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Moderate Islam Movements and Interfaith Coexistence in Indonesia

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Abstract

This article examines the emergence and development of moderate Islamic movements in Indonesia and their engagement with interfaith coexistence within a plural religious context. It focuses on three major actors: Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, and Salafi groups, situating their initiatives within the state-sponsored religious moderation programme launched by the Indonesian government through the Ministry of Religious Affairs since 2018. NU's *Islam Nusantara* and Muhammadiyah's *Islam Berkemajuan* represent traditionalist and modernist articulations of moderate Islam, both emphasising balance, tolerance, and social harmony while responding differently to local culture and modernity. Challenging common perceptions that associate Salafism with radicalism, the article demonstrates how quietist Salafi groups have also developed forms of moderation grounded in loyalty to the state and non-confrontational interfaith relations. The study further explores the transnational dimensions of these movements by analysing their connections with Saudi Arabia's reform agenda under Muhammad bin Salman and Egypt's al-Azhar-led discourse on Islamic centrism (*wasatīyya al-Islām*). While moderate Islamic movements have contributed significantly to interreligious coexistence, the article argues that the persistence of Islamic conservatism—both outside and within mainstream organisations—poses an ongoing challenge to their inclusive aspirations.

Résumé

Cet article analyse l'émergence et le développement des mouvements d'islam modéré en Indonésie et leur rôle dans la promotion de la coexistence interreligieuse au sein d'un contexte religieux pluraliste. Il se concentre sur trois acteurs majeurs : la Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), le Muhammadiyah et les groupes salafis, en les replaçant dans le cadre du programme de modération religieuse lancé par le gouvernement indonésien par

l'intermédiaire du ministère des Affaires religieuses depuis 2018. L'*Islam Nusantara* de la NU et l'*Islam Berkemajuan* du Muhammadiyah constituent respectivement des expressions traditionaliste et moderniste de l'islam modéré, mettant en avant l'équilibre, la tolérance et l'harmonie sociale. L'article remet également en question l'association systématique du salafisme avec le radicalisme, en montrant comment certains courants salafis « quiétistes » ont adopté une approche modérée fondée sur la loyauté envers l'État et le respect de la pluralité religieuse. L'étude explore en outre les connexions transnationales de ces mouvements, notamment avec l'Arabie saoudite et l'agenda réformateur de Mohammed Ben Salman et la réflexion menée par l'université d'al-Azhar en Égypte sur le centrisme islamique (*wasatīyya al-Islām*). Malgré la contribution importante des mouvements islamiques modérés à la coexistence interconfessionnelle, l'article souligne que le conservatisme islamique, aussi bien dans qu'en dehors des organisations traditionnelles, demeure un défi majeur pour leurs aspirations à l'inclusion.

Introduction

This article deals with the emergence of moderate Islam movements in Indonesia as responses to the programme. It focuses on those movements by two largest Muslim organisations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, and Salafi groups. It aims to examine the interconnection of these movements with various attempts to establish interfaith coexistence within a religious plurality of Indonesia. Muhammadiyah is a modernist organisation founded in 1912 by Ahmad Dahlan, a Muslim cleric in Yogyakarta, while NU is a traditionalist organisation established in 1926 by Hasyim Asy'ari in Jombang East Java. Both have been long considered as guardians of moderate Islam. Muhammadiyah has framed religious moderation as the *Islam Berkemajuan* movement, while NU has offered the *Islam Nusantara* movement. Becoming popular after the Reformation era, Salafis are often seen as anti-moderation and, in popular media coverage, presented as supporters of radicalism and intolerance. They are indiscriminately attributed to their connection with jihadis or terrorists. However, as will be shown later, Salafis have developed their own moderate Islam movements, which they have mobilised as part of the obedience to the ruling government.

The questions to be answered in this article are: how did those Muslim organisations and groups establish and develop their moderate Islamic movements? and how did they deal with interfaith coexistence through the movements? Before tackling these questions, we will start with a brief description of religious moderation initiated by the government.

