

Integrating Moderation within the Immoderate-labelled Islamic Movement (A Case Study of the Personal experience and Al-Guroba Da'wah Initiatives)

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji dinamika gerakan keislaman dalam konteks pemahaman agama di Aceh Tengah, Indonesia. Hal ini dilakukan melalui case study, atas pengalaman pribadi seorang tokoh dan perkembangan markas dakwah Al-Guroba. Melalui wawancara, kami menelusuri perubahan atau evolusi pemahaman Islam seorang tokoh yang terekspos oleh berbagai latar belakang keagamaan; dari institusi tradisional dayah, Salafisme, hingga pemikiran moderat. Studi ini menyoroti bagaimana dukungan finansial dan ideologi trans-Nasional berkontribusi pada dakwah Salafisme puritan, yang acapkali menyebabkan "gonjang-ganjing" dan konflik sosial di tingkat lokal. Hal ini disebabkan oleh akibat metodologi dakwah yang dianggap eksklusif dan kurang moderat. Sebagai respons, markas dakwah Al-Guroba muncul dan menempatkan diri sebagai gerakan dakwah alternatif, yang mempraktikkan dakwah yang bijak dan inklusif. Dakwah direalisasikan melalui kegiatan sosial, pendidikan, dan media. Temuan ini memberikan penjelasan tentang evolusi pemahaman keagamaan personal, tantangan pluralisme, dan peran inisiatif lokal dalam mempromosikan moderasi di tengah arus gerakan Islam yang beragam di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: Gerakan keislaman; evolusi pemahaman keagamaan; moderasi beragama

ABSTRACT

This research investigates the dynamics of Islamic movements in the setting of religious understanding in Central Aceh, Indonesia. This is carried out by a case investigation, based on the private experiences of an individual and the establishment and the growth of the Al-Guroba dakwah initiative headquarters. By doing an in-depth interview, we examined the evolution in the religious understanding of a figure exposed to various religious histories; from traditional institutions, Salafism, to a more moderate religious thought. This study underscores how trans-national support; ideologically and financially, contributes to the dissemination of fundamentalist Salafism, which often leads to "upheaval" and societal disputes at the local level, as a results of what considered exclusive and less moderate da'wah methodology. The aftermath,

Al-Guroba da'wah headquarters evolved and positioned itself as a substitute da'wah movement, practicing an inclusive da'wah. Dakwah is applied through social activities, education, and media. These findings offer perspectives into the evolution of an individual religious understanding, the challenges of pluralism, and the significance of community initiatives in fostering moderation within the various Islamic movement in Indonesia.

Keywords : *Islamic movement; evolution of religious understanding; religious moderation*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as the largest Muslim population country globally, has been becoming a dynamic arena for multiple Islamic interpretations and movements. On one hand, there is a long-standing moderate Islamic heritage, which rooted deeply within the society religious understanding and practices, and has been interacting harmoniously with local tradition. On the other hand, the growth of transnational movements, such as Salafism, presents additional challenges to social harmony and religious diversity. These movements often pose a puritanical and exclusive understanding, which can lead to conflict and division within society (Abidin & Hafizah, 2019; Saparudin, 2017). Comprehending how individuals' interactions and transformations between these diverse streams, as well as their responses to these challenges, is essential. The urgency of this research lay on these dynamics. Particularly in Central Aceh, a distinctive region with strong Islamic heritage but also open to external influences. This research provides a more comprehensive overview of the evolution of religious understanding and its influence on social unity.

Although numerous studies have examined Salafism in Indonesia (Syamsir et al., 2021; Yakin, 2018), there are still various hypotheses concerning the evolution a figure's personal understanding from a puritan Salafism perspective toward a more moderate approach, especially in the Aceh context, whose heritage were influenced by dayah tradition. Additionally, other studies often highlight on the disputes and expansion of Salafism itself, but rarely they address how local initiatives grow as constructive responses to less-moderate approaches. This study solves the scarcity of case studies that clearly examine how da'wah institutions such as Al-Guroba, make efforts to articulate and practice Islamic moderation as an

effective alternative within the conflict as results of exclusive interpretations (Ali et al., 2022; Muhtar, 2023).

