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To cite this article: Sunarwoto (2021) Online Salafi rivalries in Indonesia: between sectarianism and 'good' citizenship, Religion, State & Society, 49:2, 157-173, DOI: [10.1080/09637494.2021.1924014](https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2021.1924014)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2021.1924014>



Published online: 02 Jun 2021.



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ARTICLE



## Online Salafi rivalries in Indonesia: between sectarianism and 'good' citizenship

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### ABSTRACT

In explaining sectarian violence and conflict in Indonesia, some scholars have highlighted the crucial role played by key political actors. Taking online Salafi rivalries as its point of departure, this contribution aims to further advance the discussion on the sectarianisation thesis offered by Hashemi and Postel, which argues that one of the key factors in religious sectarianism is not theology but authoritarianism. Unlike the thesis, this contribution argues that Salafi sectarianism is facilitated by Indonesia's democratic atmosphere rather than by authoritarianism. However, this contribution agrees with the thesis that theology is not a determining aspect in Salafi sectarianism. Although framed in theological terms, Salafi rivalries are driven by competing to demonstrate their religious identity, authority, and 'good' citizenship.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 May 2020  
Accepted 26 April 2021

### KEYWORDS

Salafism; Indonesia; religious sectarianism; sectarianisation thesis; online religion; citizenship

## Introduction

Post-authoritarian Indonesia has witnessed sectarian tension and conflict flare up in some parts of the country, as represented by the anti-Ahmadiyya and anti-Shia movements. Ironically, the tension and conflict has been facilitated largely by the democratic political atmosphere that resulted from the Reformasi (reformation) movement of 1998. The increasing freedom of expression brought about by the Reformasi has enabled new Islamic groups to emerge and engage in Islamic public discourses, challenging the dominant established political and religious authorities. Among these groups are Salafis, whose public presence has created tension and even evolved into conflict in some places, primarily with traditional Islamic groups like the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), but also with other modernist and conservative groups. As in other countries, Salafis in Indonesia have fractured into conflicting groups (see Wahid 2014; Sunarwoto 2016). They have been deeply divided by rivalries, often ignited not only by differences in Islamic interpretation but also by their attempts to gain religious authority and socio-religious domination within Muslim society. These rivalries often involve sectarian discourses through the revival of old theological debates.

The media has played a significant role in propagating Salafi debates and rivalries both with outside groups and amongst the Salafi themselves. Previous studies by Sunarwoto (2016) and Wahid and Makruf (2017) demonstrate that Salafi radio stations are crucial

both for socialisation of Salafi Islam and for contestation with fellow Salafis and other groups. No less crucial than radio are internet-based media platforms. Iqbal (2014) has demonstrated that Salafis have largely constructed and articulated their Salafi identities online by establishing a significant presence on the Internet and social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram.

This contribution discusses Salafi rivalries in Indonesia as represented through Salafis' online presence. Its primary aim is to contribute to the discussion on the sectarianisation thesis as proposed by Hashemi and Postel (2017). According to this thesis, recent sectarian conflicts in the Middle East have been triggered not by sectarianism but by sectarianisation, which is defined as 'an active process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve the mobilisation of popular sentiments around particular (religious) identity markers' (Hashemi and Postel 2017, 4). Both scholars also argue that political authoritarianism is key to the sectarianisation processes where state political actors manipulate and mobilise sectarian identities in order to preserve and perpetuate power.

The Middle Eastern context is different from the Indonesian one, where, as previously highlighted, religious sectarianism increased along with the new democratisation processes following the collapse of the authoritarian regime in 1998. Therefore, political authoritarianism in itself does not explain the rise of religious sectarianism and sectarianisation in the context of the newly democratising Indonesia. However, this does not mean that political actors played no role in the sectarianisation process.

In explaining the sectarian violence and conflict in Indonesia, some scholars have highlighted the crucial role played by political actors. Van Klinken (2007), for instance, has shown that democratisation (and decentralisation) led political actors in Jakarta to compete for control of the local state by mobilising ethnic and religious groups. Ahnaf et al. (2015, 28) reveal that anti-Shia violence in Sampang Madura in 2012 was closely related to local politics, where local elites in the local government played a crucial part in sectarianisation by deploying state institutions such as police departments and provincial governments. In her study on anti-Shia discourses, Formichi (2014) maintains that the rise of sectarian tension and violence in post-Suharto Indonesia is a continuation of a long process of othering by the state in addition to global geopolitical changes. She describes four phases of the othering process, including the government's concerns about the spreading influence of the Iranian revolution (1983 to 1984); religious and political reactions to a series of cases of *mut'ah* temporary marriages (1995); the collapse of the New Order regime (1997 to 1998) with its consequent struggles for power (2000); and the impact of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI)'s increasing influence in defining religious orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the studies above, Kayane's study (2020) explains the rise of religious sectarianism by specifically examining the internal dynamics of the NU, a traditional organisation known for its tolerant public image. She argues that sectarian discourses were used by some of the members of this organisation as a tool to delegitimise its pluralist leaders and enhance influence within and beyond the organisation. The present study is similar to that of Kayane, in that it is focused on the internal dynamics of the Salafi movement in order to explain religious sectarianism in Indonesia. However, this study argues that sectarian discourses were used within the internal Salafi rivalries not only as a tool for competition over religious identities and authority but also as

a declaration of their civic allegiance to the state. Thus, while other studies – especially by Van Klinken – focus on how political elites mobilise religious identities for political purposes, this study is more concerned with how Salafis attempted to dominate in Indonesia’s religious discourse and to gain political legitimacy. Since there is a wide spectrum of ideological variations within the Salafi movement,<sup>2</sup> I shall focus on purist Salafis,<sup>3</sup> who are characterised by their political quietism, which entails a disengagement from politics in favour of a focus on purification and education. Various Salafi groups adhere to this quietist orientation, but I focus on the rivalries between the two largest purist Salafi groups, Madkhali Salafis and Salafis affiliated with the Rodja radio and television programmes. As I shall demonstrate, despite being politically quietist, both purist groups orient themselves towards demonstrating ‘good’ citizenship in the context of the state. Their civic orientation towards the state not only differentiates purist Salafis from politico and jihadi Salafis,<sup>4</sup> but also divides them into contesting groups. Intra-Salafi rivalries are often rife with theological references. I argue that the main intent of these groups in using theological references is not for religious differentiation but rather to use religious justifications to bolster their claims to be legitimate sources of religious authority. More importantly, I argue that those religious justifications played a great role in augmenting their virtues as models of good citizenship.

