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## Muslim Preachers in Social Media: Fighting For Moderation

By Satrio Dwicahyo

### Synopsis

*Indonesian Muslims inclined to moderation have been increasing their presence in social media to counter the extensive influence of hard-line teachings. More than developing platforms, uploaded contents should be presented in a clear and succinct way to appeal to Muslim audiences.*

### Commentary

SOCIAL MEDIA is a space that Indonesians often go to learn more about religion. With only a few keywords, Muslims can look up the myriad of opinions on whether an issue like insurance is *halal* (islamically permissible) or *haram* (islamically not permissible) from videos or short articles. Senior religious authorities may attempt to counter certain simplistic or absolutist claims in the videos by certain religious preachers. However, Muslim audiences may not be so discerning. Videos can also be easily disseminated to their peers via word-of-mouth or sharing through other avenues.

Surrounded by the presence of newly-emerging religious teachers using slick layouts in the virtual world to attract adherents, Muslims in Indonesia who steer the path of moderation have been continuously working to boost their social media presence. The majority of these methods, however, have been limited to “symbolic” efforts with the use of outdated social media platforms such as websites or smart phone apps. Little attention is paid to packaging the content for it to be appealing and easy to digest.

### Theology and Technology

Among other characteristics, Salafi-Wahabism often exhibit a rather simplified comprehension of religion without its nuances and context. Nonetheless, this

particular aspect suits the transient nature of social media quite well; users prefer to see short and uncomplicated content. To address whether an act is *halal* or *haram*, a Salafi-Wahabi preacher can usually provide a solid answer in a two- to five- minute video.

In addition, videos that seek to proselytise are usually made in a very interactive way. Netizens or audiences who log on to the live sessions are able to have their questions answered directly in the video, through e-mail or comments in other social media. Such an interactive method uniquely builds on the intimate bonds between the congregation (*jamaah*) and the preacher.

Frequent questions concerning daily issues can also be addressed through infographics, comics, and even memes. The creator of the online graphic *da'wah* is able to upload its e-comic onto three kinds of social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Muslims who finds these media platforms useful can quite easily share with others who are also motivated by religious orders to “convey even one verse”.

Equipped with both theological and technological advantages, the Salafi-Wahabi brand of Islam had become the most influential stream in social media amongst Muslims in Indonesia. According to Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), a major Muslim organisation that spearheads counter argument against Salafi-Wahabi interpretations, many social media platforms espousing Salafi-Wahabi beliefs were even known to hide their identity by utilising prominent NU insignias namely: *Ahlusunnah Wal Jamaah/Aswaja* (Adherents to the Sunnah and the community) & *Kitab Kuning* (Traditional book used by NU's communities) among others.

### **Social Media Platforms Good Enough?**

Learning from the success of Salafi-Wahabi related methods used in social media, NU and Muhammadiyah may be late in the race to counter such teachings or provide counter-arguments against a literalist interpretation of Islam. The engagement of these indigenous organisations on a captive Muslim audience becomes an uphill battle even as they prioritise the setting up of a social media presence without paying attention to making online content as user-friendly as possible.

Compared with common Salafi-Wahabi videos, NU clerics have more comprehensive yet rather encumbered and time-consuming ways of exegesing a particular text or issue. A simplistic or absolutist approach towards religion would be dangerous for the *ummah* (Muslim community) with limited religious knowledge. In the traditional practice of *pengajian* (religious learning), one might have the luxury of expending a longer time to discuss a teaching. However, with social media where the attention span of a user tends to be shorter, a brief straightforward presentation is preferred.

NU's main website (NU Online), for instance, addresses religious issues via 500- to 700-word articles. Despite being relatively short, Indonesian netizens on average read articles online in less than a minute. Apart from that, a short yet interactive video with clear image and sound reach more Internet users than merely an article. NU Online also functions as one that covers the activities of NU's members but may not

accommodate the *ummah*'s inquiries. This type of content would likely deter "non-NU" Muslims from exploring the website.

Videos of sermons, if any, are recorded without regard to a proper packaging of content. One consequence would be longer duration of video with unclear answers at the end. Another complaint is that the video resembles more of an ordinary video rather than that of a sermon designed specifically for an audience. Preachers are also usually not aware or savvy of how they can communicate interactively with netizens.

### **Influential Figures: An Alternative?**

To provide the necessary counter argument, some NU members active in social media have begun to initiate efforts in disseminating their ideas. Nadirsyah Hosen, a NU member who resides in Australia, for instance, actively uses his Twitter account to criticise the current Islamisation of everyday life which places emphasis on outward appearances rather than internal comprehension of the religion. Nadirsyah, who joined Twitter since October 2015, has about 60,000 followers and he frequently organises interactive sessions via Twitter.

To a certain extent, the appearance of Islam in the Indonesian public sphere has been greatly influenced by more popular "celebrity" preachers. This new trend, in which traditional modes of Islamic transmission are increasingly challenged by advances in technology, forms the basis of the popularity of these new kinds of preachers.

In just a few years, the trend among Indonesian Muslims is now greatly inclined towards preachers who emphasised a spiritual transformation through some form of outward changes. These include drastic changes in fashion style, social media preference, and patterns of consumption. In other words, it is highly likely that a majority of Indonesian Muslims, at least in social media, prefers preachers who endorse greater Islamisation in everyday life.

In opposition to such a trend, Nadirsyah Hosen as well as other members of NU and Muhammadiyah sees things differently. They emphasised instead religion as being something private and internal. It remains to be seen if such alternative thinking on religion in social media could challenge the current absolutist or literalist interpretation of Islam in the long run.

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