To begin with, this is a unique personal case study, following the journey of a traditional Dayah education figure, but then, greatly affected by the completely different interpretation, offered by transnational Salafism, supported by Saudi Arabia (Chaplin, 2018; Jahroni, 2020). The interesting point was when, finally the figure adopted the *wasathan* view, inspired by the reasoning of the more moderate national figures such as Mohammad Natsir (Kahin, 2014; Nashir, 2008). Secondly, this research in particular, identifies and investigates the social disruption resulting from the methodology of Salafi da'wah in Central Aceh which Provides tangible evidence of the influence of puritanism in the Aceh Tengah's community. Last but not least, this research presents the Al-Guroba da'wah headquarters as an example of a community initiative that actively fosters moderation and inclusivity. They act as not merely as a passive response, instead as an agent of change by educational activities, social involvements, and dakwah media approaches pertinent to the needs of the current society. This originality supports a richer understanding of adaptation and resistance of Indonesian Muslim society to religious interpretations.

This research employs a qualitative approach with a single case study method. This method was used to give an in-depth and contextual understanding of the complex dynamic of Islamic movement and the evolution of religious interpretation in Central Aceh. Primary data was received by a semi-structured in-depth interview with a key figure. This primary figure has direct experience in traditional religious education, but has been exposed to the Salafi movement, and has also involved in the Al-Guroba moderate initiatives. This interview gives a rich overview about life journeys, educational experiences, observations of local socio-religious evolution, as well as critical perspectives on various da'wah interpretations. Secondary data was collected using an extensive review of literature, from various academic sources, such as academic journal articles, books, and research reports, relevant to the topic of Salafism in Indonesia, Saudi Arabia's role in its promotion, the biography and religious understanding of Mohammad Natsir, the Hanbali school of jurisprudence, and studies on Islamic moderation and societal disputes concerning religious movements.

An in-depth interview was used to find a comprehensive personal experience. The interview questions were intended to find key points such as educational history, experience in various religious institutions, thought on Salafism and its obstacles, and the initiatives and contributions of Al-Guroba. The recordings were then transcribed for a comprehensive analysis. Braun and Clark (2006) thematic analysis methods then used to analyse the data (Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V., & Braun, V.; 2017; Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Hayfield, N.;2022). The analysis stages include; data familiarization, initial code generation, theme search, theme review, theme definition and last, report writing. In order to increase reliability and validity, the data triangulation was conducted by contrasting results from interviews with information received from the previous literature.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three primary category of findings were identified from data coding processes: (a) The evolution of the main figure's religious understanding, (b)the dynamics of the Salafi movement and social "Upheaval" in Central Aceh, and (c) the Al-Guroba initiative as a moderate response. Those themes coded from various initial codes until the final theme refinement.



Image 1; mind map of the initial codes

a) Evolution of the main character's religious understanding.

The figure's educational background was started at Dayah Jemala Amal, a modern Islamic boarding school in Aceh that combines formal education and religious knowledge. An initial figure's religious understanding that relevant with traditional Dayah patterns were shaped within this institution (Inayatillah, 2023; Nadlifah et al., 2020). Lately, he continued his education to the Arroyah Institute in Sukabumi, whose affiliations and donor strongly supported by Saudi Arabia. At Arroyah, there was an important change toward a Salafi understanding, particularly in Hanbali jurisprudence, where traditional practices like *qunut*, used to be practice by the figure in his Dayah tradition, were no longer performed. Then transformations occurred at the Ulil Albab Student Islamic Boarding School in Ibn Khaldun, Bogor,

which was founded by Mohammad Natsir. In this institution, the figure's understanding transformed toward a more moderate perspective. This transformation occurred through discussions with individuals from diverse backgrounds within the Islamic movement and guidance from Natsir's students, highlighting the importance of the unity of the ummah and the significance of understanding contemporary Muslim's problems.