This contribution is based on primary data gathered from Al-Fawaaid Salafi online media platforms, including websites, blogs, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram, and Facebook, posted online between 2013 and 2020 (see Table 1). The sources in these media platforms are open access. Most Salafi social media groups have a loose membership. Anyone, Salafi or not, can become a member and join the discussions. However, Salafi Telegram groups have a one-way communication mode so that only the moderators can send posts and no discussion is possible. Through a non-participant-observational research method of engagement with Salafi social media groups,<sup>5</sup> I became familiar with the various issues most discussed by Salafis. For clarity, I have selected relevant themes posted on those platforms by referring to the Madkhali instagram account (see Table 2) while always taking into account similar themes posted on other Madkhali social media.

**Table 1.** Al-Fawaaid platforms and their members/followers/subscribers until 14 October 2020.

Al-Fawaaid platforms	Created	Number of members/followers/subscribers
Facebook	2013	18,595 followers
YouTube	2014	14,200 subscribers
Instagram	2015	25,500 followers
Telegram	2015	7,762 members

**Table 2.** Selected themes posted on Al-Fawaaid’s instagram.

Themes	Number of postings
Photographs and selfies	12 postings
Rodja and its preachers	37 postings
Khawarij	22 postings

## Salafism and sectarianism

Almost all of the discussions on Islamic sectarianism are concerned with explaining the ‘ancient hatreds’ between Sunnis and Shias, especially in the contemporary context of the Middle East. However, they do not provide a clear-cut definition of what is meant by ‘sectarianism’ in the Islamic context (Haddad 2017). The case is also the same with the discussions on Salafi sectarianism, where the focus is on the tension between Salafism, as part of Sunnism, and Shiism. Wagemakers (2020) describes Salafi sectarianism in Jordan as ‘sectarianism without sects’, where anti-Shia discourse is developed by Salafis in Jordan to vilify other Sunnis rather than Shias. Throughout the history of Islam, many sects other than the Sunnis and Shias have existed, such as the Khawarij, Mu’tazila, and Murji’a. All of them are grouped under *firqa* (sect) as can be seen, for instance, in al-Baghdadi’s *al-Farq bayn al-Firqa* (n.d.). *Ta’ifa* is an Arabic term often used to refer to ‘sectarianism’ in the contemporary context (Bishara 2018).

In this contribution, ‘Salafi sectarianism’ is understood not in the sense of how ‘anti-Shia’ discourse has been mobilised by Salafis (as per Wagemakers), but in the sense of how sectarian discourses have been exploited in Salafi rivalries. Here sectarian discourses include both theological and non-theological references used by Salafis to criticise other Salafi sub-sects. Thus, Salafi rivalries are considered here as part of sectarianism. At least two factors are relevant to this conceptualisation. Firstly, Islamic sectarian denominations such as Shia, Khawarij, Mu’tazila, Murji’a, Qadariya, and others, are abundantly utilised within Salafi rivalries. Secondly, the Salafi rivalries often resulted in intractable schism, as will be demonstrated later. This intractable schism is caused partly by their interpretation of what Salafism is and how Salafis should act.

As defined by Wagemakers (2016b), Salafism is a branch of Sunni Islam whose adherents claim to emulate the first three Muslim generations called *al-salaf al-salih* (pious forefathers) as closely and in as many spheres as possible. Salafis are ‘like the *Salaf*’ or ‘*salaf-like*’. For them, strict and literal emulation of the *Salaf* is essential in order to maintain the purity of Islam, since the true Islam is that as understood and practised by the *Salaf*.<sup>6</sup> Yazid bin Abdul Qadir Jawas, a renowned Salafi teacher, defines Salafism as a synonym of Islam. Jawas explains as follows: ‘Salafism (*Salafiyya*) is Islam with its perfection and general meanings, which is Islam that is based on the Qur’an and *Sunnah* (prophetic tradition) according to the Salaf understanding’. He goes on to say that Salafis (*salafiyyun*) are those following the Qur’an and the *Sunnah* based on the Salafi *manhaj* (method). There is only one Salafi method (Jawas 2013, 21–24, 251). Put simply, for Salafis there is only one true Islam, which is Salafism. Although they do not claim to be the only holders of salvation and victory, they do claim to be the only ones included in the group called *al-ta’ifa al-mansura* (the victorious group) and *al-firqa al-najiyya* (the saved group) (Haykel 2009, 34; Wagemakers 2016b). This claim is based on the prophetic tradition (*hadith*) that there are 73 sects in Islam, only one of which will be saved and victorious. Gaiser (2017, 67) maintains that the central leitmotif of Muslim intra-religious divisions is the concept of salvation.

The conceptualisation above is not to deny the importance of non-theological aspects in intra-Salafi rivalries. As will be demonstrated, theological debates among Salafis are closely related to their competition for religious identity and authority, and their claims to

be exemplars of 'good' citizenship. Each group exploited both theological and non-theological capital to legitimise their respective claim to true Salafism.

