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Young Indonesian Hadhramis and the Quest for Religious Authority

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ABSTRACT

This paper observes the activities of two young Hadhrami preachers in contemporary Indonesia. The first, Ustadzah Halimah Alaydrus (Jakarta), runs some regular meetings and majelis shalawat. The second, Ustadz Muhammad Anies Alhabsyi (Solo), leads a weekly study group (majelistaklim). The paper focuses on how the two preachers adapt their preaching strategies, styles, and themes in light of the changing public demands. Concurrently, it explores how both actors use different social media platforms to attract wider, and younger, audience. By comparing the two cases, the paper offers some grounded observations on how contemporary Hadhrami preachers reconfigure their religious authority in relation to the changing proclivities of their Indonesian Muslim audience. Keywords: Indonesian Hadhramis, changing religious authority

Introduction

Indonesia's Hadhrami diaspora is divided into two main categories namely *sadal'* *ashrof* (sing. *sayyid/sharif*, feminine sing. *sayyidah/sharifah*) or Ba 'Alawi (children of 'Alawi), and *syekh/masha'ikh* (feminine sing. *Syeikhah*) or non-*sayyid*.¹ Accounts related to their country of origin, cultures, activities and their political aspirations are some main subjects of research (See, for example, van den Berg 1886, Ho 2006, Algadri 1996, Alatas 2014). A critical question of the research focused on the Hadhrami diaspora, including those who are in Indonesia, relates to whether they assimilate in their host communities, or if their distinct identities are maintained (Abushouk and Ibrahim, ed. 2009, Mobini-Kesheh 2004, Slama 2014), creolized (Ho 2006), or adapted and manipulated (Alatas 2011). In addition, some more specific studies on Indonesian Hadhrami women are worth mentioning here, namely that of

¹ The population of Hadhramaut was traditionally divided into four social stratifications that affects their social life, namely: *sada* (elites), *masha'ikh* (scholars) and *qaba'il* (tribesmen), and *masakin* (poor) and *du'afa'* (weak) classes. See Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadhrami Awakening: Community and Identity in the Netherlands East Indies, 1900–1942* (New York: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1999), 24–26. In the Indonesian context, the *sada-mashaikh* dualism came into being due to the establishment of the reformist Al-Irsyad organization in 1914 that rejected the internal hierarchies of the Hadhrami community, which was rejected by the *sada*. The category of *masha'ikh* has been used to include other non-*sada* classes. Even though on the local level, for example in the Arab quarter of Solo, some *masha'ikh* communities are aware of other categories such as *qaba'il*, generally they are referred to as non-*sayyid* or *masha'ikh*.

Mona Abaza (2004), Eva F. Nisa (2012), Martin Slama (2012), Nawiroh Vera (2018), and Claudia Seise (2018).

This paper observes the activities of two young Hadhrami preachers in contemporary Indonesia. The first is *Ustadzah* Halimah Usman Alaydrus (Jakarta), who runs some regular meetings and *majelis shalawat*. The second is *Ustadz* Muhammad Husein Anies Alhabsyi (Solo), who leads a weekly study group (*majelis taklim*). The paper focuses on how the two preachers adapt their preaching strategies, styles, and themes in light of the changing public demands. Concurrently, it explores how both actors use different social media platforms to attract wider, and younger, audience. By comparing the two cases, the paper offers some grounded observations on how contemporary Hadhrami preachers reconfigure their religious authority in relation to the changing proclivities of their Indonesian Muslim audience.

A Brief Figure of Two Young Indonesian *Hadhramis*

Ustadzah Halimah Usman Alaydrus was born 40 years ago in Indramayu, West Java. Her family name suggests that she belongs to the *Ba 'Alawi* (children of 'Alawi) referring to the descendants of Prophet Muhammad (*sada*, sing. *sayyid*) group who “form the religious elite in the Hadhramaut” (Slama, 2014: 68. See also Alatas, 2011: 47), and in Indonesia. She was married to a *sayyid* named Ahmad Alhaddar and thus maintains her elite lines of descent.

