explains the preservation of the religious spirit, which is institutionally the foundation of Indonesian Muslims. The idealised Islam is Islam where the public interest is the meeting point of all efforts made. In this case, the da'wah is a moderate-substantive paradigm that directly contrasts the formalistic-integralist paradigm in recent years.

5. The Rise of Islamic Conservatism: A Challenge of Moderation

Muhammadiyah and NU are currently dealing with the revival of conservative Islamic movements. On the one hand, these new movements are seen as bringing new enthusiasm for Islamic da'wah in the region, but on the other hand, they are also seen as a threat to familiar religious practices (Lanti, Akim, & Dermawan, 2020). Looking back at the various actions of Islamic groups in the New Order era, every activity was closely monitored so that almost no movement led to criticism of the regime. This condition changed after the New Order when Islamic movements promoted and affirmed moderate Islam and a formal pro-Islamic attitude and criticised the regime. Movements in Islam rose and carried big themes such as Islamic formalism, including in-state life. This Islamic revival is also a conservative turn (van Bruinessen, 2013). Conservative turn triggers political turmoil, especially in Islam. Various forms of intolerance have emerged in Indonesia.

A memorable case of intolerance and political turmoil in the case of the governor and deputy governor of DKI Jakarta in 2017. Thousands of people joined in a demonstration against Ahok (Basuki Cahaya Purnama). In this case, several Islamic figures saw that conservative Islam coincides with the "erosion" of the function of Muhammadiyah and NU as strongholds of Islamic moderation. The fighting spirit of these two Islamic civil organisations has weakened and cannot control their respective masses (D. Wahid, 2014). 212 and 411 Movements, for example, were attended by Muhammadiyah-NU masses and a combination of various other Islamic organisations. The internal part of Islam was experiencing "depreciation" and weakening of solidity resulting in "wild" movements. One of the important figures of Muhammadiyah explicitly stated that Muslims, not only those of Muhammadiyah and NU but also other Muslim groups in the world, experienced a degradation of the spirit to realise Islamic moderation. He stated, "*The weak fighting spirit is a disease of all moderate Muslim movements in the world*" (USA, Personal Communication, August 25, 2020).

The rise of conservative Islamic groups is recognised as a threat to life, as evidenced by history showing that conservatism breeds acts of intolerance (Mudzakkir, 2017). In this case, conservative Islam is factually a challenge for the realisation of Islamic moderation today. AM, a Muhammadiyah figure, stated:

> The serious challenge of religious moderation, especially Islamic [moderation], is from within Islam itself. In Muhammadiyah, it is the development of Muhammadiyah Ikhlas and Muhammadiyah Salafi. In NU, the paramilitary groups that are ultra-NU and ultra-nationalist have developed. It has a strong influence on these two masses (AM, Muhammadiyah Leader, Personal Communication, August 25, 2020).

This assertion was also acknowledged by HS, a prominent NU figure, stating that:

> Conservatism and radicalism movements are a real challenge for religious moderation in Indonesia because this idea leads to a setback to damage the tradition of diversity, especially NU, and create social conflicts between religious communities and even within Islam (HU, Personal Communication, August 25, 2020).

Various ummah problems experienced by Indonesian Muslims have triggered multiple responses, including the counter-productive efforts to the spirit of religious moderation. The moral decline that occurs in all age groups, for example, begins acts of violence in the name of Islam. Likewise, the economic difficulties experienced by the community resulted in a form of "recklessness" in acting even though what they did was a deviant act both according to legal and religious norms. The gap in thinking between the Islamic elite and the ummah is also a problem for the smooth growth of

conservative ideas. The elite has not interpreted Islam well and quickly chooses a more straightforward style of Islam. One of NU's academics and youth leaders, SQ, said:

> Now there is conservatism among Muslims because most of them still hold on to old traditions that tend to be conservative and do not lead to change. The contributing factor is the knowledge gap between the elites and the people. The life experiences gained by some people have created antipathy towards the moderation movement and religious pluralism. Moreover, the benefits of defending moderation are not yet clear for the survival of the people (SQ, Personal Communication, July 28, 2020).