### Salafi schism at a glance

Current Salafi rivalries are inseparable from the history of the Salafi movement in Indonesia, which started to emerge in the mid-1980s.<sup>7</sup> Until around the mid-1990s the movement was relatively undivided; there were no competing and conflicting groups within it. The movement started to fragment in 1995, when Ja'far Umar Thalib, a Salafi leader and former Laskar Jihad<sup>8</sup> commander, accused his fellow Salafi leaders of being *haraki* (activists) because of their relations with Jam'iyat Ihya' al-Turath al-Islami (Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, RIHS) (Hasan 2006, 55; Pall 2015, 177–200). RIHS is a charity foundation based in Kuwait that played a significant role in the early development of the Salafi movement in Indonesia. *Haraki* is the label used by purist Salafis to denounce political movements like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and politically inclined Salafis (on *haraki* or political Salafis in Egypt, see Al-Anani 2016). Salafis of RIHS were condemned as being *haraki* because of their political inclinations. Thalib and his followers came to call recipients of RIHS charity '*turathiyyun*' (followers of the Ihya' al-Turath al-Islami or RIHS). Thalib also condemned them as *sururi*, which means followers of the thought of Muhammad Surur Zayn al-'Abidin (Hasan 2006, 80–84).

Born in Syria in 1939, Muhammad Surur was a former Muslim Brotherhood activist who turned Salafi. He became a controversial figure, as he fiercely criticised Saudi Arabia's decision to invite US troops in during the Gulf war in 1990 (on Muhammad Surur, see Lacroix 2009, 435–436). According to Hasan (2006, 83), Thalib's criticism of those anti-Saudi personalities such as Muhammad Surur was primarily driven by his attempts to aggrandise his claim as the main authority. However, he also attempted to attract financial support from philanthropic foundations in Saudi Arabia and other organisations, although these attempts failed. As will become clear, this initial schism among Salafis remains relevant to the current Salafi rivalries. Labels such as *haraki*, *sururi*, and *turathi* have consistently played a role in these rivalries.

The split between Thalib and his fellow Salafi leaders resulted in two Salafi factions: Yemeni Salafi and non-Yemeni or *sururi* Salafi (Hasan 2006). The former refers to the faction of Thalib and his followers. Thalib is Yemeni by descent, and studied Salafism in the Dar al-Hadith school in Dammaj Yemen, established by Muqbil bin Hadi al-Wadi'i. Meanwhile, as discussed earlier, *sururi* refers to the followers of Muhammad Surur's ideas. The split deepened when Laskar Jihad was dissolved in 2001. The Yemeni Salafi faction split into groups. Elsewhere I have discussed these groups and classified them into three main groups or networks: the Luqman Ba'abduh network, the Dzulqarnain network and the Abu Turob network (Sunarwoto 2016). Therefore, we can say that there are four main Salafi groups or networks.<sup>9</sup> These groups may be subsumed under what Wiktorowicz (2006) has termed 'purist' Salafis, characterised by their political quietism. They distance themselves from practical politics and are primarily concerned with non-violent methods of propagation, purification, and education.

The Madkhalis, the primary focus of this contribution, are those within the Luqman Ba'abduh network, who follow the thought of Rabi' ibn Hadi al-Madkhali, a Saudi Salafi cleric who actively propagates total obedience to the ruler (Sunarwoto 2020). This

propagation has played a key role in their rivalries with other purist groups. As will be clear later, this is evidently seen in their rifts with Salafis of Rodja. Rodja is a Salafi radio station established in 2005 in Bogor, West Java. It is broadcast nationally and can be accessed worldwide via the Internet.<sup>10</sup> In 2009, Rodja established a television channel. Its activities are greatly supported by Saudi Salafi scholars such as ‘Abd al-Muhsin ibn Hammad al-‘Abbad, Abd al-Razzaq al-Badr, Ali Hasan al-Halabi, and Ibrahim al-Ruhaili – the latter three of whom were invited to the Rodja centre several times. In addition, they often gave teleconference sermons to Rodja.

In general, Madkhalis and other purist Salafis agree that any figurative representations, either in the forms of humans or animals, are forbidden (*haram*), based on prophetic *hadiths* that condemned painters (*musawwirun*). One of those *hadiths* frequently cited by Salafis reads, ‘Surely the most severely punished by God are painters [*musawwirun*]' (Al-Asqalani 1959, 12, 506). They avoid using human or animal photographs and paintings except for essential purposes such as ID cards or passports. A warning billboard is frequently set up at Salafi sermons and lectures to warn participants not to take pictures or videos. This principle of avoiding figurative representations is clearly manifested online.

In online media platforms that belong to Salafis of the non-former Laskar Jihad network and those of the Dzulqarnain network, we can easily find images and videos of humans. This is not the case with those platforms that belong to Madkhalis and Salafis of the Abu Turob networks, which strictly avoid portraying living creatures in pictures or videos. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to find photographs of Salafi teachers from these two groups on websites or any other social media platforms they administrate. This different stance towards human images and videos, as will be discussed later, stems from their respective interpretations of the prophetic *hadiths* as mentioned above.

## Online Salafi rivalries

### *Polemical online pages and channels*

Online Salafi rivalries are well manifested in the polemical nature of online Salafi media that contain pages specifically intended to criticise other groups. For example, there is a special page called *bantahan* (Indonesian) or *rudud* (Arabic), both of which mean refutation or rejection, which is aimed at countering the presumed errors of theological arguments made by Salafi rivals. Salafi online media have special pages aimed at criticising other groups such as Tablighi Jama’a, Ahmadiyya, and Sufis. Interestingly, the online media channels that belong to Madkhali Salafis have special pages named after their Salafi rivals, such as *Sururiyya* (followers of Surur Zain al-‘Abidin), *Ihya’ al-Turath* (the Kuwaiti-based foundation of the Revival of Islamic Heritage), and Rodja. Madkhalis also established special channels intended to condemn rivals, such as the channels *Kesesatan Khawarij* (the error of Khawarij), *Penyimpangan Rodja* (the misguidance of Rodja) and *Jarh wa Ta’dil* (refutation and rectification).