Religious moderation and Moderate Islam movements

The Indonesian government played a central role in mobilising moderate Islam movements through its religious moderation programmes, which are organised under the responsibility of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA). As a policy, it was launched in 2018 by the Minister Lukman Hakim Syaifuddin and it became part of the National Mid-term Development Plan 2020-2024, and the MORA issued its decision (KMA) no. 720/2020 on religious moderation. Its implementation has involved state as well as non-state organisations.

Religious moderation is applied to all six religions recognised in Indonesia, including Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholic Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism). Although it is inclusive, the concept of religious moderation is formulated in predominantly Islamic terms such as *tawāzun* (balance), *i'tidāl* (moderation), and *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance), as can be seen clearly in the publication of the book *Moderasi Beragama* by the MORA in 2019. The MORA defines religious moderation as “an outlook, an attitude, and a behaviour that always takes a middle position, doing justice, and not being extreme in practicing religion.”¹ It is based on justice and balance (*adil dan berimbang*).² It is neither an extreme right nor an extreme left.³ To avoid insensitivity to the religious plurality, the ministry launched *Peta Jalan Penguatan Moderasi Beragama* (Road Map for Strengthening Religious Moderation) in 2020 as an official directive to the implementation of religious moderation. As Emanuel Gerrit Singgih said, this road map is intended to neutralise religious radicalism through awareness of the religious plural context of Indonesia.⁴ Singgih takes an example of how the tense relation between Muslims and Christians often stems from labelling each other as “*kafir*”, an Arabic loan used by both sides. According to him, religious moderation can be implemented by avoiding such a labelling. From a

¹ Kemenag RI, *Moderasi Beragama* (Jakarta: Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kemenag RI, 2019), 7.

² Ibid., 19-22.

³ Ibid., 47-52.

⁴ Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, “Religious Moderation as Good Life: Two Responses to the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ Directive on Religious Moderation in Indonesia,” *Exchange* 52 (2023): 220-240.

Christian point of view, Singgih offers “good life” as the right interpretation of the religious moderation in the context of the Indonesian religious plurality.⁵

Trainings and workshops were organised to strengthen religious moderation. State officials, civil servants, and academics must follow these. Religious moderation becomes an important subject of school and university curriculum. Recruitment of civil servants and appointment of state officials includes the comprehension of religious moderation as a requirement. In line with this programme, the moderate Islam movements have emerged. NU, Muhammadiyah, and Salafis among those who have participated and implemented the programmes in various forms.

This does not mean that there is no rejection to this programme. A handful of Islamist groups such as HTI (Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia) and FPI (*Front Pembela Islam*, Front of Islamic Defenders) disagreed with this programme. *Al-Wa‘ie*, a magazine published by ex-activists of HTI, issued a special edition to criticise religious moderations programmes as contradicting Islamic teachings and originating from the West culture.⁶ Both HTI and FPI were banned by the government in 2017 and 2020 respectively. HTI was considered as in conflict with Pancasila, five pillars of the nation,⁷ and Indonesia’s 1945 Constitution (UUD 45) due to its aspiration to the establishment of a global Caliphate-based state. FPI was Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), another Islamist group, considers religious moderation as a form of religious syncretism.⁸ MMI was founded 2000 by Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, one spiritual leader and founder of Jemaah Islamiyah. He left MMI in 2008 and established Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) in the same year.⁹ All these groups were critical of the administration of President Joko Widodo.

The *Islam Nusantara* movement

It is worth noting that the term *Islam Nusantara* has been used long before NU launched the movement. In 2015, a book *Islam Nusantara* was published. Edited by NU activists, it also involves Muhammadiyah thinkers such as Amin Abdullah and Azyumardi Azra (d. 2022) and other individuals. This means that at the beginning they were involved in the

⁵ Ibid., 231.

⁶ <https://alwaie.net/fokus/5032/>.

⁷ They include: the oneness of God, just and civilized humanity, the unity of Indonesia, democracy, and social justice.

⁸ <https://www.majelismujahidin.com/khutbah-jumat-bahaya-sinkretisme-agama/>.