The moderate position of Muhammadiyah-NU is considered by conservative groups as a way to weaken faith and Islam itself. There is a counter-discourse on religious moderation because it is an effort to weaken the internal organisation of Islam. PH, a young NU leader and administrator of Lakpesdam, said:

> The challenges, according to my observations, come from new Islamic puritanism groups such as the Salaf group and political Islam movements such as the HTI. Meanwhile, we (NU), who always carry the jargon of moderate Islam, are even considered to weaken the faith of Muslims (PH, Personal Communication, July 28, 2020).

Besides internal challenges, the outside world also threatens Islamic moderation in Indonesia, as recognised by MS, a NU academic. He said:

> There are two serious challenges to Islamic moderation today, [from] inside and outside. From the inside, there are differences in political choices that have not been addressed maturely. Different Islamic groups are considered opponents. Likewise, there is a gap of knowledge among religious elites and laymen about pluralism and tolerance. The fact that we are ignored [is] because we only care about our group. The most visible external challenge is the transnational Islamic movement that enters and is not filtered by Islamic groups. "[When] External culture is imposed in Indonesia, which has its [own] culture, it never meets its ideas, including [its idea of] Islam (MS, Personal Communication, July 29, 2020).

This transnational movement has even entered the heart of Muslims through institutions and donations. "There are transnational ideologies that enter either through mosques, business charities, or other media. In West Kalimantan, AMCF (Asia Muslim Charity Foundation-ed) established Ma'had Al Khansa and has its office in the PWM building. Many of the preachers produced tend to be salaf", said HS, one of the young leaders of Muhammadiyah (HS, Personal Communication, July 29, 2020). A solid internal organisation of Islam with excessive traditionalism, liberalism, and revivalism creates solid fanaticism. It does not open up space for dialogue interaction, especially with other Islamic groups (Rohmatika & Hakiki, 2018). On the other hand, Islamic moderation can contribute to and encourage the progress of science, culture, and economy.

Information from several figures above shows that Islamic understanding, which tends to be conservative, provides room for the growth and development of rigid, or even harsh, Islamic practices. The strengthening of Islamic conservatism cannot be separated from influences from outside Indonesia that have the intersection of ideologies. The religious spirit always returns to the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah. Several conservative Muslims have no sufficient knowledge in understanding Islam. Yet, many of them claimed that their understanding is right while others are wrong, and even accused as an infidel. The positions do not provide a place for other religious groups even though the groups are also Muslims because rigid, textual, and literal Islamic understanding is growing in the Islamic world, including in Indonesia. Differences in interpretation are even understood as contradictory conditions to address contrasting and partial actions.

6. Crisis of Social Recognition

Other groups' lack of recognition weakens Islamic conservatism in Indonesia. Conservatism coincides with the strengthening of practices that adopt the terminology "the other and us", *Minna wa minkum*. In this case, there is a clear distinction between members of one group and other groups. Not only differentiation but also social mapping tends to deny each other, even kill each other. The Setara Institut report also explained rampant acts of violence in the community that make differences a trigger. The Wahid Institute also released its annual report on Freedom of Religion (KBB) in 2019, where there were 184 cases of violations (intolerance) with 215 incidences. Of the 184 cases, 30 cases were hated speech against other groups and accusing another Muslim(s) of apostasy (*takfiri*) and were followed by violence from both state and non-state actors. Non-state actors are civil societies and institutions that are violent and do intolerant activities. Victims of this prejudiced case included 30 religious groups or sects and 19 issues against Christian groups.

Religious minority groups are the targets of intolerant actions of certain religious groups The Ahmadiyya community has fallen victim to intolerance due to a monopoly on a proper interpretation of sacred texts by certain groups. The truth claims that only come from the majority directly closes the opportunity for understanding from the minority side. This situation has an impact on the singularity of the truth. The truth claim exists in the traditions of religions. However, this claim provides a vast space for the majority group (of Abrahamic religions) to neglect other groups (Tajrid, 2012). In the dynamics of Islam in Indonesia, the interpretation of truth is visible in the dominance of (Sunni) Islam to marginalise other Islamic groups such as Ahmadiyya and Shia communities.