A newly established website *Ini Fakta Bukan Fitnah* (this is fact, not slander) that belongs to Madkhalis contains rubrics for judging *Hajury*, *Khawarij*, *MLM Mutalawwin*, *Musho’afiqoh*, and Rodja TV. All these rubrics refer to the Salafi rivals of the Ba’abduh network. Hajury means Yahya al-Hajuri, current director of the Dar al-Hadith in Dammaj, Yemen, who is considered by Luqman Ba’abduh and his group as deviant from the Salafi *manhaj*. The



MLM Mutalawwin rubric contains Dzulqarnain, Haris Abu Naufal, and Farhan Abu Furaihan. Madkhalis condemn these three individuals from the Dulqarnain network as *mutalawwin* (like chameleons) because of their inconsistency in applying the Salafi *manhaj*. MLM stands for *mutalawwin*, *la'ab* (making fun of Salafi sheikhs), and *makir* (deceitful). *Musho'afiqah* (Ar. *musa'afiqah*, stupid person) refers to Ba'abduh's former colleague in Balikpapan East Kalimantan, Abu Muawiyah Askari, who has been Ba'abduh's rival since 2017.

### Main principles of the rivalry

The claim to be part of *al-ta'ifa al-mansura* (the victorious group) and *al-firqa al-najiyya* (the saved group) above has consequences for their interactions with other groups and, as will become clear, with fellow Salafis. They hold firmly to the principle of non-cooperation with those considered religiously corrupt or deviant. This is derived from the saying: *al-mar'u 'ala dini khalilihi* (the religiosity of a person is in accordance with the religiosity of his/her friends) (Al-Albani 1996, 535). This principle also holds true for their learning method. One should be selective about where one receives Islamic education. They refer, among others, to the words of Ibn Sirin (d. 729), 'Surely this [religious] knowledge is [Islamic] religion itself. Consider from whom you take your [knowledge of] religion' (*inna hadha al-ilma dinun fa-nzuru 'amman ta'khudhuna dinakum*) (Al-Nawawi 1929, 84). Salafi students study Salafism with Salafi teachers from their groups and decline to learn Islam from other teachers and sources.

The principle above plays an important role in Salafi rivalries: each Salafi is susceptible to scrutiny by others that may lead to criticism or even expulsion from their group. One example is when Ja'far Umar Thalib, former commander of the Salafi paramilitary Laskar Jihad, was exposed as having attended *Zikir Akbar* (Ar. *dhikr akbar*), a Sufi-like practice of public invocation, led by Arifin Ilham in the Istiqlal mosque in 2003. Thalib's attendance became grounds for his colleagues to declare him as deviant from the Salafi *manhaj* (Hasan 2006, 213). Translated into cyberspace, as addressed below, rival Salafi groups have used online data to prove that their rivals are deviant.

Online Salafi rivalries have involved personal attacks or *ad hominem* criticisms. This is especially the case with Madkhalis, who often criticised others by name. Interestingly, those Salafis criticised have not brought defamation cases to court, although Indonesian law would have facilitated this. According to Law No. 11 of 2008 on Electronic Information and Transaction (UU ITE), amended by Law No. 19 of 2016, one can bring slander and online *hominem* attack cases – religious or not – to court for alleged electronic communication abuse because of defamation, hate speech, and blasphemy.<sup>11</sup> With increased political polarisation in Indonesia, religious individuals and groups have often utilised this law to bring their rivals to court with allegations of defamation or hate speech. One example is the case of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (aka Ahok), a Christian and then mayor of Jakarta, who in 2017 was sentenced to two years in prison on a charge of blasphemy and defaming *ulama* (Muslim clerics).<sup>12</sup> In the case of Salafis, instead of going to court, they framed their critiques in a religious idiom through *jarh wa ta'dil*, a sub-branch of *hadith* studies dealing with the evaluation of the credibility of *hadith* transmitters. As Meijer (2011) has argued, the *jarh wa ta'dil* has become politicised in intra-Salafi rivalries. As Larsson (2018) has highlighted, accusations of blasphemy and apostasy are often used as a tool or method for fighting potential political or religious enemies.



## Contesting Salafi identity online

As previously mentioned, Salafi groups in this study regard photography (*taswir*) or visual representation as problematic. The debates on *taswir* have been further complicated by the introduction of social media, where the practice of taking selfies and sharing photographs online has become commonplace. Theologically, these debates are legitimised by several *hadith* verses which condemn portraying or drawing living creatures (Larsson 2011, chapter two).

Online debates about taking selfies are concerned not only with the legal aspects of the selfie, but also with the question of what a Salafi should be or who is a true Salafi. We have many examples of campaigns against selfies spreading on various social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Telegram. These can be seen in anti-selfie Salafi campaigns expressed in words such as '*Salafi anti selfie*' (Salafis are anti-Selfie), '*Berani syar'i tanpa selfie*' (Brave to be *shar'i* without a selfie), and '*Salafi gak suka selfie*' (Salafis dislike selfies). YouTube videos on these campaigns are available. A Telegram channel called *Salafy Indonesia* sent a post titled '*Fenomena Da'i Selfi*' (The phenomenon of selfie preachers),<sup>13</sup> which was then reposted on other platforms such as YouTube and Facebook.<sup>14</sup> The post was taken from the question-and-answer session of a lecture that Muhammad Afifuddin al-Sidawy, a Madkhali teacher, gave on 3 October 2016 in Yogyakarta. More than campaigns, debates on selfies have led to more critical questions as to the integrity and authority of a Salafi teacher who often takes selfies, fuelling tensions between Salafi groups.