Since her childhood she was determined to go to some Islamic boarding schools and did not go to formal schools due to her father's influence. Her first training was at *Pesantren* Darul Lughah wad Da'wah in Bangil, East Java, which was established by a Yemeni descent *Habib* Hasan Baharun in 1981. She then continued her study at *Pesantren* At-Tauhidiyah Tegal (1995), and *Pesantren* Al-Anwar Rembang (1996), both are located in Central Java. In addition to her studies she was trusted to teach at the same institutions for several years. After completing her trainings in those *pesantrens* she went to continue her study at Daruz Zahro, Tarim, Yemen, for four years (1998-2002).

Ustadzah Halimah stated that during her first year in Tarim there was no boarding school for woman, and therefore she copied her brother's lessons from Darul Musthofa, a male boarding school under the leadership of *Habib Sayyid* Umar bin Hafidz. Due to the requests from many Muslim women to study in Tarim, Daruz Zahrowas later established.

Among its main aims of teaching is to spread Islam that is based on Qur'an and *Sunnah* (the Prophet's tradition).

After returning to Indonesia, *Ustadzah* Halimah has been active as a preacher at various offline religious gathering sessions (*pengajian*), both in Indonesia and overseas. She often held *safari da'wah* (a series of offline *da'wah* in a certain city, which runs for several days) and *daurah* (lit. training, a short term *pesantren*) to learn a certain Islamic topic. She has written some books on Muslim woman and wedding counsel. In addition, she is quite active on social media, namely Instagram, Facebook, and Youtube channel.

The second one is *Ustadz* Muhammad bin Husein bin Anies Alhabsyi, who was born in Solo in 1987. He is the great grandson of *Habib* Alwi Alhabsyi, the writer of the well-known *Simtud Durar*. His family name, Alhabsyi, also suggests that he belongs to the *Ba 'Alawi* group. During his early migration years *Habib* Ali Alhabsyi, the great-great grandfather of *Ustadz* Muhammad, established Riyadh Mosque in Solo where every year people from Indonesia and beyond commemorates his death in an event called *haul*. Muhammad's inclination towards religion has been evident since his early childhood. He often followed his father, Husein bin Anies Alhabsyi, to the Riyadh Mosque, where his grandfather led the prayers. Therefore after completing his high school he decided to study at *Pesantren* Suniyyah Salafiyyah under the guidance of *Habib Ustadz* Taufiq Bin Abdul Qodir Assegaf. This *pesantren* is quite selective in receiving students because it does not want to be associated with a place where useless people are sent to live. *Ustadz* Taufiq himself conducts student's selection to ensure that he knows the quality and the backgrounds of the candidates. At this *pesantren*, he revived some traditional methods of learning in Hadhramaut including *rohah* (lit. relax, meaning reading together a certain Islamic classical book in a forum). Muhammad graduated in 2012 and went back to Solo to become a preacher.

Muhammad started his preaching through radio broadcast and local TV (Masjid Jami' Asegaf) Solo. He was then invited to some offline *pengajian* and soon attracted many people. He also lectured at a small learning center "Ma'had Alhidayah," which was built by his grandmother. Later on he established Madrasah Diniyyah Suniyyah Salafiyyah at Pasar Kliwon, Solo, which takes the same name as his former school in East Java and was meant to be one of its branches. This *madrasah* focuses on *'aqidah*

(theology), Hadith, *fiqh* (Islamic law), *adab* (moral), and Arabic. In addition, he preaches in different parts of Indonesia. Thanks to social media, he receives many invitations to preach overseas.

