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AS OF 01 SEPTEMBER 2019

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“The Role of Nahdhatul Ulama-based Universities in Mainstreaming Moderate Islam: Case Studies from Malang, East Java”

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ASBTRACT

The paper discusses the programs and activities of universities that are closely related to Nahdhatul Ulama in mainstreaming moderate Islam. Universitas Islam Malang (Unisma) and Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang (UIN Maliki), both are located at an important site of the radical movement in East Java, will be two cases the paper will analyse. It focuses on best practices that demonstrate how the two universities develop their moderate Islam policies and strategies in light of the development of Islamism in Malang in general, and at Islamic universities in particular.

The paper discusses the programs and activities of universities that are closely related to Nahdhatul Ulama in mainstreaming moderate Islam. The Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) was established in 1926 by Wahab Chasbullah (d. 1971) with the support of Hasjim Asj'ari (d. 1947). The organization was formed because its leaders wanted to defend their religious belief, which was blended with Javanese practices that they had held for centuries. Indeed, this belief has been perceived as characterizing the Indonesian Islam, which is coloured with Indonesian local traditions.¹ Members of this organisation, estimated at around 80 million. NU is concerned with education as well as economic development for the poor.

This presentation is based on a field research conducted at Islamic Education Study Programs at the State Islamic University Maulana Malik Ibrahim (UIN Maliki) Malang and Islamic University Malang (Unisma), both are located at an important site of the radical movement in East Java, from August to November 2018. Even though UIN Maliki is a public university, it is very much Nahdhatul Ulama oriented, and Unisma is a university that is formally associated with Nahdhatul Ulama. The paper focuses on best practices that demonstrate how the two universities develop their moderate Islam strategies

¹ Although several scholars, most recently Menchik (2016), have challenged this idea of moderation as the form of Indonesian exceptionalism.

in light of the development of Islamism in Malang in general, and in Islamic universities in particular.

Introduction: Malang as an Important Site for Spreading Islamism

Malang is the second largest city in East Java after Surabaya. The city is notorious as a touristic destination as well as the city of education with big universities including Universitas Brawijaya, Universitas Negeri Malang, Universitas Islam Negeri Malang, Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, and Universitas Islam Malang. This has resulted in its high urbanization rate. According to a census held in 2018, the city receives an additional of 1,300 citizens every month (<http://dispendukcapil.malangkota.go.id>). Malang is believed to be a meeting point of terror movement in East Java (*"titik penting dalam simpul gerakan terror di Jawa Timur"*). It is not a new ground for terrorism because in 2014 ISIS was declared in Dau, Malang greater area. Terrorism in Malang has reached as far as Singasari, Karangploso, and Dau (Yusli Effendi, *Malang Post*, 17 May 2018).

A more specific research on Universitas Brawijaya students who took courses on Pancasila, Islamic Studies, Civic, and Indonesian language revealed that 22,7% out of 1,888 students supported *khilafah* (government based on Islamic law). The study also found that the students' exposure to Islamism was to some extent influenced by their relationship with other students through "assistance" program, and through non-academic activities outside campus, such as *pengajian* (Islamic gatherings). The new students, especially, become the main target for Islamism due to their emotional fragility being far away from home (Effendi, 2018).

A similar survey on "Students' Religious Scheme" of the State Islamic University of Malang last year was conducted to early detect radicalism within the campus. Even though the survey revealed that the majority of the students were tolerant, some 29,3% (744 students) was ready to die to uphold Islam, and 18% (475 students) said that fighting the infidels (*kafir*) was the key to heaven (Tim Penelitian Psikologi UIN Maliki Malang, 2018). Amidst the growing tendency of Islamism in Malang, this paper will discuss policies, programs, and

activities of these two universities to examine their efforts in mainstreaming moderate Islam. But before that I will start with a glimpse of the core values of the two universities to understand how these principles are translated into actions.

UIN Maliki and Unisma

UIN Maliki started as a branch of the State Islamic University Yogyakarta in 1962. In mid 1997 it was developed into College of Islamic Studies (STAIN) Malang and was transformed into a full-fledged university on 21 June 2004. (www.uin-malang.ac.id). In line with this transformation, the Rector declared an epistemological change that tried to integrate between secular knowledge and Islamic studies:

“I think that to understand the Qur'an and Hadith we need some tools, namely: Arabic, English, Philosophy, Hard Science, and Social Sciences. Those knowledge are very important for everyone in their studies” (Imam Suprayogo, tulisanterkini.com).

The Rector at that time, Prof. Imam Suprayogo, underlined that the transformation to a full university was based on an ideal goal to harmonize between knowledge and religion that is not only manifested in the curriculum but also in the daily behavior of the academic community within the campus. For that, all students are expected to develop four core values, namely: (1) spirituality, (2) great morality, (3) comprehensive knowledge, and (4) professional maturity (Imam Suprayogo, 2016).