Al-Fawaaid's Instagram, which belongs to Madkhalis, reposted a post with the phrase 'Is the Salafi *pengajian* [Islamic gathering] the same as Rodja?', which was a question discussed at a lecture by Abu Fudhail Abdurrahman, a Madkhali teacher in Sumatra. In response, he said that Rodja is not Salafi, since its preachers are keen on taking selfies and pictures with deviant people such as those *khariji* (followers of Khawarij, discussed below) and *tablighi* (followers of Tablighi Jama'a). He argued that there must be a differentiation (*tamayyuz*) between Salafis and non-Salafis, which can be seen in their stance towards photographs and their relations with other groups. Al-Fawaaid also posted a number of audio clips on his Instagram, taken from the sermon given by Abu Hamzah Yusuf, a Madkhali teacher in Tasikmalaya West Java, to Salafis in Kolaka, Southeast Kalimantan in 2017.<sup>15</sup> In his sermon,<sup>16</sup> he discussed the deviation of Rodja preachers and for that reason he suggested avoiding them, although they also taught the *Sunnah*. According to him, what is important is whether they held the principles of the *Sunnah*, such as non-cooperation with *ahl al-bid'a* (people of *bid'a*) and *hizbiyyun* (partisans). He criticised Rodja preachers such as Firanda for praising Zakir Naik and Ali Hasan al-Halabi. He denounced Arifin Badri for befriending *ahl al-bid'a*. He highlighted other forms of the violation of the *ahl al-sunnah* principles: using television as a medium for Islamic preaching (*da'wa*) and taking selfies with the audience.

In reply to the Madkhalis' critiques, Firanda posted his video sermon on his personal website,<sup>17</sup> where a viewer asked a question related to the difference between 'teachers of *Sunnah*' (*ustadh sunna*) and Rodja preachers. Madkhalis had previously declared TV to be *haram*. But in his answer, Firanda explained that the critics did not understand the Salafi *manhaj* (method), so they considered those who preached on television not in accordance with the Salaf *manhaj*. He highlighted that the appearance of preachers on

television is a matter of *khilafiyya* (difference of opinion). Firanda stated that he permitted television because there is no reason to declare it forbidden. Television is different from painting. The latter is to imitate God's creation, while photography and television relay knowledge that is originally from God.

### **Being a true Salafi**

Most online Salafi rivalries were framed as theological debates. Each Salafi group revived medieval theological polemics to attack their rivals. They labelled their rivals as *khawarij*, *murji'a*, and *mu'tazila*.<sup>18</sup> Although this seems to indicate that Salafis are striving to revive old theological feuds, they are doing so by reworking them within new contexts and, more importantly, with new meanings. Therefore, these medieval feuds should not be read solely through the lens of their original context. In most cases Salafis used theological labels as an adjective rather than as a noun, meaning that they refer to the characteristics of those medieval sectarian groups rather than their actual existence in the contemporary context (Lav 2012, 6). Thus, a person is labelled as a *khariji* not because there exists such a sectarian group called Khawarij analogous to that of the medieval Khawarij. Instead, he/she is so-called because he/she is deemed to share characteristics with the medieval Khawarij. As noted by historians and scholars, Khawarij are characterised by their political view that Muslims should declare rulers who have strayed from Islam to be nonbelievers and rebel against them, and by their theological view that those who have committed mortal sins are apostate (*murtad*) and nonbelievers (*kafir*) (Vida 1997, 1074–1077). Similarly, Salafis labelled their rivals *murji'a* because of the political and theological similarities they have with the historical Murji'a. In terms of politics Murji'a believed that Muslims should not rebel against Muslim rulers. Theologically, they removed action from the article of faith (*iman*). For the historical Murji'a, those who commit a mortal sin while believing in God remain Muslim (Madelung 1993, 605–607). Similarly, Salafis categorise all rationalist Muslims as *mu'tazila* because they are seen as identical to the historical Mu'tazila who are known to accord supremacy to reason over revelation (*wahy*) (Gimaret 1997, 783–793).

Salafi rivalries, either with fellow Salafis (as internal conflicts) or with non-Salafis, are framed in medieval theological terms. Lav (2012, 6) said, 'each party to this struggle strives to define itself as the upholder of Sunnism and attempts to define its antagonists as unorthodox'. In practice, a Salafi group may criticise other groups for being deviant from the true Salafi, and, by the same token, the group itself may be open to criticism from other groups for its own deviance.

There are two possible reasons why Salafis have revived old sectarianism by reintroducing sectarian labels such as *khawarij* and *murji'a*. First, Salafis want to reinforce their claim to the true Islam by delegitimising other groups – fellow Salafis or non-Salafis – as deviant. In other words, they compete with each other to gain religious authority among Salafis. Second, they want to enhance their claim to be good citizens by contextualising it within Indonesia. We will deeply delve into these reasons below.

'*Khawarij*' is one important theme repeatedly posted in Salafi online media. In one of Madkhalis' Instagram channels named Al-Fawaaid, for instance, in the period from 2015 to 2020 this theme was posted 22 times. Some posts were in response to terrorism that

occurred in Indonesia and abroad, while others were related to the identification of *kharijis*. The label *khawarij* or *khariji* played a role in constructing a true Salafi identity.