Adapting the Preaching Strategies

Ustadzah Halimah started his preaching through conventional media, namely books and offline religious gatherings. Her first book entitled *Bidadari Bumi: Kisah 9 Wanita Shalehah* (Wafa Production, 2004), outlined stories of some pious Muslim women whom she met during her study years at Tarim. She argued that these women did not live in heaven but they were real and existed in our time. Her other book *Tutur Hati* (Daarut Tauhhid, 2013) consists her posts at her Facebook wall between 2009 and 2012. Among the themes discussed include love our God, the importance of prayers, forgiveness, death and marriage relationships. In line with the development of social media she adapts her preaching strategies and uses these platforms, namely Facebook (@Halimah Alaydrus Page, with 60,000 followers), Instagram (@halimahalaydrus with 115,000 followers, and @muhasabahcintaevent with 11,200 followers), and Youtube channel to convey her *da'wah* (preaching).

While in her offline preaching she emphasized on the above mentioned general religious messages, her *da'wah* through social media significantly changes. Her online preaching is more up to date and includes messages on how to use social media wisely, issues within modern household, and relations between men and women in the digital era. In one Instagram video post, for example, she underlined the importance of avoiding *riya'* (showing off our good deeds through social media) as Allah will not accept it. She argued that social media is useful to share some good information but not to update our status in a certain event. In addition, she often shared some quotes, which are very relevant to the needs of younger audiences. The quote below is one example:

Tetaplah jadi diri sendiri
Konsentrasilah terhadap perbaikan diri tanpa perlu menjadi orang lain
Maka seperti ulat, ia akan berubah menjadi kupu-kupu yang indah (IG posting, 21 June 2019)

Be yourself
Be focus on self-improvement without needing to be somebody else
So like caterpillars, they will change into beautiful butterflies.

This type of postings typically liked by thousands of followers and received many comments. For this, *Ustadzah* Halimah often replied to comments and questions. It is interesting to see how the communication was built in a relaxed way in order to attract wider and younger audiences. The example below exemplifies this style:

Linafakhrosa: Tapii aq pengeen jadii supir ajaaah
Ustadzah Halimah: @linafakhrosa ga sanggup gajinya. Supir import kaan...
Linafakhrosa: @halimahalaydrus asal dikasiih senyum ustadzah dah cukup
edisi gombal emoticon tertawa

Linafakhrosa: But I only want to be your driver
Ustadzah Halimah: @linafakhrosa I can't afford the salary. You're an imported driver, right? (meaning it needs a higher salary)
Linafakhrosa: @halimahalaydrus if you gave me your smiles it is more than enough.

Parallel to *Ustadzah* Halimah's *da'wah* strategy, *Ustadz* Muhammad started his preacher mainly offline. He, however, realized that young people are also interested in *da'wah* and therefore chose social media to communicate with his followers. Starting his online *da'wah* through Facebook, he has now more than 345,000 followers in his FB Fans Page. He is also very active on Instagram with 92,000 followers, and on YouTube with thousands of subscribers. Even though he uses different types of social media in his *da'wah* activities, he explained that Facebook Fans Page, WhatsApp, and Instagram are easier and are more useful to convey his messages to his followers. He only uses Twitter to write some short religious advices in line with the nature of this interface.

His main *da'wah* when he first started his preaching was on '*aqidah* (belief) to strengthen his members' religiosity and to help them separate between Islamic teachings and cultural practices, which was considered *bid'ah* (heresy). His more current preaching themes, however, have also been adjusted to cater the needs of wider and younger audiences. These include ethics on social media, family problems, and other issues faced by the millennial. The post below shows this:

Berhati-hatilah dengan pergaulan anda di Media Sosial
Jangan sampai karena pertemanan yang tidak tepat
Anda akhirnya terjebak pada dosa yang besar (IG post, 22 September 2017)

Be careful with your relations with others in social media
If you are making friends in an illicit way
You will be trapped in great sin.