The university outlined 9 main pillars called *Arkanu Jami'ah* (rukun perguruan tinggi): 1) Professors who are competent both academically and spiritually, 2) Mosque as the center for spiritual and intellectual activities, 3) *Ma'had* as a place to consistency practice rituals, to respect time, and to learn to be discipline, 4) Library as an information and research center, 5) Laboratorium, 6) class rooms, professor offices, and discussion rooms, 7) Administration Office that offers efficient services, 8) Center for Sports and Arts, 9) Great funding resources (Imam Suprayogo, 2016).

The establishment of Unisma, on the other hand, was initiated by some Nahdhatul 'Ulama (NU) leaders to launch a big, high quality, and independent Islamic university. It started as an academy of Islamic Education back in 1963, and was transformed into Unisma on 27 March 1981. The university now has 10 faculties, including Medical School (www.unisma.ac.id).

To support the needs of its academic community, Unisma has several facilities, including: Center for the Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah Studies, Halal Center, and Boarding school. We will, however, not find a strong epistemological basis at Unisma as we found at UIN Maliki. It is true that Unisma has also paid a significant attention in harmonizing between science and cultures that are based on the values of Ahlussunnah waljama'ah (Aswaja). In addition, this university, which has a motto "*Dari NU untuk peradaban Indonesia dan Dunia*" (From NU to Indonesian and World Civilization) emphasizes the teaching of Islam that are based on the principles of Aswaja, namely: *tawassuth* (moderate), *tawazzun* (balanced), *tasammuh* (tolerance), dan *ta'addul* (equality). However, a more philosophical framework that underlines the university's standpoint, which is implemented in all aspects of academic life, seems lacking.

Islamism within the Campus?

We have seen above how both universities have set their goals to become great universities that would combine knowledge and spirituality, and that emphasize moderate interpretation of Islam. The question is what are the religious views (or, more specifically, Islamic views) of the professors and students of these universities? Are they reflecting and in line with the goals that have been set?

A survey that I conducted to some professors and students at the Islamic Education Study Programs of UIN Maliki Malang showed that both groups are moderate in their views on Islam. The majority of professors (90%) and students (92%) stated that they disagree with the argument that Islam could only be sustained with the *khilafah* system. Furthermore, the majority of professors (90%) and students (96%) did not agree with the use of physical violence or

suicide in the attempt to form an Islamic state. These inclusive views were reflected in their daily interaction with their neighbors. Majority of the lecturers (90%) and students (98%) stated that they did not have any issue in living among people of different faiths.

However, some important notes should be shared here. First, while the majority of professors (90%) agreed that the current Indonesian government system is not *thoghut* (un-Islamic) and has to obeyed, only 74% of students argued the same. Second, there were 10% of professors and 12% of students agreed with the use of violence to uphold Islam. Third, there was 30% of professors and 42% of students who did not acknowledge Ahmadis and Shi'is as Muslims.

Does the same view apply to Unisma? Similar to UIN Malang, almost all professors at Islamic Education Study Programs of Unisma have an inclusive understanding of Islam. From the survey that I conducted, 100% of the professors stated that they disagree with the argument that Islam could only be uphold through *khilafah* system, and 90% agreed that the current Indonesian government system is not *thoghut* (un-Islamic). This was in line with their view that 100% disagreed with physical violence to defend Islam, and their view (90%) that they did not have any issue in living among people of different faiths.

However, the responses from the students showed a significant dissimilarity with those of the professors. There were 26% of students who argued that the Indonesian government is *thoghut*. This was in line with their views (28%) that Islam could only be uphold in *khilafah* system. In addition, 30% of them did not acknowledge Ahmadis and Shi'is as Muslims.

At this point we were wondering how did these students develop their religious thinking that inclines toward Islamism? From our FGD with students of UIN Maliki Malang it was acknowledged that radical thinking was brought to campus through students who were not graduated from pesantren. This type of students often searched for information on Islam through social media and did not know how to find more authoritative sources. These students would like to "go back to the Muslim identity" and started with physical expression of piety such as *niqob* for women and $\frac{3}{4}$ pants for men.

The students were actually agreed that their campus that is based on Nahdhatul Ulama is moderate. However, many student organizations outside campus, including those of Brawijaya University, are very active and strong in recruiting students to become members of their *pengajian*, which is quite radical in its interpretation of Islam. For students who felt that their understanding of Islam was limited, this offer was very attractive.

Students of PAI Unisma argued that “Islam radikal” came to campus silently. “We did not realize how it came,” they said. Their method in recruiting the members was based on person to person. Once the ideology was developed in campus, they recruited new members, especially through female students, during class break when many students when for their day prayers in the mosque, and the campus was quieter. The students stated that efforts from the university to prevent religious radicalism have not reached them.² They also said that at this NU campus they begin to see some women students wearing *cadar* and call for *hijrah* in the form of *syar'i* outfits.