Let us focus on this identity construction by discussing one posting titled, '*Tidaklah Memuji Khawarij Kecuali Dia Seorang Khoriji*' (One does not praise Khawarij unless one is a *khariji*).<sup>19</sup> The posting contains a fatwa by Salih al-Fawzan, a Saudi Salafi scholar, on the stance to be taken towards those who praise Khawarij, defend them, call them conciliators (*musalih*) or pass over their *bid'a* (reprehensible innovation) and *takfir* (excommunication) in silence. In his fatwa, al-Fawzan stated that promoters of *khariji* thought are *khariji*, because they agree with that thought, and spread and preach it. Al-Fawzan alerted his audience to their danger. The post was reposted in Al-Fawaaid's Instagram by adding a warning caption to it as follows:

Be alert about:

#rodjatv #askary #dzulakmal#ahmadbazzmul #dzulqarnainms#ustadzabdulsomad#ustadzsyafiqzabasalamah#hananattakivideo #ustadzadihidayat#zakirnaik #ustadzkhalidbasalamah#ustadzhanaanattaki#ustadzbadrusalam#ustadzsubhanbawazier #felixsiauwwesaltv #yufidtv#ustadzfirandaandirja #hizbi #sururi#ikhwani #haddadi #hits #viral

The caption tells us to whom the label '*khariji*' may be applied. Among them are the preachers of Rodja TV, such as Syafiq Riza Basalamah, Badrusalam, Subhan Bawazier, and Firanda. Khalid Basalamah,<sup>20</sup> Dzulqarnain, and Askary, who are Salafi teachers but not from Rodja TV, are also included in the caption. Various Salafi television channels are mentioned, including Rodja TV, Wesal TV, and Yufid TV. Non-Salafi preachers such as Abdul Somad, Hanan Attaki, Adi Hidayat, Zakir Naik, and Felix Siau are included as well. From the content of the caption, we can clearly understand that this post is a critique of those who can be considered *khariji*. On the other hand, the amalgamation of preachers of diverse backgrounds indicates that the appellation '*khariji*' may be loosely applied not only to one particular group but also to diverse groups.

Four hashtags mentioned in the caption are worth discussing, as these attributes substantiate who may be considered '*khariji*'. First is *hizbi*, which literally means 'partisan' or 'factional'. It relates to *hizbiyya* (partisanship, factionalism), which refers to a political orientation that quietist Salafis condemn as contradicting Salafi teaching. They consider *hizbiyya* as divisive for Salafis. As mapped out by Wiktorowicz (2006), Salafis' political orientation has resulted in the emergence of 'politico' Salafi groups.

In Salafi rivalries, the term *hizbiyya* played an important role as a buzzword to vilify other groups in order to assert which group is the true Salafi. According to Meijer (1997), the term *hizbiyya* once was used in Egypt by the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1940s to condemn any political system. At the time, the Muslim Brotherhood focused on *da'wa* (Islamic call) activities and refrained from any political involvement. With the passing of time, they became deeply involved in politics. The term *hizbiyya* was adopted by Salafis not only to criticise non-Salafis but also their fellow Salafis. Salafis are very critical of the political orientation of the Muslim Brotherhood. According to Bonnefoy (2011, 61–69), the critique of *hizbiyya* is one of the key Salafi teachings adopted by Salafis in Yemen led by Muqbil bin Hadi al-Wadi'i. As demonstrated earlier, Madkhalis in Indonesia were former followers of al-Wadi'i, like other former members of the Laskar Jihad. They inherited the Salafi teaching of al-Wadi'i, including the *hizbiyya* teaching. However, other non-Yemeni

Salafis also adopted this teaching. To defend their position vis-à-vis the critiques launched by Madkhalis, they used this teaching as well.

The Madkhali leader, Luqman Ba'abduh, once identified *khariji* figures of the day as follows. During his sermon in Balikpapan, East Kalimantan, he was questioned about who the *khariji* figures of the day are.<sup>21</sup> In response, he identified Indonesian *khariji* figures by especially mentioning Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Aman Abdurrahman, who are well known for their alleged connection with jihadist terrorism in Indonesia (Ramakrishna 2015). Interestingly, Ba'abduh described Abdurrahman by explaining the connection of the latter with a charitable foundation in Jakarta, As-Sofwa. One of the important persons behind this foundation was Yazid bin Abdul Qadir Jawas, an important Salafi teacher in Indonesia. Abdurrahman, according to Ba'abduh, was the one who had Jawas' sermons recorded. In addition, Abdurrahman was also a regular preacher who gave sermons in the mosque of As-Sofwa in South Jakarta. Ba'abduh mentioned another name, Farid Ahmad Okbah, as one of the Indonesian preachers who, according to him, has paved the way for *khariji* ideas in Indonesia.

It is worth noting how Ba'abduh mobilised sectarian idioms (here, Khawarij) to criticise his rivals. Between 1992 and 1993 Ba'abduh was himself attached to the charitable foundation of As-Sofwa in Jakarta. Thus, as he acknowledged, Aman Abdurrahman, Farid Ahmad Okbah, and Yazid bin Abdul Qadir Jawas were his former colleagues. Later they became his rivals, especially after he turned to Salafi beliefs. The foundation of As-Sofwa was founded by Muhammad Yusuf Harun, a Salafi teacher who graduated from Muhammad ibn Sa'ud University, with the aim of spreading Islamic *da'wa* in order to shun Islam of *bid'a* (reprehensible innovation), *khurafa* (superstition), and *shirk* (polytheism), and to call Muslims to return to the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. The foundation played a role in channelling funding from Middle Eastern countries, especially from RIHS as discussed above.<sup>22</sup>

In his reaction to Madkhalis' criticism, Badrusalam, director of Rodja, gave a brief speech on neo-*hizbiyya* (*Hizbiyyah gaya baru*).<sup>23</sup> He highlighted a new phenomenon of Islamic preaching in the media, which led Muslims to become fanatical about a certain religious person or group (*ta'assub*). But, more importantly, he criticised those preachers who were proud of having played a considerable role in Islamic preaching. He implicitly criticised Madkhali preachers more than preachers in general. This kind of criticism can also be seen in how some Salafi netizens commented on a speech that was uploaded to Yufid's YouTube channel. A Madkhali sympathiser (or perhaps a Madkhali) commented: '*Rodjaiyyun*', which means 'a man of Rodja' or 'member of Rodja'. The comment evoked reactions from non-Madkhali sympathisers. One of them immediately responded, 'You, *luqmaniyyun* [follower of Luqman Ba'abduh], are never harmonious [...] conflicting with Askari'. Another Madkhali sympathiser reacted, 'What is important is [that we are] not as hypocritical as Rodja people, who said demonstration was *haram*, but supported it [...] and were fond of making implicit critiques of the government in social media'.