⁹ On MMI, see M. Iqbal Ahnaf, “Why do Islamist Movements Die? Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia and its Decline,” in in Leonard Sebastian, Syafiq Hasyim, and Alexander Arifianto (eds), *Rising Islamic Conservatism in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2020), 146-162.

movement. Azra himself published a book entitled *Islam Nusantara* in 2002, dealing with the history of *Islam Nusantara* and its local and global intellectual networks.¹⁰ Despite their support for the movement, they have different views on how *Islam Nusantara* should be. Rather than emphasizing the traditional aspects of Islam, Muhammadiyah is prone to modernity. We will return to this later.

In 2015, NU organised its National Conference (Munas) 2015 in Jombang East Java with the main theme “Meneguhkan Islam Nusantara untuk Peradaban Indonesia dan Dunia” (Strengthening Islam Nusantara for the Indonesian and World Civilisations). The Munas marked the official start of what Hisanori Kato has called the *Islam Nusantara* Movement.¹¹ For NU, *Islam Nusantara* is representative of moderate Islam. It is explicitly mentioned in the aim of the Munas that NU will develop “the thought of *Islam Nusantara* based on the principles of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-jamā‘ah* and prioritise the distinctive character of Islam [as] *rahmatan li-l-‘ālamīn* (blessing for all).”¹² NU conceptualises moderate Islam as Islam characterised by *tawassut wa i’tidāl* (moderation), *tasāmuh* (toleration), *tawāzun* (balance), and *amr bi-l-ma‘rūf wa nahy ‘an al-munkar* (commanding the true, forbidding the wrong).¹³

The political significance of the Islam Nusantara movement is clear, especially in relation with the then President Widodo who sought support from the moderate Islam constituency for the 2019 election campaigns. Widodo was undermined by hard-line Muslims as being anti-Islam and allegedly associated with communism, an ideology banned in Indonesia since 1965. His backup for the *Islam Nusantara* enhanced his commitment to moderate Islam. NU has benefited from this mutual relation. Widodo provided them with more privileges such as the instalment of NU cadres within his cabinet, including Minister of Religious Affairs. He issued a presidential decree on the Day of Santri (*Hari Santri*) which is commemorated on 22 October every year. The date is taken in memory of NU founding fathers’ *jihād* action against the Dutch in 1945.¹⁴

The *Islam Berkemajuan* movement

¹⁰ Azyumardi Azra, *Islam Nusantara: Jaringan Global dan Lokal* (Bandung: Pustaka Mizan, 2002).

¹¹ Hisanori Kato, “The Islam Nusantara Movement in Indonesia,” in Muhammad Afzal Upal and Carole M. Cusack, *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2021), 110-128.

¹² Pengurus Besar Nahdlatul Ulama, *Hasil-Hasil Mukhtamar ke-33 Nahdlatul Ulama* (Jakarta: PBNU, 2015), 212.

¹³ Ibid., 99.

¹⁴ Hisanori Kato, “The Islam Nusantara Movement in Indonesia,” 117-118.

As one of the key Muslim organisations supporting religion moderation, Muhammadiyah has developed its vision on progressive Islam (*Islam Berkemajuan*). Before detailing this, it should be noted that Muhammadiyah is a reformist organisation inspired by Islamic reformists at the beginning of the 20th century. It is influenced by Salafi visions embraced by Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Rida as well as Wahhabism. However, over the last two decades, Muhammadiyah seems to have distanced itself from being identified with Salafism or Wahhabism. This can be seen in its publications. In 2012, for instance, *Suara Muhammadiyah*, one of this organisation's key publishers in Yogyakarta, published *Muhammadiyah dan Wahhabism*, collecting a number of articles by Muhammadiyah scholars and leaders. The book clearly demonstrates the aspiration of those authors to the clarification of Muhammadiyah's contesting stances toward Wahhabism. In his contribution to the book, Haedar Nashir, current head of Muhammadiyah, defends the monotheistic and reformist thought of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab while rejecting any association of terror and violence attributed to him.¹⁵ Azyumardi Azra considered Muhammadiyah as “moderate Salafism” (Ind. *salafisme wasathiyah*) which is different from Salafism founded by Ibn Taymiyya and his proponents. For Azra, Wahhabi Salafism is not only literal in doctrine but also radical in praxis and action.¹⁶

