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STUDIA ISLAMIKA
STUDIA ISLAMIKA (ISSN 0215-0492; E-ISSN: 2355-6145) is an international journal published by the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University of Jakarta, INDONESIA. It specializes in Indonesian Islamic studies in particular, and Southeast Asian Islamic studies in general, and is intended to communicate original researches and current issues on the subject. This journal warmly welcomes contributions from scholars of related disciplines. All submitted papers are subject to double-blind review process.

STUDIA ISLAMIKA has been accredited by The Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education, Republic of Indonesia as an academic journal (Decree No. 32a/E/KPT/2017).

STUDIA ISLAMIKA has become a CrossRef Member since year 2014. Therefore, all articles published by STUDIA ISLAMIKA will have unique Digital Object Identifier (DOI) number.

STUDIA ISLAMIKA is indexed in Scopus since 30 May 2015.

Editorial Office:
Phone: (62-21) 7423543, 7499272, Fax: (62-21) 7408633;
E-mail: studia.islamika@uinjkt.ac.id
Website: http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/studia-islamika

Annual subscription rates from outside Indonesia, institution: US$ 75,00 and the cost of a single copy is US$ 25,00; individual: US$ 50,00 and the cost of a single copy is US$ 20,00. Rates do not include international postage and handling.

Please make all payment through bank transfer to: PPIM, Bank Mandiri KCP Tangerang Graha Karnos, Indonesia, account No. 101-00-0514550-1 (USD), Swift Code: bmriidja

Harga berlangganan di Indonesia untuk satu tahun, lembaga: Rp. 150.000,-, harga satu edisi Rp. 50.000,-; individu: Rp. 100.000,-, harga satu edisi Rp. 40.000,-. Harga belum termasuk ongkos kirim.

Pembayaran melalui PPIM, Bank Mandiri KCP Tangerang Graha Karnos, No. Rek: 128-00-0105080-3
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Religious Trend in Contemporary Indonesia: Conservatism Domination on Social Media

Dita Kirana & Endi Aulia Garadian

Religion is predicted to dissipate from social significance through the processes of development or economic modernization. Classical secularization theory forecasted religion in the modern era will face some circumstances such as 1) the decline of personal faith, religious beliefs and practices; and (2) the retreat of religion from public space (Casanova: 1994, 2010). However, the supporters of secularization and modernization theories failed to notice that religion did not disappear from the public sphere. The opposite occurs in Southeast Asia. Economic development program and modernization could work hand-in-hand with religion in the region (Feener and Fountain: 2018).

In the context of Indonesia, the issue of religion has gone through ups and downs. The story of Indonesia’s revival of Islam had been begun when the country experienced anti-communist campaigns of 1965-66 (McVey: 2006). Since then, the government obliged all of its societies to profess one of Indonesia’s recognized religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, and Hinduism (now Confucianism has been added to the list)

Another significant change in the religious map of Indonesia occurs after the fall of New Order era—Reformasi. Islam, as the majority religion in the country, has much more influences in the public and political sphere. It makes Indonesia become a prime example of the democratic shift in the Muslim majority country. In general, Indonesian Islam is widely claimed as a moderate and accommodative. It is acknowledged that Indonesian Islam is compatible with democratic values such as pluralism, respect human rights and tolerance (Bruinessen, 2013). However, the freedom of expression in the reformation era has also provided opportunities for trans-national Islam to grow in Indonesia.

Some scholars argue that Indonesian Islam in the post-Reformasi is challenged by the growth of Islamic groups which conveys antidemocracy, violence, militancy, radicalism, and even terrorism. There are many factors that provide an increasing various understanding of Islam in Indonesia. One of them is the role of the media in spreading religious discourse. Several studies, for example, tried to analyze how the media is used as a tool to spread religious understanding of conservatism in Indonesia (Abdullah and Osman 2018; Rakhmani 2016). This shows that the development of media has apparent consequences in the formation of new public spaces (Eickelman and Anderson 2003).

Media should be scrutinized abruptly to understand the religious trend discussed in Indonesia. Thus, it is important to conduct the research of religious trend in media. There is limited research in Indonesia that specifically addresses religious trends through media. Previous research focused on media studies that only emphasized the aspects of identity politics in the middle class (Rakhmani, 2016). The media itself is evolved over time. In contemporary media, it is recognized that media is differed by old and new media. New media is a kind of media that offers digitization, convergence, interaction, and development of networks related to message creation and distribution (Flew; 2005). New media refers to the means of technology using internet. Hence, the old or traditional media refers to all institution that widely use without internet such as television, radio and newspaper.
So far, it is acknowledged that there is no comprehensive study on the religious trends discussed in old and new media. This gap of knowledge should be fulfilled to capture how religious discourse evolved on the media. Previous studies commonly tend to be confined to a single person or organization, making it difficult to understand general trends of religious discourse among society. Thus, the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM, Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat) initiated a series of research projects on religious trends in old and new media, later known as Media and Religious Trends – MERIT. The new media in this project refers to social media while the old media limits to television and radio. The project aims to foster religious moderation that can build a foundation for tolerant religious perspectives, attitudes, and practices in Indonesia.