Second is the term *sururi*, which, as mentioned earlier, means followers of the thought of Muhammad Surur Zayn al-Abidin. Al-Abidin was condemned by Salafi scholars in Saudi Arabia as *ikhwani*, which means to hold the political ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. This term *ikhwani* is important for Salafis in general and Madkhalis in particular in denouncing their rivals. Rabi' bin Hadi al-Madkhali, their patron, condemned

Muhammad Surur in particular and his rivals (including the Brotherhood) as neo-*Khawarij* (see Meijer 2011).

The third is the term *haddadi*, which means followers of Mahmud al-Haddad al-Misri. Born 1374/1955 in Egypt, al-Haddadi migrated to Riyadh and served as a *muhasib* (book-keeper/librarian) at Muhammad ibn Saud University. He then moved to Medina to serve as an editor of Arabic manuscripts. Not much is known about al-Haddad, except that great Salafi scholars condemned him, among others, as fighting against the Salafi *manhaj*.<sup>24</sup> We can see that Madkhalis criticised Rodja and its preachers as *khariji* primarily because of their similarities with persons or groups outside of the Salafi movement.

### **Being a 'good' citizen**

As described at the outset, this contribution focuses on purist Salafis. One of the most important principles they hold is total obedience to the ruler (*ulu-l-amr*). This principle distinguishes them sharply from jihadi Salafis and other Islamists in dealing with the state. For the latter, since Indonesia is not an Islamic state, its ruler cannot be categorised as an *ulu-l-amr*. In contrast, for purist Salafis the Indonesian government is an *ulu-l-amr* whom Muslims should obey (Sunarwoto 2020). Both Madkhalis and other purist-quietist Salafis have actively promoted this total obedience principle in their online activities. This can be seen in the themes of their sermons uploaded on their online media platforms, discussing loyalty to the government, prohibition of rebellions and revolts, maintaining the state's stability, and praying for the government's wellbeing.

The rivalry between Madkhalis and Rodja preachers, in this regard, takes the form of positive competition over 'good' citizenship. As Poljarevic (2014) has demonstrated, Salafi citizenship is ambiguous, especially within the context of the nation-state. They must come to terms with pluralism in society. Moreover, Salafis grapple with Indonesia's democratic system, which contradicts Salafi principles. Despite this ambiguity, as Chaplin (2018) has shown, Salafis are active in promoting 'good' citizenship by becoming 'agents of change' through their pious activism. Supporting the state's agendas is an important strategy in becoming a good citizen. In the previous section, I have indicated that Salafi sectarian discourse is aimed to reinforce their claim to be good citizens. This claim is clearly manifested in Salafis' participation, for instance, in campaigning for anti-radicalism and anti-terrorism initiatives for the government since 2002,<sup>25</sup> in which the label *Khawarij* is used to condemn perpetrators of radicalism and terrorism.<sup>26</sup>

The claim is also evident in Salafis' engagement with the national integrity discourse that became a predominant topic in post-Suharto Indonesia, following the bloody sectarian conflicts in various regions such as in Sambas West Kalimantan, Moluccas, and Poso in Central Sulawesi (Van Klinken 2007). The discourse on national integrity has been translated into, among others, the slogan *NKRI Harga Mati* (the Unitary State of Republic of Indonesia is non-negotiable). According to Honna (2009), the slogan was developed by Indonesian military elites to reinforce their role in preserving the integrity of the nation after the abolition of their 'dual function' (*dwifungsi*) following the collapse of Suharto's authoritarian regime.

In response to the slogan, Muhammad Umar as-Sewed, a Madkhali teacher in Cirebon West Java, was once asked: 'Do we agree with the slogan "*NKRI Harga Mati*", whereas we know NKRI adheres to *Pancasila* (five pillars of the Indonesian nation-state)<sup>27</sup> as its highest

law?’ He immediately answered that Indonesia is based on belief in One God, and the founders of *Pancasila* declared it monotheistic (*tawhid*). He underlined that all principles of *Pancasila* are included in Islam, such as *musyawarah* (consultation) and *keadilan* (justice).<sup>28</sup> In other words, for him, Islam does not conflict with *Pancasila*, nor with NKRI. It should be noted that although *Pancasila* accommodates monotheism, it is not automatically considered Islamic. Instead, it is considered ‘neither a secular nor religious ideology’ (Ichwan 2012, 3). Even Islamists such as Abu Bakar Ba’asyir call *Pancasila* a *kufur* (nonbelief) ideology (Ichwan 2012, 42).

The similar endorsement to the NKRI was stated by Abdullah Zaen, a Yufid and Rodja preacher, in one of his sermons entitled ‘*NKRI Harga Mati, Guyub Rukun NKRI*’ (Non-negotiable NKRI, NKRI in solidarity and harmony).<sup>29</sup> For Zaen, national integrity may be well implemented in the form of social harmony regardless of the religious plurality that exists in society.

### Concluding remarks

I have described how Salafis have been engaged in rivalries and argue that the reason for this intra-rivalry is the competition for religious authority and the claim to be exemplars of ‘good’ citizenship. Salafism is established in accordance with the Islamic principles as understood by the righteous forefathers (*al-salaf al-salih*). Salafis want to emulate them as literally as possible. Salafi rivalries as discussed here reflect how they have tried to implement those principles within Indonesia. The differences in the application of those principles have played a role in these rivalries. This is clearly seen in their debates on whether or not to use photographs and videos for *da’wa* purposes. The disagreement between Madkhalis and Rodja on whether a Salafi may or may not establish relationships with other groups is rooted in the religious principle that the religiosity of a person may be gauged by the religiosity of his or her friends. In this regard, competition over religious identity and authority is crucial to those rivalries.