This becomes clear when Muhammadiyah conceptualised moderate Islam as *Islam Berkemajuan* (progressive Islam) more systematically. As a concept, *Islam Berkemajuan* has existed long before the initiation of the religious moderation by the government and that of *Islam Nusantara* by NU activists. However, as a movement the *Islam Berkemajuan* was clearly formulated in its 48th Conference (*Muktamar*) in Solo in 2022 produced its decisions in the publication of *Risalah Islam Berkemajuan* (a treatise on progressive Islam). In the *Risalah*, *wasathiyah* becomes one of the distinctive characteristics of *Islam Berkemajuan*. It is said that *wasath* means to avoid religious extremism in the form of excessive social behaviour (*ghuluw*) and negligence (*tafrīt*). Moreover, *wasath* rejects any kind of ultra-conservatism as well as ultra-liberalism.¹⁷ It is interesting to note that included in the *wasathiyah* is not to declare fellow Muslims *kāfir* (unbeliever). This is a sort of

¹⁵ Haedar Nashir, “Anatomi Gerakan Wahhabiyyah,” in Muarif (ed.), *Muhammadiyah dan Wahhabisme: mengurai Titik Temu dan Titik Seteru* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2012), 26-27.

¹⁶ Afandi, “Salafisme Muhammadiyah Adalah Salafisme Wasathiyah, Bukan Salafisme Wahhabiyyah” <https://muhammadiyah.or.id/2022/09/salafisme-muhammadiyah-adalah-salafisme-wasathiyah-bukan-salafisme-wahhabiyyah/>.

¹⁷ Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, *Risalah Islam Berkemajuan* (Jakarta: Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2023), 10-11.

emphasis on Muhamadiyya's response to the increasing phenomenon of *takfir* (declaring others as *kāfir* or infidels).

Salafis' moderate Islam movement

It should be noted that Salafis in Indonesia are divided into groups difficult to define with precision, especially when referring to Quintan Wiktorowicz's anatomy of this movement.¹⁸ This is not the place to discuss them. Instead, in this article, I focus on what Wiktorowicz has called "purist" or, to borrow Joas Wagemakers,¹⁹ "quietist" Salafis who are concerned with the purification and education of Islam. In terms of politics, they call for total loyalty to the existing ruler rather than being critical. This is also reflected in their participation in religious moderation initiated by the government. Jihadi groups such as MMI, as mentioned above, rejected the concept of religious moderation.

Previously, Salafis took a relatively exclusive position toward others, by accentuating their distinctive outlook and relations. However, in line with the changing domestic and transnational geopolitics, they have become increasingly open to other groups. They have been actively involved in promoting Islamic moderation and other state agendas concerning counterterrorism and intolerance. As for interfaith coexistence, they emphasised the need to respect other faith members by non-intervention in religious matters of other religions and focusing on social interrelations. Other groups identified Salafis as sources of radicalism and intolerance. Rejecting this accusation, Salafis participated in campaigning for antiradicalism by urging the need for the loyalty to the state. They showed their loyalty, among other things, by declaring the compatibility of *Pancasila* with the Islamic teaching.

Muhammad Mufti Al Achsan points out how Salafis in Yogyakarta has transformed into post-Salafis. Salafis have become more open to socio-cultural diversities due to changing socio-political contexts. Many of them, for instance, are no longer reluctant to adopt local attires such as Javanese *batik* dress and use local languages for sermons. They cooperate with other Muslim groups and organisations such Muhammadiyah and MUI. Al

¹⁸ Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflicts and Terrorism* Vol. 3, No. 3 (2006), 207-239.

¹⁹ Joas Wagemakers, "Revisiting Wiktorowicz: Categorising and Defining the Branches of Salafism," in Francesco Cavatorta, and Fabio Merone (eds), *Salafism After the Arab Awakening: Contending with People's Power* (London: Hurst, 2017), 7-24.