Even though we could not make a direct link between the wearing of face veil (*cadar*) with radical ideology or religious radicalism, the universities express their concern in witnessing the possible connection between physical expressions of piety and Islamism. This is shown by some policies issued in mainstreaming moderate Islam.

Universities’ Actions and Policies in Mainstreaming Moderate Islam

While the two universities have different terms in naming this new religious development within their campuses, they show the same concerns and have made some efforts in mainstreaming moderate Islam. The efforts do not only come from the university as academic institutions, but also from professors and students through various means.

² When this FGD was conducted at Unisma on 24 October 2018, the SK Rector dated 2 October 2018 has not been socialized to the students.

UIN Malang:

1. *Ma'had al-Jamia'ah* Program. This is a required program for all first-year students, in which they have to live in boarding houses within the university and take several additional lessons, namely: *Shabah al-Lughoh* (language morning), *Ta'lim al-Qur'an*, *Tashih Qiroatul Qur'an*, *Tahsin Tilawatul Qur'an*, and *Ta'lim Afkar al-Islamiyah*. Arabic and English are the two main languages used in this boarding school. Through this program the students are expected to not only learn their chosen subject, but be equipped with deep knowledge on Islam which could hinder them from simplistic interpretation about Islam.
2. Some professors offer *counter narrative* to the more close-minded interpretation of Islam through their courses. One professor, for example, explained in his class where there was one student wore *cadar* that the wearing of *cadar* belongs to the category of "*ijtihad*" where there is no complete agreement on the issue by the Muslim jurists. Therefore, students have to be open minded in interpreting the Qur'anic verses on this issue.
3. In May 2018 a regulation issued by the Rector during the inauguration for the new students of UIN Maliki Malang. The regulation clearly stated that it is not allowed to wear *cadar*.
4. Lastly, relating to the ethics of profession for the teachers, the Dean of the Faculty of Tarbiyah and Education also issued a regulation letter in May 2018 outlining the standard outfits for students. The students are not allowed to wear outfits that are transparent, *cadar*, jeans, or clothes that provoke violence. We could find banners in some areas near the classroom, showing examples of the standard outfits. However, there is no sanction so far for those who break the regulation.

Unisma

1. While Unisma does not offer boarding school for their new students, they have a program called *Master Maba* (Transformation term for new students), which runs every week for 1 full semester. It attempts to develop three positive characters for the new students, namely: academic, Islamic, and Indonesian. The students are expected to learn the values of *ahlus sunnah wal-jama'ah*, which is moderate in character.
2. Some professors try to include contemporary issues within their lectures. In *Masail Fiqhiyyah* course, for example, the professor discusses law on inter-religious marriage and law on non-Muslim as leaders, and the need to be open-minded Muslims.
3. Some other professors offer religious discussions outside campus. One professor established Haraka Institute at Kota Batu Malang with topics related to faith and moral within the ideological contestation context in Indonesia. While some students from Unisma often join this program, it is also shared in and broadcasted through social media.
4. Lastly, in October 2018 the Rector issued a regulation concerning the outfits to wear at the university for the students as well as for the professors and staff. It is interesting that the regulation underlines the standard outfits for both men and women. For men, for example, they should wear long pants below his ankle, and for women to not cover their face with any kind of cloth except when they medically require it. When this research was conducted the university was attempting to persuade students who were wearing *cadar* to take it off and stated that it would apply sanctions for those who did not obey the regulation.

Conclusion

To conclude, the development of Islamism at some Islamic university campuses is real. This research (and other research that has been conducted at 18 Islamic universities throughout Indonesia) confirm this. While we have seen that both universities have attempted to counter this new development within their respective campuses through various programs and policies, the challenges ahead are also very real:

1. Student Recruitment System: The existing university's entrance tests do not really measure the applicants' capability in Arabic and basic Islamic studies. This is due to the fact that many come from secular high schools, and not from *pesantrens* or Islamic high schools. Once they are accepted as students it is often difficult to raise their bars in their knowledge on Islamic studies. Two important consequences could be noted: a) their lack of knowledge in Islam may result in their vulnerability in facing the more exclusive interpretation of Islam, and b) If they are graduated to be teachers at Islamic schools, it is highly possible they would transmit their more exclusive interpretations of Islam to their students. So the students' recruitment system needs to be revised.
2. Courses on Essential Islamic Studies and Critical Thinking: As explained above some professors did try to provide counter narratives to Islamism. However, my research also showed that some other professors do not offer deep explanation on Islam. The courses offered are quite basics and not really different from what they have learned at madrasah high schools or *pesantren*. As a result, many students went online to consult their questions about Islam. In addition, very few courses offered related to critical thinking. Therefore, the universities need to review their curriculum.

The universities need to pay more attentions and take necessary actions if they are serious in fighting Islamism within their campuses. Thank you.

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