Ustadz Muhammad's online *da'wah* activity has also brought him in contact with Indonesian workers in different parts of Southeast Asia, and particularly in Hong Kong. An Indonesian female worker in Hong Kong, for example, forwarded one interesting question about praying in the toilet, as this is the only place in the house where she could perform her prayer without being fired from her job. This shows that *Ustadz* Muhammad has to be ready with issues that are faced by various audiences and that social media has smoothed communication between him and his overseas members. In addition, social media has also facilitated a more relaxed communication between the *ustadz* and his followers as shown in this Instagram post and comments:

Wahai wanita,
sebagaimana kau hias bibirmu dengan lipstick,
maka hiaslah pula dengan sholawat and istighfar
Sebagaimana kau hias parasmu dengan kosmetik,
maka hiaslah pula dengan air wudhu yang akan menjadikannya bercahaya
Berhiaslah, bersoleklah, berdandalah hanya untuk suamimu maka rahmat
Allah akan menaungimu (Instagram Post, 5 June 2019).

O women,
As you put on lipstick on your lips
Please also read (use your lips to read) some *sholawat* and *istighfar*
As you put on some make up
Please also take a *wudhu* (ablution) to make your face glowing
Put on make up and dress up only for your husbands so that Allah's blessings
will shower you.

This post was liked by 7,311 people and received 75 comments. Among the comments and replies by *Ustadz* Muhammad are as follows:

kangrifai: Masih ada g ya habib yg seperti itu? Kalau masih, nyuwun doanya satu buat ana, bib

muhhabsyi110: @kangrifai Nanti ana kirim ke Grogol..

kangrifai: do you think we could find a woman of this character? If so, please pray I will meet one, bib (habib)

muhhabsyi110: @kangrifai I will send her to Grogol (where kangrifai lives).

The above accounts show that the two young Hadhrami preachers differ from their predecessors in conveying their *da'wah*. The era of social media does not only change the medium of communication between the *ustadz/ustadzah* and their audiences, but also “force” them to adapt their preaching themes and communication styles. I will next discuss how these preachers maintain their religious authority amidst the changing proclivities demanded by their Muslim audiences.

Reconfiguring Religious Authority in the Era of Social Media

Brian Turner in his article on “Religious Authority and the New Media” (2007) has argued how “modern information technology has changed the social conditions by which political and religious authority are produced.” (p. 117). When the article was written he has not seen the fast development of new media, especially social media. Turner’s main reference was “websites, email channels, chat rooms, Internet cafes, blogging networks, and so forth” (p. 117), and therefore he did not consider how a greater effect of Facebook, WhatsApp or Instagram might have in their relations with religious authority.

Traditionally speaking, religious authority is held by religious leaders. Within the Islamic context, after the death of Prophet Muhammad the authority was handed down to the *al-Salaf al-Salih* (the ‘pious ancestors’ or ‘pious predecessors’) pointing out to the followers of Prophet Muhammad from the first three generations. The fact that they lived in close proximity to Prophet Muhammad, some Muslims believe, entitled them with the finest understanding of Islamic doctrines. As Islam has no central authority, someone who has a good Islamic knowledge and is trusted by their surroundings naturally emerges as a Muslim leader.

With the development of new media, especially social media, this religious authority is challenged. This is very much in line with what Turner thought some 12 years ago: “In particular, this set of questions about the globalization of knowledge converges on the problem of authority: who or what might exercise authority in an emerging system of global knowledge? In a devolved and ‘glocalized’ world of instant and continuous communication, who can speak authoritatively for Islam?” (Turner, pp. 123-124).

The above examples of the two young *Hadhrami* preachers show us that they have to adapt and adjust their *da'wah* strategies in order to maintain their religious authority. *Firstly*, they choose the very new media as their vehicle for *da'wah*. While, as Turned indicated, almost everyone could speak “authoritatively” about Islam through social media, these two preachers embraced this opportunity to strengthen their authority. They realize the danger of social media as often mentioned in their preaching, but at the same time underline how to make their most benefit. Once they are online and socially engaged with their members, they choose themes and communication styles that could easily be accepted by younger and wider audiences. This has enabled them to maintain their authority in speaking about Islam in front of this audience.