The research project aims to investigate religious understanding disseminated through various platform on old and new media such as social media, television and radio. It aims to help formulate, endorse and implement public policies to analyzed religious trends in a certain period of time on the old and new media. The research series on the program are: (1) Research on Religious Trends in Social Media; (2) Research on Religious Trends in Television Program; and (3) Research on Religious Trends in Radio.

**Conservatism Dominates Religious Narrative on Social Media**

The research project starts from 2019 to 2021. By the time this document is issued, the project has just unveiled the first research which is focused on the religious trend in social media.

The first research series in this project examines the evolvement of religious trends in social media on what religious understanding is commonly discussed on digital media. It is also analyzed factors and socio-political context that influence it. Religious understanding observes in this study are Liberalism, Moderatism, Conservatism, Islamism and Radicalism (Extremism). In this study, Liberalism defines as a religious group that tries to go beyond the boundaries of reason, tradition, norms and values that have been agreed upon by the Muslim community (congregation). Moderatism describes as religious groups that prioritize the balance of reason and revelation as well as the balance of diversity between groups as basic principles to maintain the common good. Conservatism here is defined as religious groups which
practice early Islamic traditions (performs by prophets and friends) as a reference. Islamism defines as religious groups that endorse Islam as a political system to establish an Islamic state. Radicalism is described as religious groups that make and approve of violence as a means to realize their religious ideals.

This research combines quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative method in this study conducts by means of big data analysis. It is recognized as the first-ever research on religion and media uses big data in Indonesia. We fetch data from 2009 to 2019 on Twitter which collected up to 1.9 million tweets. Some filter processes take into force resulted in 458,582 tweets from 100,799 users with 7,367,190 followers. Meanwhile, the qualitative method was implemented through in-depth interviews with some identified key actors. The main results of the research are described below.

The research finds out that religious trend in Social Media from 2009 to 2019 is dominated by conservatism narrative. It is discovered that 67.2% religious narratives on Twitter are conservative, followed by moderate (22.2%), liberal (6.1%) and Islamists (4.5%). Since 2009-2019, the hashtags which contain conservative narration is revealed to be the most popular hashtag. Furthermore, the neutral hashtag is often associated with conservative narration.

Thematic discussion on social media is also dominated by conservative narratives. In the gender theme, for example, conservative ideas are widely used in building views on women’s subordination. Concerning disregarding equality, the narratives on women mainly related to the limitations of their role as a child, mother and wife. In the case of heaven and hell in the afterlife, women also depend on their relationship with men – their fathers and especially husbands. It sets aside human right where women are also entitled and responsible for their own actions and choices. In the gender lens analysis, the research also finds that women are more vulnerable to be exposed to religious understanding fanaticism than men. To some extent, it could lead to the transmission of conservatism among generations.

The same conservative narrative is also widely applied to environmental issues. The dichotomy of heaven and hell, as well as merits and sins, were also found in the discussions about the environment on social media. The debates on climate change are often associated with hell, and it is believed has something to do with wicked
human behavior. Natural disasters are also often seen as a form of punishment from God for human sins. This case shows the strength of the conservatism narrative in the spread of religious understanding on social media.

The Politicization of Religious Narrative

In this research, we found that the political context plays a vital role in the construction of religious narrative in social media. The trends of religion on Twitter experience dynamics change according to the political conditions. Through the hashtag analysis method, all hashtags associated with religion and politics in social media are divided into a separate category since it was the most frequently found. Hashtag of the general religious narrative is found to be many in non-political years but decrease in political years. Meanwhile, the religious hashtag with political nuance started to emerge in the political year, especially since the election of 2014. This indicates that political competition in Indonesia is often associated with religious issues. Religious narratives are commonly used for political purposes to gain support from society. The politicization of religious narrative is not only done by an Islamic party but also by almost all political party, including the National party. It leads to the spread of conflict of interest in the public sphere through social media.

Java and Contestation of Religious Understanding

According to regional distribution, the contestation of religious understandings is still concentrated in the Java region. Jakarta is the melting pot point for any religious understandings which shows the high proportion of all religious group categories. Moderate group dominates cyberspace with 67.11%, followed by Conservative (60.11%), Islamist (53.19%) and Liberal (44.64%). Moreover, if conservative views are assumed to be compatible and in line with Islamists since their difference lies only in the vision of establishing an Islamic state, then the combination of the two dominates the contestation of religious understanding.