b) The Dynamics of the Salafi Movement and Social "Upheaval" in Central Aceh. The Salafi movement in Central Aceh began to develop individually around 2010 through "**door-to-door preaching**," introduced by Ustaz **Sayuti**. This area was considered a "**blank slate**" or in the participants term as "**piring kosong**" that was opened extensively to the various movement. At the beginning, Ustaz Sayuti was well-welcomed by the Muhammadiyah community, as a results of similarities in ideology. But over time, "**upheaval**" and social unrest were brought by the puritanical and judgmental Salafi missionary method. The tension's climax took place when a Salafi cleric from Java criticized prayer in a mosque with a cemetery strongly. As a results, leaflets were distributed, accusing Ustaz Sayuti as a of a "deviant sect" leader and a "Khawarij" follower. The "Salafi" terminology itself has become a source of confusion, as a results of the exclusive self- claim over the "Salaf method, its carried out. Which in its term, discriminates against other groups. This dispute caused public rejection and a decline in the massive Salafi da'wah activities since 2020 in Central Aceh.

c) Al-Ghuraba' Initiative as a Moderate Response.

Responding to the negative impact of the puritanical Salafi method, the Al-Ghuraba' da'wah headquarters came with a commitment to reserve the understanding of Islam according to the Quran and Sunnah, but with a more moderate and wise attitude in carrying out dakwah. Al-Guroba adapted a stance as a "center for da'wah," not a pesantren, setting an Islamic environment devoiding gambling, dating, and smoking. Al-Guroba's activities cover three sectors: education (TPA, general studies, Quran study groups, weekend pesantren, prayer guidance, sunnah sports, free health therapy), social (distribution of basic necessities, dates, sacrificial animals, guidance for residents of Central Aceh Detention Center, health therapy,

and social media (online studies). This initiative initiate to address community problem, such as the decline of religious enthusiasm within the community, and the prevalence of drugs, by providing free educational answers and a supportive Islamic environment.

The discussion will integrate research findings with theoretical frameworks and previous studies, highlighting the complexities of the Islamic movement in Indonesia and the roles of key figures and local initiatives. The main character's educational journey in the interview reflects the dynamics of the “evolution” of religious understanding in Indonesia. Starting at Dayah Jemala Amal, which reflects the tradition of Islamic education in Aceh that combines religious and general education (Masyhuri, 2015), the figure then moved to the Arroyah Sukabumi Institute. Arroyah's affiliation with Saudi Arabia and donor support from there confirm Saudi Arabia's central role in the spread of Salafi ideology in Indonesia through the funding of educational institutions and scholarships (Chaplin, 2018; Jahroni, 2020; Muhtarom, 2017). The presence of institutions like LIPIA in Indonesia, which is a branch of a university in Riyadh, demonstrates this mechanism of dissemination (Febriansyah & El-Alami, 2021; Istadiyantha, 2018). Exposure to Hanbali jurisprudence at Arroyah marks a significant shift in understanding, considering this school is known for its strict emphasis on (the Quran and Sunnah Bulut, 2017), which is often a hallmark of the Salafi movement (Hoover,2014).

However, this journey did not stop at puritanical Salafism. The experience at the Ulil Albab Student Islamic Boarding School, Ibn Khaldun Bogor, was a significant turning point. This institution was founded by Mohammad Natsir, a national figure who had a vision to unite general science and religion, and rejected the dichotomy of knowledge (Hakim, 2023; Kahin, 2014; Tambunan, 2019). Natsir, through the Indonesian Islamic Propagation Council, was historically an important bridge for the organized spread of Islamic ideas (Burhanudin, 2021; Rosmawati et al., 2024). Under the guidance of Natsir's best student, K.H. Didi Nafi Tutin, the main character interacts with various backgrounds of the Islamic movement, leading him to a more wasathan (moderate) understanding. This concept of wasathiyah, which emphasizes simplicity, tolerance, and acceptance of differences, as stated in the verse of Allah SWT in Surah Al-Baqarah: 143, "And thus We have made you (Muslims) a middle nation (wasathan) that you may be

witnesses over the people and that the Messenger may be a witness over you," stands in stark contrast to the rigidity often found in some Salafi interpretations (Ali et al., 2022; Muhtar, 2023; Wafa, 2024).