Achsan maintains that the religious moderation the government mobilised has had great impacts on this Salafi transformation.²⁰

Salafis promoted religious moderation through social media such as YouTube channels and instagrams. They used Islamic gatherings, such as *dawras* (seminars or workshops) and *halaqas* (study circles). For instance, on 26-27 November 2022 a forum of Salafi teachers (*Forum Asatidz*) led by Dzulqarnain Sunusi, a renown Salafi teacher, held a mass gathering (*Tabligh Akbar*) in Maros, South Sulawesi. The topic was *Keutuhan Bangsa dalam Bingkai Moderasi Agama* (the unity of the nation within the frame of religious moderation). Subthemes discussed in this forum are interesting since it clearly highlights how Salafis have taken part in promoting the government programme of religious moderation. Among them are: *Hakikat dan Karakteristik Moderasi Islam Serta Pengaruhnya dalam Individu, Masyarakat dan Bernegara* (The essence and characteristics of Islamic moderation and its influence on individuals, societies, and nationhood).²¹ Abu Nida', a senior Salafi teacher in Yogyakarta, asserts that it is wrong to attribute the source of Islamic radicalism to Ibn Taymiyah who actually teaches moderation (*wasatiyya*). In his view, this misunderstanding of thought of Ibn Taymiyyah can be avoided by reading his *al-'Aqida al-Wasitiyya* seriously. Abu Nida admitted that he was often invited to participate in various programmes organized by governmental offices and universities. Zainal Abidin, a Salafi teacher in Bogor West Java, wrote a book on Islamic moderation in Islamic education. The book entitled *Sekolah Islam Modern dengan Kurikulum Wasatiah* is ample evidence of Salafis' active engagement in promoting the government's moderating programmes. Its subtitle *Mengintegrasikan Moderasi Beragama dalam Kurikulum dan Pembelajaran* means "Integrating Religious Moderation in Curriculum and Learning". In his introduction, he highlights that some Islamic schools taught radicalism and extremism.

For Salafis, practicing religious moderation is part and parcel of obedience to the ruler (*wali al-'amr*), one of the primary Salafi teachings.²² But, for Salafis, what is moderate Islam or, more generally, religious moderation? For them, it is wrong to make Islam moderate, since it itself is moderate. The problem is, as Syafiq Riza Basalamah, a Salafi

²⁰ Muhammad Mufti Al Achsan, "Pos-Salafisme di Yogyakarta: Pribumisasi, Politisasi, dan Lokalisasi," PhD thesis at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, 2025, especially 166-176.

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kRBPkchBY0>.

²² Christopher Pooya Razavian, "Al-Azhar, Wasatiyah, and the Waqi'," in *Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change*, Vol. 2, edited by Masooda Bano (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 102-126.

teacher, has argued, Muslims who behave against moderate Islamic teaching. Basalamah supports his argument by referring to the exemplary history of the Prophet Muhammad who lived side by side in harmony with Jews and Christians.²³ Likewise, Firanda Andirja, another Salafi teacher, highlights that all in accordance with the Quran and Sunnah as exemplified by *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* are moderate (*wasat*). He suggests that the true Islam is the *wasat* one. He then explains that the *wasat* does not mean to consider all things as the same, but to put things in their proper place. In this regard, he criticises liberals who tend to treat different religions and genders equally.²⁴ Dzulqarnain Sunusi, a Salafi teacher in Makassar South Sulawesi, emphasised a middle way of the Salafi teaching while denouncing those bombings perpetrated in the name of Islam.

The global connections: Saudi Arabia and Egypt

As part of the global movement, the moderate Islamic movements in Indonesia area inseparable from similar movements in other Muslim countries, especially in the Middle East. At the state level. As Andar Nubowo stated, in Indonesia moderate Islam was a soft-diplomacy in the eradication of radicalism and extremism.²⁵ Here, we will discuss the moderate Islam movements in Saudi Arabia and Egypt and their connection with Indonesia.