However, rivalries between Madkhalis and Rodja preachers can be explained through their competition to demonstrate their contributions as citizens. The sectarian discourses they used in these rivalries were framed within their participation in the state’s agendas such as anti-radicalism and anti-terrorism programmes initiated by the government and in the national integrity discourse. Their engagement may be interpreted as their attempt to act in accord with the Salafi principle of obedience to the ruler (*ulu-l-amr*) and to maintain their relations with the state. Again, however, it can also be construed as a declaration of their critical political stance against other (Islamist) groups, which is at odds with their seemingly quietist tendency.

As stated in the introduction, the aim of this contribution is to engage with the sectarianisation thesis proposed by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel. In this thesis, one of the key factors in religious sectarianism is not theology but authoritarianism. While Salafi sectarianism is facilitated by Indonesia’s democratic atmosphere rather than authoritarianism, this contribution agrees with the thesis that theology is not a determining aspect in Salafi sectarianism. Although framed in theological terms, Salafi sectarianism is driven by competition over religious identity and authority, and equally importantly, ‘good’ citizenship.



## Notes

1. For a thorough study of MUI and its influential role in defining Islamic orthodoxy after the New Order era, see Ichwan (2013).
2. Wiktorowicz (2006) classifies them into three different Salafi groups, including purists, politicos, and jihadis.
3. Purist Salafis are those who focus on nonviolent methods of propagation, purification, and education. See Wiktorowicz (2006).
4. These groups have different views on politics. For purist Salafis, politics is a diversion that encourages deviancy, while, for politicos, the Salafi creed should be applied in the political arena in order to have impacts on social justice and the right of God alone to legislate. Jihadis take a more militant political stance through violence and revolution.
5. This means that I did not engage with the social media users and only observed the posts. Although my university does not yet have an ethics board responsible for reviewing research, my research was based on data collected entirely from social media located in the public domain and there was no human interaction.
6. Scholars like Wagemakers (2016a) and Lauzière (2016) call this form of Salafism purist Salafism, which is different from modernist Salafism.
7. A comprehensive study on Salafism in Indonesia can be found in Wahid (2014).
8. Laskar Jihad is a Salafi paramilitary group founded by Ja'far Umar Thalib. The most comprehensive study of Laskar Jihad is that by Hasan (2006).
9. It should be noted here that I intentionally removed a Salafi organisation named Wahdah Islamiyah foundation based in Makassar, South Sulawesi from the discussion, as I focus more on the Salafi networks that emerged directly from the conflicts initially instigated by Ja'far Umar Thalib. Wahdah Islamiyah was initially linked to the modernist Muhammadiyah organisation and broke with the latter in 1985. See Chaplin (2018). I also do not include Salafi individuals outside these networks such as Khalid Basalamah in the networks, although he was once affiliated with Rodja TV.
10. [www.rodjaradio.com](http://www.rodjaradio.com).
11. The text of the Law is found in <https://web.kominfo.go.id/sites/default/files/users/4761/UU%2019%20Tahun%202016.pdf>.
12. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/05/09/ahok-guilty-of-blasphemy-sentenced-to-two-years.html>.
13. <https://t.me/forumsalafy/6727>.
14. <https://web.facebook.com/watch/?v=1005210776310874>.
15. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BS8sM1GBwQi/>; <https://www.instagram.com/p/BS64cHlhqTS/>; <https://www.instagram.com/p/BS59tzSBqDI/>.
16. His audio sermon is found in Al-Fawaaid's Youtube channel at [https://www.youtube.com/embed/x3b\\_nFWsdf8](https://www.youtube.com/embed/x3b_nFWsdf8).
17. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g06baiNEcak>.
18. Khawarij (sing. *khariji*) is an early Islamic sect or group who rejected a peacefully negotiated agreement between Ali, the fourth Caliph, and Mu'awiya, and declared those involved to be unbelievers (*kafir*). Murji'a consists of those who abstained from supporting or rejecting both Ali and Mu'awiya. Mu'tazila is a sect or group led by Wasil b. 'Ata who separated from the teaching of his teacher, Hasan al-Basri.
19. <https://www.alfawaaid.net/2019/05/tidaklah-memuji-khawarij-kecuali-dia.html>.
20. Previously, Khalid Basalamah was once a preacher of Rodja TV, but he is no longer affiliated with it. He has his own TV channel called Wesal TV.
21. <https://forumsalafy.net/tanya-jawab-bersama-al-ustadz-luqman-baabduh-daurah-balikpapan/>, accessed 19 January 2020.
22. For further information on the As-Sofwa foundation, see Hasan (2006, 55–56).
23. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U\\_IZUJeO0R0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_IZUJeO0R0).
24. <https://www.tasfiatarbia.org/vb/showthread.php?t=17854>.



25. In the online context, we can see this campaign, for example, in the following Instagram post: 'Terrorism and radicalism are our common enemies', which is followed by two hashtags #kamibersamaTNIPOLRI and #bersatamelawanteroris, which mean 'we are with the Indonesian army and police' and 'together [we are] fighting terrorists'. See <https://www.instagram.com/p/B3iqNPchxDG/?igshid=1tl7o1ubztyuk>.
26. This can be seen, for instance, in Luqman Ba'abduh's book *Mereka adalah Teroris* (They are terrorists) in which he attributes terrorism and radicalism to the teaching of the *Khawarij*. See Ba'abduh (2005, 358).
27. *Pancasila* (five principles) includes monotheism, humanitarianism, nationalism, democracy, and social justice.
28. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDI8vukFfD>.
29. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qM6NUSzdKCU>.

## Acknowledgements

My sincere gratitude goes to Alex Arifianto, Saleena Saleem, and two anonymous reviewers for their critical comments on the draft of this contribution. However, all shortcomings are my sole responsibility.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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