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## **Muhammadiyah: The Challenge of Rising Conservatism**

*By Andar Nubowo*

### **Synopsis**

*Ostensibly a champion of moderate Islam in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah is itself challenged by a growing conservatism in Indonesian politics. How should Indonesia's second largest Muslim organisation cope with this turn towards conservatism?*

### **Commentary**

THE MYRIAD voices found within various quarters in Muhammadiyah in response to the blasphemy case of Jakarta's vice-governor Basuki Tjahaya Purnama (also known as Ahok) has shown that the second largest Islamic organisation in Indonesia is not a monolithic entity. Ahok, the former vice-governor with a good track-record, found himself mired in controversy when he was shown on video making references to a Quranic verse in 2016. He was subsequently accused of blasphemy by Islamic hardliners and eventually jailed by the authorities for two years.

Muhammadiyah, as an institution, has taken a more neutral stance prohibiting its members from participating in the mass demonstrations against Ahok, at the same time demanding a fair trial for him. But the elites within Muhammadiyah were divided. There were many followers who concurred that Ahok should be indicted for blasphemy. As the result, approximately 100,000 Muhammadiyah members decided to join the mass rally that took place on 2 December 2016 (also known as "Aksi 212").

### **Conservative Turn**

The anti-Ahok demonstrations were at odds with the modernist, progressive vision of Muhammadiyah founded by Ahmad Dahlan in 1912. The Majelis Tabligh (or Religious Propagation Council), a group under Muhammadiyah's purview, went against the

organisation's official stance of neutrality by directly playing a central role in the anti-Ahok demonstrations.

Prominent Muhammadiyah figures such as Amien Rais and Yunahar Ilyas, both former heads of Majelis Tabligh and revered by conservative Muhammadiyah members, were vocal in their condemnation of Ahok.

Muhammadiyah is known for its progressive views of Islam encapsulated within its *Islam Berkemajuan* or Progressive Islam manifesto. The doctrine adopts a non-scripturalistic approach, or a view that Islamic values embrace modernity and go hand-in-hand with the development of science, technology, democracy, and human rights.

The modernist, progressive identity of Muhammadiyah is currently being contested. There had been a growing trend of female students wearing the Islamic full veil or burqa even though this dress code is neither a must in Islam nor correspondingly a Muhammadiyah tradition. Azaki Khairudin, a senior official in the Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta, suggests that there are about a thousand students (three percent of the student population) wearing burqa.

In the Ahmad Dahlan University of Yogyakarta, Hadi Suyono, Head of Public Relations of the university, noted that there are about 600 students (two percent of the student population) similarly attired. Donning the burqa is increasingly seen as a direct physical manifestation of conservatism within certain elements in society.

### **Nature of Conservatism**

Although there was heavy lobbying by Muhammadiyah members who participated in the anti-Ahok rally, Muhammad Ali who is the secretary of Muhammadiyah Surakarta, assured that "there is no reason to ally with or cooperate with them [referring to the conservative groups within]".

This has shown that partnership with hardline grassroots movements such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) – the group that played a central role in the anti-Ahok demonstrations – was perhaps a one-off event in which various interests converge.

On the other hand, there is evidence that affiliation between smaller groupings under the aegis of Muhammadiyah with hardliners is getting stronger. An influential figure such as Bachtiar Nasir has assumed a dual role. He is a member of Muhammadiyah's Majelis Tabligh as well as Chairman of the GNPf-MUI (National Movement of Islamic Legal Opinion Defenders - the Council of Indonesian Ulama) which played a major role in the anti-Ahok demonstrations.

Bachtiar also has a strong connection with Salafi modernist networks that propagate that *NKRI Bersyariah* -- the idea of the Unitary State of Indonesia with Shariah -- should be implemented. What is really intriguing is that Nasir has been promoting himself and his cause through social media. The high number of followers he has compared to other progressive figures such as Haedar Nashir (current General Chairman of Muhammadiyah) gives him greater recognition within social media.

### **Islamic Solidarity**

Another example is Buya Risman Muchtar, Deputy of the Majelis Tabligh of Muhammadiyah, who has openly campaigned for alliance between Muhammadiyah and hardline groups. According to Buya Risman “as long as it is in line with Islamic concerns and *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic solidarity), Muhammadiyah can collaborate with any Islamic groups”.

Komando Al Maidah (Kokam), a group of Muhammadiyah Youth activists, also maintained a similar view. Indeed, the term *ukhuwah* or solidarity can have different interpretations. While progressive Islam has a more humanitarian interpretation, hardliners tend to interpret such terms narrowly for the sake of political objectives – in this case to apply shariah and Islamic jurisdiction in a multi-religious country like Indonesia.

At the regional level, the desire of Muhammadiyah members to link up with groups beyond the organisation is becoming more apparent. In February 2018, the Muhammadiyah branch of Mantrijeron Yogyakarta invited Sobri Lubis of FPI as a keynote speaker.

Despite having different approaches, the congregation explored the possibility of a joint cooperation between the two to enforce their standard of Islamic justice in Yogyakarta. These cumulatively demonstrated a growing conservative strand within Muhammadiyah.

### **Future of Muhammadiyah**

The anti-Ahok demonstrations represented a watershed event that satisfied the hardliners’ attempt at achieving some of their aims to Islamise Indonesia and bring their cause to the forefront of national discussion. The conservatives have undoubtedly utilised social media and digital technology to support their stance.

Under the democratic setting of Indonesia, they become more and more confident in promoting their ideals while fostering a sieged mentality of being perennially attacked by Judeo-Christian, secular-liberal conspiracies, notably in the field of politics, economic and social and religious life.

As a critical vanguard of progressive Islam in Indonesia, the identity tension within Muhammadiyah can have a profound impact on its role in promoting *Islam Berkemajuan* or progressive Islam. The promotion of *Islam Berkemajuan* is pivotal in channelling the loyalties of its approximately 22 million members across Indonesia towards Islamic democracy – demonstrating the compatibility of Islam and democracy -- rather than authoritarian theocracy.

The future of Muhammadiyah thus depends on the ability of progressive ideas to prevail over the conservative tide. Progressive intellectuals and young millennials from Muhammadiyah could start by creatively using social media to promote their ideas through persuasion and reasoning. Finally, progressive individuals at the national level can link up with global networks to counter intolerance.

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