1. Saudi Arabia

Moderate Islam has become an important part of the Saudi reform by the Prince Crown Muhammad bin Salman or better known as MBS who in 2016 announced his vision of 2030. This vision demonstrates the great changes that MBS planned to make, including socio-religious ones, showing his moderating approaches to Islam. In the vision the word “moderate” is repeatedly used, implying its significance.²⁶ In his interview in 2017 with *The Guardian*, MBS clearly said, “We are simply reverting to what we followed – a moderate Islam open to the world and all religions.”²⁷

MBS in particular and the Saudi kingdom in general have been active in promoting moderate Islam abroad, including in Indonesia. The kingdom via the religious attaché of its

²³ <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/zLfNWz7T5hU>.

²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L463MtFvVU&t=181s>.

²⁵ Andar Nubowo, “Jokowi’s Soft Diplomacy: Global Islamic Network of Moderation,” at <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/co18119-jokowis-soft-diplomacy-global-islamic-network-of-moderation-by-andar-nubowo/>.

²⁶ See https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi_vision203.pdf.

²⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince>.

embassy in Jakarta made cooperation with the MORA and Muslim organisations such as NU, Muhammadiyah, and others for strengthening and mainstreaming moderate Islam.²⁸ On 22 September 2022, for instance, both countries organised a conference on religious moderation.²⁹ Likewise, on 24 September 2024, the Saudi Embassy, in cooperation with Islamic State Institute (IAIN) Kendari Southeast Sulawesi, organised a seminar on religious moderation.³⁰

The extent to which MBS's moderate Islamic vision is influential to Indonesia is an important question. To answer this, it is worth noting that MBS is not always content with the term “moderate Islam”. In an interview with the *Atlantic* news, he, for instance, expressed his discontent that it is in favour of extremists because it means to change Islam into something new. For him, the real teaching of Islam is the one exemplified by the Prophet and the four Guided caliphs.³¹ In this era, Muslims lived in harmony and peace with Christians and Jews.³² Therefore, the true Islam is moderate, and there is no need to change it. As we have seen earlier, Salafis in Indonesia embrace a conception of moderate Islam similar to that of MBS. It should also be noted that MBS's reform does not necessarily imply a declining role for Salafism in the kingdom. He remains to defend Wahhabism and Salafism.³³

According to James M. Dorsey, there are differences between Saudi Arabia, as represented by MBS, and Indonesia, as represented by the Nahdlatul Ulama head Yahya Staquf, in dealing with “moderate Islam”. For MBS, Dorsey suggests, the principle of moderate Islam in the monarchical context means an absolute obedience to the ruler (*wali al-'amr*), who holds the authority and power to implement Islamic law. MBS emphasises the need to restore Islam into its purity as practised in the era of the prophet. In contrast, for NU, moderate Islam should be built upon the re-contextualisation of Islam in line with the 21st century, needing revising obsolete elements of Islamic jurisprudence that are

²⁸ <https://ihram.republika.co.id/berita/r4gkaf335/dirjen-bimas-islam-terima-atase-saudi-ini-yang-disepakati>.

²⁹ <https://www.ngopibareng.id/read/september-22-indonesia-saudi-gelar-konferensi-moderasi-beragama>.

³⁰ https://iainkendari.ac.id/content/detail/dosen_dan_duta_besar_kerajaan_arab_saudi.

³¹ They include Abu Bakar, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, and 'Ali ibn Abi Talib.

³² The full transcript of the interview is available at: <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/617738>; and <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2022/03/03/Mohammed-bin-Salman-on-Iran-Israel-US-and-future-of-Saudi-Arabia-Full-transcript>.