The emergence of the Salafi movement in Central Aceh since around 2010, initiated by the preaching of Ustaz Sayuti, illustrates a phenomenon that is also occurring in various other regions of Indonesia (Syamsir et al., 2021; Yakin, 2018). Central Aceh, described as an "empty plate," illustrates how a region can be highly receptive to new missionary movements. However, the "upheaval" and social conflicts that subsequently emerged were primarily related to controversial issues such as qunut or praying in mosques near graves, illustrating the negative impact of the puritan-exclusive and judgmental Salafi da'wah methodology (Abidin & Hafizah, 2019; Hafid, 2020; Saparudin & Emawati, 2023). Other research also shows that differences in the interpretation of teachings and claims of absolute truth are often a source of local tension (Saparudin, 2017). The accusations of "deviant sect" and the labeling of Ustaz Sayuti as a "Khawarij" reflect the Takfiri attitude, which is often used within Salafism to excommunicate other groups (Akhlaq, 2023; Mimouni, 2016). This is also exacerbated by the use of the term "Salafi" itself, which has become a source of "shubhat" (confusion), dividing the community instead of uniting it, due to the exclusive claim over the "Salaf method" which was never known during the time of the Prophet and his companions (Koca, 2015; Laher, 2022; Willoughby, 2015). Although Muhammadiyah and Salafism share similarities in their spirit of purifying teachings (Muhtarom, 2017; Qodir et al., 2021), friction can still arise when Salafis exhibit exclusive attitudes, even in Muhammadiyah mosques (Febriansyah & El-Alami, 2021; Junaidi, 2022; Rosadi, 2022; Saparudin & Emawati, 2023).

In this context, the Al-Guroba da'wah headquarters emerged as a significant response. Unlike the common rigid Salafi approach, Al-Ghuraba positions itself as a moderate initiative committed to the Quran and Sunnah, but in a wise and community-oriented manner. The "dakwah headquarters" model, which prioritizes education, social activities (community development for inmates, distribution of basic necessities), and social media, demonstrates an adaptive effort to meet the contemporary needs of the community. This approach aligns with the principles of Islamic moderation, which emphasize the relevance of religious teachings to the social context and avoid extremism.

Al-Guroba offers practical solutions to social problems such as declining religious enthusiasm and the prevalence of sin, by providing free education and a supportive Islamic environment.

This indicates that amidst polarization, inclusive local initiatives can play an important role in promoting social cohesion and a more tolerant understanding of Islam. This approach aligns with the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him): "Convey from me, even if it is only one verse," which underscores the importance of continuous and contextual da'wah.

SUMMARY

This research highlights the complexity of the dynamics of the Islamic movement in Central Aceh, characterized by the evolution of individual religious understanding from traditional Dayah, exposure to transnational Salafism, to the adoption of a wasathan perspective. External support from Saudi Arabia proved significant in the spread of puritanical Salafism, which subsequently caused "upheaval" and social conflict at the local level due to its exclusive and judgmental missionary methodology. Al-Guroba Islamic Center, as a local initiative, has successfully positioned itself as a moderate alternative, practicing wise and inclusive da'wah through educational, social, and media programs relevant to community needs. This study highlights the importance of religious moderation in maintaining social harmony amidst the diversity of Islamic interpretations in Indonesia.

For future research, it is suggested to conduct a comparative study between Al-Guroba and other da'wah movements in Central Aceh to gain a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to their success or challenges in promoting moderation. Additionally, the research can be expanded to examine the long-term impact of moderate da'wah initiatives like Al-Guroba on social change and the religious understanding of the wider community. Practically speaking, da'wah initiatives focused on social solutions and free education, such as those undertaken by Al-Guroba, need to be supported and developed as an alternative model for addressing the challenges of religious extremism and promoting moderate Islam.

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