The blasphemy case of Jakarta’s governor, Ahok, in 2016 and the Jakarta regional election in the following year became a significant factor in the contestation of religious understanding on social media. Besides Jakarta, 22.62% of the liberal narrative are found from East
Java. The contributions of young progressive wings of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in East Java reasonably provide the high percentage of liberalism narrative in the region. In line with the existing research, West Java confirms to be a province which contributes 15% of Islamists narrative and 10% of conservative narrative in the social media. Aceh and South Sulawesi are also in the top 10 provinces with the highest proportion of conservatism. In addition, the special provinces of Yogyakarta, Papua and North Sumatra, which incidentally is not predominantly Muslim and neither is the main base of the Islamic party, have a high proportion of conservatives and Islamists narrative. It shows that the domination of the religious narrative politicization to some extent, is designed to gain political support.

The Construction of Religious Narrative

Another finding that supports the domination of religious conservatism in social media is the centrality of the actors. The central actors discovered tend to have conservative and Islamists understanding. In addition, those groups have a higher potential of virality of religious tweets than those who are moderate. Even though moderate groups have a greater proportion than Islamists, their participatory tend to be silent and is far outweighed by the Islamists group, which is more active in social media. This reinforces the position of the Islamists group as a noisy minority, a small group but has wide influences in social media.

Furthermore, the findings also point out that social networks formed among clustered account on Twitter tend to be closed. It shows the lack of interaction among religious groups since almost all networks are formed only among accounts with the same understanding. It resulted in the strengthening of their own religious understanding. Those who are liberal are becoming more liberal. Those who are conservative tend more conservative while those who are Islamists will also become more Islamists. Although the networks on central actor tend to be homogeneous and closed, they show the opposite in the general user. They exhibit heterogeneity of networks and interactions between moderate and conservative groups. On the other side, the lack of interaction between the extreme right and extreme left group hinders the expected exchanges view of religious understanding and practices which aims to form a moderate religious understanding naturally. However, this condition creates a serious challenge in society.
Gender and Religious Understanding

The strengthening of religious understanding also occurs in the classification of accounts based on gender. The study found a high tendency of strengthened religious understanding among women. It could be seen from the high proportion of women in all categories of religious understanding compared to the proportion of men. The proportion of women was 52% for tweets that were liberal, moderate and conservative, while for men only 48%. Meanwhile, in the category of Islamic religious understanding, women have a higher proportion (54%) than men (46%). When exposed to certain religious views, women tend to be more consistent in their views. If women have a liberal view, they will tend to be more liberal than men. Likewise, if he is exposed to conservative or Islamist views, then he will tend to be more conservative and or more Islamic than men. This tendency makes women occupy a position that is more at risk of being exposed to extreme religious beliefs.

Fragmentation of Religious Authority

Lastly, the findings of the study have found the risk and the potential of the insignificant and small base user which could deploy religious narrative in social media. The authority of religious narratives, as can be shown in figure 5 below, is now fragmented from Ulama to nominal citizen. Even though the central account is still dominated by religious leaders, usually called Ustadz, followed by community leaders and then the community, some of them have a lower level of engagement than accounts with few followers. These findings imply that anyone without influence and a follower base in society can easily play a significant role in spreading their religious views online. This allows anyone to spread their religious understanding freely, even if it is radical or extreme religious understanding. However, apart from these risks, the findings also create opportunities for Muslim communities in Indonesia to take part in moderating religious understanding on social media. In environmental issues, for example, Islamic narratives which offer problem-solving idea such as nurturing an environmentally friendly habit and demonstrating actions to prevent environmental damage can be constructed by the individual. They can even disseminate it easily to compete with the conservative narrative related to the monopoly narrative of sin and doom that is commonly found when natural disasters
occur. Thus, anyone could be a significant actor in the construction and dissemination of religious ideas in social media.


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Website: http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/studia-islamika

STUDIA ISLAMIKA (ISSN 0215-0492; E-ISSN: 2355-6145) is a quarterly journal published by the Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education of the Republic of Indonesia in collaboration with the Central Research and Development Agency, designed to disseminate research findings related to Islamic studies, especially in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. It is indexed by CrossRef (DOI), Scopus, and other international databases. The journal welcomes contributions from scholars, researchers, and practitioners in the field of Islamic studies.

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ستوديا إسلاميكا
مجلة إندونيسيا للدراسات الإسلامية
السنة السابعة والعشرون، العدد 2003، süreç

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ISSN: 0215-0402  E-ISSN: 2355-6145