³³ See, for instance, Raihan Ismail, “Saudi Salafi Clerics Under MBS: Reform and Survival,” *Crown Center for Middle East Studies*, No. 156 (October 2023), 4-5.

supremacist or discriminatory such as concept of *kāfir* (infidel) and *dhimmi* (non-Muslims under Muslim protection).³⁴

2. Al-Azhar and “Islamic Centrism” (*wasatiyyat al-Islām*)

It is beyond doubt that the University of al-Azhar in Egypt plays a central role in many Muslim countries, including Indonesia. This can be seen in the case of moderate Islam (*wasatiyya al-Islām*) in response to religious extremism. Among the central figures behind this is Ahmed alTayeb, the Grand Shaykh of the university. He has mobilised the moderate Islam movement domestically and internationally. He is active in spreading moderate messages through world conferences. He wrote books on this topic, such as a treatise *Fī-l-Manhaj al-Azharī* (On the Azhari Method). In the introduction, he said that there are three dimensions of the *Azharī* method, including *al-naqliyya* (textualism), *al-‘aqliyya* (rationalism), and *al-dhawqiyya* (Sufism). He believes that the method is representative of *wasatiyya al-Islām*.³⁵

Historically, the relationship between al-Azhar and Islamic organisations, especially NU and Muhammadiyah, has been strongly established for more than a century.³⁶ Until the present, thousands of students of both organisations have pursued their Islamic education at al-Azhar. It can be said that their number is higher than that of students from any other Muslim country.

So far, al-Tayeb has visited Indonesia three times, in 2016, 2018, and 2024, respectively, where he called for inter-religious tolerance. He met state officials, including President and his ministers. He was invited to state ministries such as the Ministry of Politics, Law, and Human Rights to discuss such topics as tolerance and moderation. He also visited two Muslim organisations such as NU, Muhammadiyah, and MUI. No doubt that this is part and parcel of al-Tayeb’s mobilisation of the moderate Islam movement across the world. On 1-3 March 2018 Muhammadiyah and NU sponsored the world conference “High Level Consultation of World Muslim Scholars on Wasatiyyat Islam” (*al-liqā’ al-tashāwurī al-‘ālī li-l-‘ulamā’ wa-l-muthaqqafīn al-Muslimīn fī-l-‘ālam ‘an Wasatiyya al-Islām*). The conference resulted in “The Bogor message” which includes seven characteristics of moderation: *tawassut*, (middle way); *i’tidāl* (fairness with responsibility); *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance toward

³⁴ https://baytarrahmah.org/2022_03_04_saudi-arabia-and-indonesia-clashing-visions-of-moderate-islam/.

³⁵ Ahmed al-Tayeb, *Fī-l-Manhaj al-Azharī* (Cairo: al-Hokama Publishing, 2019), 10.

³⁶ See Mona Abaza, *Indonesian students in Cairo: Islamic education perceptions and exchanges* (Paris: Association. Archipel, 1994).

differences); *shurā* (consultation and consensus); *islāh* (reform); *qudwah* (exemplary behaviour); and *muwātanah* (citizenship). Attended by 100 world Muslim scholars, it became an important forum for spreading messages on moderate Islam.³⁷ Al-Tayeb was one of the key Muslim scholars outside Indonesia invited in this conference.

The influence of the Azhari *wasatiyya al-Islām* on Indonesian Muslim can clearly be seen in the mainstream Muslim organisations, especially NU and Muhammadiyah. Al-Tayeb has campaigned for moderate Islam by organising international conferences and visiting Muslim countries. During his visits to Indonesia, he met members of these organisations and Azhari alumni. The growing influence of Ash‘arī theology in Indonesian public life has led to the rise of what Muhammad Yunus Masrukhin, an Azhari alumnus, has called “theological nationalism” (*nasionalisme teologis*). By this, he means “nationalist enthusiasm stimulated by Muslim scholars (‘*ulamā*’) based on the theological principles of the Ash‘arī school that has increased in some Muslim majority countries.”³⁸ For al-Tayeb, as narrated by Masrukhin, nationalism is a form of the maturity of faith.³⁹ As to interfaith coexistence, the Ash‘arī doctrine, as understood by Masrukhin (al-Tayeb), can serve as a foundation for open citizenship (*kewargaan yang terbuka*), in which religious freedom for non-Muslims is guaranteed.⁴⁰ Therefore, it can be said that for al-Tayeb the Ash‘arī doctrine is the important foundation of interfaith coexistence.