The truth claims that have been going on so far have denied the fact that Indonesian people are plural and do not adhere to the same religion. This claim also denies the universal mandate of faith, which focuses more on prioritizing human dignity and not merely upholding textual teachings (Jubba & Hidayati, 2018). A truth claim is a statement that only one group is accepted and the right one, while others are wrong. It is a big challenge faced by religious people in creating a peaceful life (Tajrid, 2012). A harmonious life can fail if it intensifies negative sentiments towards religious groups outside a certain group.

7. Religious Moderation, Islamic Conservatism, and the Challenge of Social Recognition

The findings demonstrate that Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) promote religious moderation through different but complementary approaches. Muhammadiyah advances Progressive Islam through educational and healthcare services, while NU develops cultural da'wah by integrating Islamic values with local traditions. These practices reflect the principles of wasatiyah, particularly moderation, balance, tolerance, and justice (Anshori et al., 2021; Kamali, 2015). They also reinforce Nashir's argument (2019) that moderation can foster inclusive relations across religious and cultural boundaries.

However, the findings reveal that the moderating influence of these organisations faces challenges from both internal and external conservative currents. This extends van Bruinessen's discussion (2013) of the conservative turn by showing how conservative tendencies can contest the authority and internal cohesion of established moderate organisations. The interview accounts further indicate that ideological differences, limited religious understanding, and transnational Islamic movements contribute to these challenges. This finding also resonates with Din Wahid's observation (2014) regarding the weakening role of Muhammadiyah and NU as strongholds of Islamic moderation.

Furthermore, the marginalisation of Ahmadiyya and Shia communities illustrates how exclusive truth claims can undermine social recognition. Drawing on Taylor's concept (1994), recognition requires respect for different identities and equal treatment to protect human dignity. The findings therefore support Tajrid's (2012) and Jubba and Hidayati's (2018) arguments that exclusive religious claims can obstruct harmonious social relations and disregard the dignity of others.

In conclusion, this study highlights the interconnectedness of religious moderation, Islamic conservatism, and social recognition. It extends previous studies by demonstrating that promoting moderation requires more than institutional programmes and inclusive religious teachings. It also demands the capacity of Islamic organisations to address internal ideological contestation, resist exclusivism, and uphold equal recognition of religious differences. Thus, religious moderation should be understood not merely as a normative ideal but as an ongoing social process grounded in human dignity and respect for plurality.

8. Conclusion

Islamic moderation promoted by Muhammadiyah and NU in Indonesia has not maximally dampened the conservative Islamic movement. The rise of conservatism changed da'wah's direction and the image of Islam, which is a complete and flexible footing of life, into harsh and intolerant ones. Religious moderation is experiencing obstacles in its realisation, along with the more substantial penetration of conservative groups through various da'wah media, including social media, to disseminate influence to society, which gives the impression that Islam is more exclusive and keeps Islam away from its spirit as a religion of grace. What is being promoted by Muhammadiyah and NU in Indonesia today can reflect their commitment to proving that Islam is a religion that becomes a bridge to realise a more humane social life.

Efforts that have been initiated by the mainstream Islamic civic groups in Indonesia face problems when it comes to dealing with conservative Islamic groups. In this case, although religious (Islam) moderation is interpreted as a dignified social life goal, it encounters obstacles when it deals with fellow Muslims from different Islamic groups. The strengthening of conservative Islamic groups is when the flow of unilateral truth claims is getting stronger. Muhammadiyah and NU even tend to be silent and only focus on strengthening their respective organisations. The urge to fight against various movements that lead Islam to closed-mindedness is getting stronger. The majority position of the two organisations that carry moderatism is not visible.

This article only observes the efforts made by two leading mass organisations in Indonesia to realise religious moderation and the challenges from the internal organisation of Islam itself. Therefore, further studies that investigate the challenges of religious moderation that come from outside Islam (external factors) and efforts to realise Islamic moderation carried out by other civil (Islamic) organisations are needed to obtain a more comprehensive study. Likewise, the data used are still one-sided, obtained from internal sources of Muhammadiyah and NU. Further studies by taking a broader spectrum will complement this study.

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