Secondly, they strengthen their religious authority through their Islamic studies trainings at qualified and authoritative boarding schools, both in Indonesia and in Hadhramaut. Once they master *'aqidah*, *fiqh*, and *akhlaq* (morals) from these authoritative centers of learning they could claim their authority to speaking to their members and new audiences. This is also supported by the undeniable fact that they are the descendent of Prophet Muhammad. The fact that both of them are *Ba 'Alawi*, who has direct lineage to Prophet Muhammad, almost guarantees their religious authority.

Thirdly, their self-presentations help them to construct the image of piety, which in turn help them to reconstruct their religious authority. *Ustadzah* Halimah wears a *niqob* covering her face where she has male audiences. Indeed, her Facebook and Instagram accounts never include her face. When a video account was uploaded, it only had her voice, without her face. Even though wearing a *niqob* for Muslim woman is debatable in Islamic law, some believe that it reflects the image of pious Muslimah as it has been the practice of Prophet Muhammad's wives. Thus this practice did relate to the question of religious authority. As a Muslim woman who is a *Ba 'Alawi*, trained in authoritative school in Hadhramaut, and is wearing a *niqob* her authority in speaking about Islam is elevated.

A similar presentation is also found in *Ustadz* Muhammad. Since his return to Solo he often wore a *turban* and a white *gamis* (robe). Again, while some might argue that this type of clothing is cultural, some others believe that this is picturing classical

and authentic Islamic outfits. This is strengthened by his practice of not receiving honorarium from those he considers the needy in the society. *Ustadz* Muhammad, for example, clearly stated that his effort to reach the Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong was purely based on the intention of *ikhlas* for *da'wah*:

There are abundant of problems faced by Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong, especially related to *fiqh*. As they did not know where to consult their problems they, especially the women, often being manipulated by people who declared themselves to be *ustadz* but charged them for such a consultation. Whereas my intention is purely for *da'wah*, they do not need to pay anything to me as I would like to help them solving their problems, especially related to *fiqh*.²

Forthly, they maintain offline meetings in addition to their online endeavors. This traditional form of learning, as argued by Turner (2007, 125), remains important because “they sustain an emotional bond between the self and the collectivity ...”. Both *Ustadzah* Halimah and *Ustadz* Muhammad conduct their regular meetings in their respective communities. In addition, they often receive invitations, locally, nationally, and internationally, to meet face to face. Indeed, quite often in the comment section of their Instagram or Facebook accounts her followers said that “saya rinduuu bertemu ustadzah” (I really miss meeting you *ustadzah*), or “sudah kangen ustadz lama tidak kemari” (we miss you *ustadz*, it has been a long time since you came last time).

Conclusion

Social media has clearly challenged the way these young Hadhrami preachers in their *da'wah* endeavors. They too propose some new opportunities, which were unthinkable during the era of conventional media. On the one hand social media has confronted the question of religious authority that was once uphold by traditional leaders and traditional places of learning. On the other hand they offered new opportunities to embrace wider and more diverse audiences. As the use of social media is often associated with young people, preaching through these media has also offered more possibilities of being accepted.

Both *Ustadzah* Halimah and *Ustadz* Muhammad have shown us that they do not leave social media, even though in many of his preaching, online and offline, they

² Interview with *ustadz* Muhammad Alhabsyi, 5 October 2014.

reminded their audiences of its dangers. Their engagement with social media has also “forced” them to adjust their *da’wah* strategies, themes, and styles in order to meet the changing proclivities of their Indonesian Muslim audiences. While this engagement has successfully facilitated a more intensive communication between them and their audiences, there is still task to be completed, namely holding their religious authority online. They are in a way lucky because of their status as *Ba ‘Alawi*, who has direct links to Prophet Muhammad, and thus, maintain their authority in Islam. Their educations in authoritative Islamic studies centers and their offline meetings, which sustain the emotional bond between them and their communities, strengthen this and place them as authoritative preachers within the Hadhrami communities and beyond.

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