Islamic conservatism as a challenge

We have discussed three moderate Islamic movements initiated by NU, Muhammadiyah, and Salafis. Their stance toward religious moderation programmes is no doubt different from that of those critical of them. As many scholars have observed, the development of Islam in post-Suharto’s Indonesia witnessed the rise of Islamic conservatism characterised by, among other things, heightening religious intolerance.⁴¹ This can be clearly seen in the

³⁷ <https://kumparan.com/kumparannews/ulama-dunia-sepakati-pesan-bogor-komitmen-7-nilai-utama-wasathiyah/full>.

³⁸ Muhammad Yunus Masrukhin, *Menjadi Muslim Moderat: Teologi Asy‘ariah di Era Kontemporer* (Tangerang Selatan, Banten: OIAA, 2020), 168.

³⁹ Ibid., 170.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 162-164.

⁴¹ On the Islamic conservatism in Indonesian Islam after Suharto’s regime, see, Martin van Bruinessen (ed.), *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the ‘Conservative turn’* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2013);

responses to a fatwa issued in 2005 by Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Council of Ulama, MUI) denouncing secularism, pluralism, and liberalism.⁴²

Moderate Islam organisations such as Muhammadiyah and NU raised their deep concern with those intolerances. However, internally these organisations have also been influenced by the conservative trends. As Masdar Hilmy has argued, not all members and followers of NU and Muhammadiyah embrace moderate Islam.⁴³ Within NU, there are those popularly called *NU Garis Lurus* (NUGL) whose Islamic aspirations are fairly close to those of FPI and HTI,⁴⁴ and others. They oppose *Islam Nusantara*.⁴⁵ Likewise, some members of Muhammadiyah tend to support those Islamists. Faried Saenong describes NU as a grassroots movement advocating moderate Islam. Such a movement often lacks in authoritative and disciplinary structures, which has resulted in illiberal attitudes and practices among its grassroots clerics. This can be seen in their sentiment against Shi'is and Ahmadis, which contradicts the tolerant position of NU centre leaders.⁴⁶

Conclusion

We have seen that the moderate Islamic movements have historical roots of Muslim organisations, especially Muhammadiyah and NU. However, in the geopolitical context of war on terrorism after 9/11 tragedy, the movements bear a new significance, since they are supportive to the religious moderation programme initiated by the government through the MORA. Muhammadiyah's *Islam Berkemajuan* and NU's *Islam Nusantara* can be considered as ideological responses to the movement, modernist and traditionalist. The Salafi engagement with the programme is perceived as an obedience to the government. Salafis demonstrated a lot of changes in their social relation with other groups and in their responses to cultural diversity and religious plurality. Moderate Islamic movements played

⁴² <https://mui.or.id/baca/fatwa/pluralisme-liberalisme-dan-sekularisme-agama>. See also Piers Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam: Analysing the 2005 Council of Indonesian Ulama Fatwa No. 7 Opposing Pluralism, Liberalism and Secularism," *Journal of Islamic Studies* Vol. 18, No. 2 (2007), 202–240.

⁴³ Masdar Hilmy, "Wither Indonesia's Islamic Moderatism? A Re-examination on the Moderate Vision of Muhammadiyah and NU," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* vol. 7, no. 1 (2013): 33.

⁴⁴ HTI was dissolved by the government in 2017.

⁴⁵ On NU Garis Lurus, see Asep M. Iqbal, "Challenging moderate Islam in Indonesia: NU Garis Lurus and its construction of the 'authentic' NU online," in Leonard Sebastian, Syafiq Hasyim, and Alexander Arifianto (eds), *Rising Islamic Conservatism in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2020), 95–115.

⁴⁶ Faried Saenong, "Nahdlatul Ulama (NU): A Grassroots Movement Advocating Moderate Islam," in *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2021), 147.

a significant role in fostering interfaith coexistence. However, as discussed above, Islamic conservatism can be a serious challenge, if not obstacle, to all the above movements.